

final word



Not Too Sharp

The author fondly remembers a boyhood game in which participants hurled knives at one another. by Shaun Gallagher

For as long as I can remember, my brother and I envied our father's pocket knives. He had a collection of five or six of them, some with just a slick single blade, others of the Swiss Army multi-tool variety. When my brother and I joined the Cub Scouts at ages 9 and 10 respectively, we were excited to receive as a gift from our father two authentic, working, junior-sized pen knives.

Not long after we received our knives, a neighborhood Huckleberry introduced us to a marvelous game called "Mumblety Peg," which I have come to learn dates at least as far back as the late 1800s. The rules are as simple as they are catastrophically self-imperilling: Two pen-knife-wielding competitors stand facing each other, three feet apart, with their legs spread out. Each takes his turn flinging his knife as close as he can to the other boy's feet.

That's it.

That's the whole game.

Looking back, I simply can't fathom what dark force tempt-

ed my brother and me to play this potentially disfiguring Rochambeau, but we did play it, and often. I remember with uncanny clarity us brothers standing near the garden in our backyard, two podalic William Tells slinging knives at each others' tootsies.

By some great grace of God — and heaven knows we needed it — neither of us ever punctured a shoe. Despite hours and hours of Mumblety Peg, the worst injury we ever received was a tiny cut here or there from gripping the knife to yank it out of the ground.

Mumblety Peg, in case its history interests you, was first played by daring young lads outside the schoolyard at the turn of the last century. It was always discouraged by justifiably worried teachers, but to only the same degree as were marbles and comic books. I wonder how such a game would be received today, when children have been expelled under zero-tolerance policies for perceived weapons like butter knives and keychains. I don't mind wagering that Mumblety Peg's days are over.

In fact, I can't understand how a game like Mumblety Peg survived so long.

Surely the dopey young children lacking the sense to avoid the game should've killed each other off by now. And if not that, then certainly some parent should've heard whispers about the game — or remembered playing it — and alerted other parents to never, ever leave their Cub-Scout-aged kids unattended with pocket knives.

Then again, I suppose outlawing Mumblety Peg can't stop two little menaces with energy to spare from making up their own trouble. The summer after we got bored with Mumblety Peg, my brother and I created a new game: We'd climb up the thick, leafy tree beside our house, pick a limb about 10 feet above the ground, and see who could throw whom off of it first.

I wonder if — a century from now — other fearless, reckless, witless young brothers will carry on our legacy.

One hopes not. **III**

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