

Jesse's Rite of Passage

In many a young man's life there comes a defining moment which marks the transition from boy to man. One such moment happened to my son, Jesse, on the first Thursday following Mardi Gras 1996, in New Orleans' French Quarter.

Surrounded by three uncles, his father, two older cousins (including the groom, Todd), three of my nephew Todd's future brothers-in-law and their college buddies, Jesse joined this entourage of men out for some macho mischief in the Stag Party that apparently inevitably must precede every wedding.

Before we left Seattle for New Orleans I had bought Jesse a blazer, some dress shirts and pants, some new shoes and suspenders, and some snappy ties, so he'd look like a real cool young man (which, in his newly discovered teen vanity, he loved!). And he's already almost as tall as I am, an inch or so away from my 6 feet, 1".

But he is, after all, only 17, and the drinking age is 21 in Louisiana, though if you're 18 you can enter a bar and order a Coke (sure...as if those with him wouldn't give him a "sip" from time to time!).

Jesse's also at an age where he has just started to get some peach fuzz on his face. As we were dressing in our hotel room and the time got nearer to going out on the town for some serious drinking, he got nervous about it all. He suggested that maybe he just ought to stay in the hotel rather than inconveniencing me in case he wasn't let in anywhere and I'd have to go home with him (a big 17 or no, I wasn't going to let him walk those night streets alone!).

And somehow I could sense that he wanted to shave, but not in front of me, perhaps afraid I'd say something like, "Shave? What do you to shave?" And one of his nervous questions was, "Do you think I could really get away with telling somebody I'm 18?"

So I said, "Hell, Jesse, with your new duds, you look just like some Yankee college kid down for the Mardi Gras, just relax and act like you belong." Then, as if it were a throwaway line, as I walked out of the room to see if Todd was ready in his room down the hall, I said, "My razor's in the bathroom if you want to use it." Also acting as if it were nothing, he said, "Sure. OK."

When I came back, the peach fuzz was gone.

But Jesse hadn't lost any of his nervousness; he asked me, "But what if they ask me for my ID, Dad?" I said, "Have your driver's license in your shirt pocket, ready at hand, and show it to them right away, confidently, without hesitation. Since it's your real ID with your picture, you're not breaking the law, and chances are, with this whole group of older guys, they'll figure you're about the age of the college kids, they'll just check the picture to see if it's really you, and let you in."

Well, he wasn't so sure about this, and he remained really nervous. I was prepared to hop a cab with him back to the hotel in case he wasn't let in anywhere, but from what I had already seen in the French Quarter, I got the feeling nobody really cared, carding people was a kind of formality which I didn't see often done.

Anyway, so we go into a bar with about six guys ahead of Jesse. I'm right behind him, and there are about another six behind me. We figured putting Jesse in the middle of a kind of phalanx would Trojan Horse him in there.

So for the first few bars he was muscled inside in this fashion. There were crowds and all kinds of music to add to the general night's confusion, and once safely at a table he shyly ordered Cokes, figuring any minute he would be discovered and thrown out.

Then came The Big Test. At Pat O'Brien's, a front man carded Jesse. Jesse did as I told him, whipped out the driver's license right away, and the big black man gave Jesse the up and down look, and asked, "How old are you, anyway?" And Jesse, suddenly not remembering whether the drinking age was 18 or 21, simply said, "Old enough," and with that, the bouncer shrugged and smiled, and Jesse was let in!

Once inside, I said to Jesse, "That was cool, but why did you say, 'Old enough' when he asked your age?" And so he explained his confusion about whether he was supposed to be 18 or 21, thought that this was the only thing he could say at the moment.

The unanimous consensus among the macho guys was that Jesse had played it cool, had used his head, had talked fast and sure on his feet, knew how to handle himself. Jesse lit up like a candle with all this praise about his "savvy street smarts."

Jesse got high fives from all these men he looks up to, and when the waitress came by and asked his order, he mumbled "Root Beer," and she said, "What kahnd of beer d'ya want, honey?" So he quickly said, "Dixie," and thus did he order his first beer in a bar, with all these men of the world looking on.

Later, at a joint where curvaceous young women danced on little stages with nothing but G-strings on, dancing suggestively while undulating against a pole before ogling men seated near the stages (the ultimate sexist trip, lounge chairs and drinks around several active stages at once, a three-ring circus of jiggling young women, most of them not much older than Jesse), it was no problem sneaking Jesse in, because with two beers in him and his acceptance as a "man" now clearly established with the entourage, he was about as obnoxious as all the rest us.

At \$10 a head cover charge I don't think the doorman would have cared if Jesse was 10. So now Jesse was right in there, now a functioning part of this whole Stag Party, that ancient silliness before the real connecting of a man and a woman would occur, there he was, face to face with naked female flesh, I'm pretty sure it's as close as he's gotten yet, his daydreams come true.

He tried to give a practiced nonchalant look at it all, even slipped a dollar bill into one stripper's garter at his Uncle Hans' urging -- with Hans' dollar bill! (which is the whole goofy idea behind this joint, horny droolers sitting in the seats in front of the stages get a cheap little thrill sliding their hands over the smooth thigh of the stripper and under the fluffy garters that hold the proffered money).

But for all that, there was still so much of the innocent boy in Jesse in taking this all in, his big wide blue eyes staring in total wonderment at all this gyrating exposed female flesh, and behind him the honky-tonk music blaring from loudspeakers.

