



Why Boys Leave Home

John F. Kennedy changed the course of my adult life.

In 1969, following graduation from George Washington University in Washington, D.C., I joined the Peace Corps, which had been established in 1961 by Kennedy as one of his first acts as president. I asked for Botswana, they sent me to Borneo. One door closes, another opens.

My desire to travel far was triggered by several drives.

The first was a curiosity about “exotic” and distant shores, a form of questing wanderlust I still feel.

And I wanted to be of some use to others. I grew up as a baby boomer in suburban New Jersey. It was a comfortable (maybe a touch spoiled) existence and I wanted to give something back.

But the equally significant trigger was the on-going Vietnam War, another Kennedy legacy. I didn’t want to fight, but I was

reluctant to cut off a toe, commit a felony, or run to Canada to escape military service. Becoming a primary school adviser in the Malaysian state of Sarawak, in the western part of the island of Borneo, seemed a useful and honorable alternative.

I’ve been an expat since then.

Sometimes I ask myself: Why do boys leave home?

This question might strike while I’m wandering alone in a rainforest, or asking the Sultan of Yogyakarta about his relationship with the Mermaid Queen, or searching for tiger magicians in Sumatra, or squatting in the dust asking a wizened village elder if he really thought his house burned down because he pissed in a sacred forest, or bargaining with Thai amulet traders for a charm made out of 200-million-year-old fossilized shark dung, or simply enjoying the cool air of a

Bangkok shopping emporium (the only mall I know where you can buy cupcakes in the basement, designer clothes on the ground floor, diamonds on the third, and a Maserati on the fourth).

Why travel far, leaving behind comfort, friends and security?

Peter Kedit, former director of the Sarawak Museum, feels my Asia travels are comparable to the concept of *berjalai* among the Iban tribe, the rite-of-passage for young men which in previous generations often ended with the taking of a human head.

My mini-adventures are less bloody, but serve a similar purpose. By leaving home and going off to the distant corners of the world, I have put down a marker. Without saying it, I am saying that when I return I will have been changed. It is a desire to move towards individualization. “He left and did exciting things that

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our left-behind friends can only dream about; they stayed and worked in the post office." Think of Kipling: "All things considered there are only two kinds of men in the world -- those that stay at home and those that do not."

Neuroendocrinologist Robert Sapolsky discussed voluntary exile and adventure-seeking in the context of young male primates leaving the nest. "Another key to our success must have something to do with this voluntary transfer process, this primate legacy of getting an itch around adolescence," he wrote. "How did voluntary dispersal evolve? What is going on with that individual's genes, hormones, and neuro-transmitters to make it hit the road? We don't know, but we do know that following this urge is one of the most resonantly primate of acts. A young male baboon stands riveted at the river's edge; an adolescent female chimp cranes to catch a glimpse of the chimps from the next valley. New animals, a whole bunch of 'em! To hell with logic and sensible behavior, to hell with tradition and respecting your elders, to hell with this drab little town, and to hell with that knot of fear in your stomach. Curiosity, excitement, adventure - the hunger for novelty is something fundamentally daft, rash, and enriching that we share with our whole taxonomic order."

Society forgot to stage a ceremony just for me.

I came of age without a party. I was denied the vigil in the desert, where I was expected to kill a lion, fast for three weeks, have a vision, return to the village to get tattooed, become cleansed

in a sweat lodge and decorated with feathers and body paint and invited, finally, to eat with the grownups.

We modern boys and girls lack rites of passage, rituals and ceremonies where we clearly shift from childhood to adulthood. Instead our life-passages are fuzzy. Girls in Western societies begin to menstruate many years before they are old enough to bear children in a socially-acceptable context. Boys might be old enough to drive but not old enough to drink, old enough to kill/be killed in the army but not old enough to vote, old enough to father children but not old enough to leave school of their own volition.

If society doesn't offer us clear rites of passage we tend to create our own:

Some boys will go into the army.

Some boys play competitive sports.

Some boys join gangs, or fraternities.

Some boys break into their fathers' gun cases and commit mayhem.

Some boys write novels, or sing on stage, or get a real job.

Some boys don't worry about it.

Some boys worry about it too much, and become dreamers.

Or, as T.E. Lawrence wrote:

All men dream: but not equally. Those who dream by night in the dusty recesses of their minds wake in the day to find that it was vanity: but the dreamers of the day are dangerous men, for they may act their dreams with open eyes, to make it possible. ★

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This article is excerpted from Paul Sochaczewski's new book: *An Inordinate Fondness for Beetles*, which recounts the author's forty-year journey retracing the steps of Victorian naturalist Alfred Russel Wallace across Southeast Asia. It is available now, priced £9.99, from Amazon.co.uk