And I'm sure half of his mind was filing this all away for future retelling: "Wait till I get home and tell my friends about this!"

At 3:00 AM I walked back to the Fairmont, our hotel, with Jesse. My arm around his shoulders, his around mine, old pals navigating the back alleys of Bourbon Street. The rest of the Stag entourage was fairly looped by now and determined to do an all-nighter, and they staggered to a parked river steamboat on the Mississippi, the Flamingo, for some wee-hours gambling. Todd would resurface the next day at noon, hung-over, surprised to be some \$120 richer. He apparently played blackjack with abandon, not caring what the cards read.

Daughter Sarah greeted us from her bed, still in a half slumber. She had been out with the ladies for their Stagette Party, and she muttered, "I wish I could have partied with you guys, the women were such a bunch of bores!" They had stayed at one restaurant the whole evening and had presented the bride-to-be with such witty items as straws in the shape of a penis, and gooey plastic male genitalia made like sticky play-dough, so when you threw them against a wall they'd stick in a slimy mass.

A number of these genteel white Southern belles had already made their mark by throwing a few dozen of these dismembered male sex organs at random targets on walls facing their tables, where these sad gelatinous penises stuck and stared over flattened testicles in mute rebuke.

In the wanderings of the wedding party's males that night we actually stumbled upon the women briefly. Sarah had already left. On the walls of this upscale Mexican restaurant I noticed the richly colored slime penises and balls, with no other sign of the male anatomy to accompany them, and I thought that these were rather peculiar decorations for a Mexican restaurant ("*Hola, hombre, mira, nuestro restaurante es el mas macho de todos los restaurantes aqui!*").

Then a rather drunk lass from LSU explained the source for the decorations, grabbed one off the wall and threw it to me. I can honestly say this was the first and only time in my life I have held a set of cock and balls in my hand. The ladies laughed like hell. I guess I must have been quite a sight. "So," I asked, "is this what you ladies in Louisiana do to the groom, after the wedding?" More squeals of hilarity.

I wondered how to get rid of the gelatinous genitalia with some measure of poise. So I threw it back on the wall where it came from. Maybe it was good for business.

Then I caught up with the men, who were already making a hasty exit out the front door, finding it fundamentally wrong that the bride and groom should see each other on the eve of the wedding (my, my!).

Like a SWAT team the men bolted quickly, despite the importuning from the women to "hang" with the men there, next to fountains and nachos and overturned daiquiri glasses.

Although Jesse felt yet another victory in gaining entry to this colorful place, he immediately fell into the ranks of the swiftly departing pack, close-in with them, at the front of the horde with Todd and his college buddy, Rob. Jesse had found his footing and was confident.

So as I was saying, when we got back to the Fairmont at 3:30 AM, Sarah now awake, she told us what a worthless evening she had had with the women, that she felt slighted she couldn't have just joined "the guys."

I told her I had a pretty good idea why she came home early, but that being excluded from "the guys" was not meant to slight women, it had something to do with the only remaining rite in our society which still had to be all male, if only to preserve the illusion of a tradition, and the further illusion that being a male and not a female, if even for just this brief rite, was somehow important. There are few all-male preserves left, I told her, half-heartedly.

In my heart, I saw her sense of injustice, and had she joined us men, she would have added zest to an otherwise routine ritual spent on drink and seeing how many hours and/or how sick one can get on the eve of a sacrament.

Sarah is energy and joy and explosions of laughter, an original with furnaces of fire and passions, full of smiles and penetrating, intelligent brown eyes. How I love her! (Hillary, whom I adore with equal love, alas, would miss the whole thing, caught up in her mule work in Portland, an initiate in the cloisters of the law, her absence sadly inexplicable.)

As if to show all the men what they missed the night before, Sarah would have ample opportunity to show herself in the dance following the wedding and the reception. Fortunately, I have it all on videotape. The band playing on a stage, with tables groaning in the middle of the ballroom with shrimp and crab and crawdads and roast beef and gumbo and jambalaya, Sarah on the dance floor whirls and turns and dives, up high one moment, her arms in flight, and then over there the next, an orchestrated co-ordination of supple muscles.

And her dancing partner, making a gawky but credible mirror of her fluid movements: her brother Jesse. Jesse, the party man, dancer and hand clapper, happy boy-man, happy man-boy, sweating now with his blazer doffed, a Tom Sawyer in his suspenders. What a father's joy.

The night before, Jesse couldn't wait to tell the sleepy-eyed Sarah of his adventures.

That next day word traveled fast among those who would attend the wedding: Jesse had been cool. He talked himself into Pat O'Briens. Fun guy to be with. A party animal. A Survivor of the Long Night. More high-fives.

Earlier that day of the wedding, most of the men of the night before were eating soft-shell crab Po-Boys in the hotel restaurant, and one of Todd's friends, a chef from LA (who was Bruce Springsteen's personal chef, wouldn't you know) shoved an Abita ale, a hearty New Orleans brew, into Jesse's hand.

Jesse smiled, then turned to me and said, "Can we come back next year for Mardi Gras, Dad?" Then, when he was sure nobody was looking, he slipped the beer to me, and in a low voice he said, "I still don't like the taste."

I said, "You don't have to, Jesse, probably just as well you don't." Then he took the bottle back from me and took a swig, just in case anybody had been looking at us. He held the bottle for a long time, adjusting his blazer, like a prop in a play, not drinking.

At the dinner following the wedding that night, Jesse was served champagne with everyone else, nobody even questioning it.

He had made it. One of the Men.