Fire Fighting

LITTLE ERNIE POKES at the bonfire. His sister, Brianna, watches with downcast eyes. Their father has repeatedly beaten their mother. Will the same violence consume them?

The moment that Ernie met Donna Ferrato, he began smashing his sister's doll. He didn't know yet that Ferrato was a photographer, but he wanted to show her what was smoldering inside of him. The familiarity and simplicity of the Golden Rule belie its depth. Recast: What is done unto us is what we will be inclined to do unto others.

All of us live in a violent world; we are all potentially violent creatures. And yet the ways in which violence has traditionally erupted seem to be changing. Rage is both more and less contained. The possibility of another world war feels distant; a boy gunning down his classmates seems commonplace.
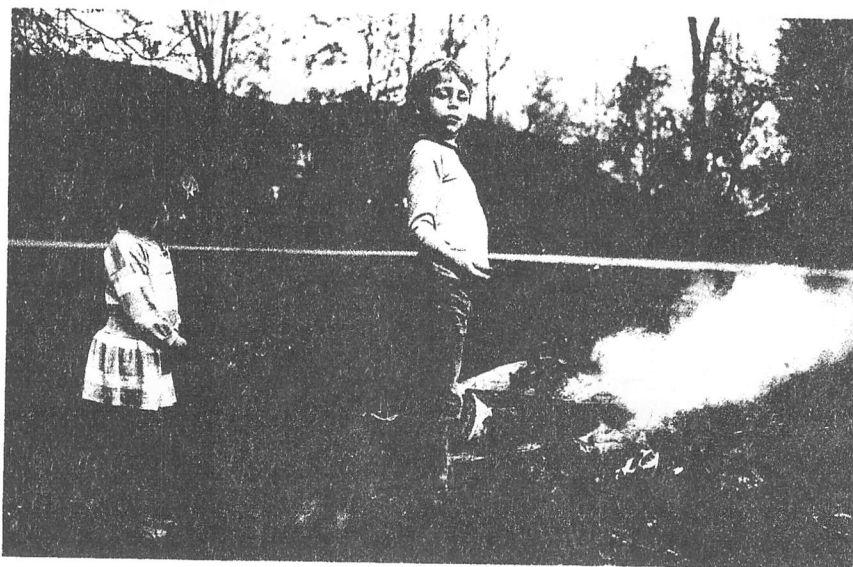
Scanning the nightly news, I almost anticipate suddenly seeing yet another teenager's fatal rampage, another community devastated and bewildered. In little more than a year, seven teenage boys in five states have taken 18 lives. Their average age was 14. Seeing this scene periodically play out on TV both deadens its impact and diminishes the desire for inquiry. The fatal shooting of a teacher by a student after a graduation dance in Edinboro, Pennsylvania, disappeared between the prior shootings in Jonesboro, Arkansas, and the subsequent ones in Springfield, Oregon. The central question is no longer why, but where and when.

Television is an effective medium for turning mayhem into tedium. Who can dispute TV's pervasive influence, its lack of conscience? A recent study conducted at four major research universities found a 14 percent increase in violent content on prime-time programming from 1994 to 1997. Fourteen percent may not seem drastic, until you consider that a 12-year-old watches an average of three to four hours of TV each day. Even more disturbing is the study's finding that nearly 75 percent of the violent scenes portrayed show no criticism of, and no remorse or penalty for, violent behavior.

It's also tempting (and accurate) to point an accusing finger at the other leading culprit—our gun culture. But this explanation doesn't seem entirely sufficient. Previously unimaginable juvenile violence is currently plaguing even those countries that don't have the obscenely easy access to firearms that we do. In France, for example, roving gangs of 12- to 17-year-olds have repeatedly rioted in the suburbs of several major cities, torching cars, smashing windows, and throwing Molotov cocktails. French teenagers have

assaulted bus drivers, police officers, firefighters, and even elderly bystanders with knives, stones, and guns. Japan has experienced a rash of knife attacks by young teens, including one by a 15-year-old boy who decapitated an 11-year-old, and another by a 13-year-old who stabbed his teacher to death after she reprimanded him for being late to class.

Both France and Japan attribute their increases in juvenile crime to violent movies, television, and video games. Some leaders in these two countries also cite ills particular to their own societies. The French have pointed to widespread unemployment, especially in those areas where residents are mainly low-income immigrants. Although France's unemployment rate averages about 12 percent, that figure approaches 50 percent for urbanites under 25.

In Japan, the anxiety about juvenile crime focuses on the country's high-pressure school system. Rigorous admission tests are given early on to students to decide which of them will enter the elite high schools and universities that control access to the nation's most lucrative jobs. Japanese students' intense after-school preparatory programs and endless study hours often mirror their parents' long workdays. Family interaction, particularly with fathers, can be minimal. In the '50s, most juvenile offenders in Japan were poor, orphaned, or abused. Today, a reported 90 percent of young lawbreakers come from solidly middle-class families.

STILL, THE ABSENCE of one culture's easy answers and the introduction of another's begs a larger question: Why is juvenile crime erupting worldwide at a time when adult crime is diminishing and there's much less violence among nations? According to a study done at the University of

Uppsala in Sweden, of the 101 conflicts that occurred from 1989 to 1996, only six involved the forces or territory of another state. While we've had atrocious ethnic wars and border skirmishes, there hasn't been an old-fashioned international conflict since the Persian Gulf War.

With global wars becoming less prevalent and adult crime declining, is it possible that the media is filling the void by sensationalizing a few isolated, if gruesome, incidents, ascribing to them a disproportionately large cultural importance? Not likely. In his report "Trends in Juvenile Violence," James Alan Fox of Northeastern University's College of Criminal Justice cites a 22 percent rise from 1990 to 1994 in the rate of murder by teens aged 14 to 17. He notes that this jump occurred while the teenage population as a whole was on the decline. Pointing out that the 14- to 17-year-old age group is expected to grow 20 percent by the year 2005, Fox warns that, without remediation, the juvenile crime rate seems likely to increase. The FBI's most recent juvenile arrest records support this grim prediction: Weapons possession, aggravated assault, robbery, and murder all rose more than 50 percent from 1987 to 1996.

Perhaps the decline in international warfare and the rise in teenage mayhem are somehow related. In the global market, everyone has become, first and foremost, a potential consumer. Suddenly, the lines defining the "other" are much blurrier than they were during World War II, or even during the Cold War. When I talk with French and Japanese teenagers, for example, they say they can't imagine going to war for practically any cause. This is a happy and

remarkable change, although one not often remarked upon. When, in recorded history, has war's red badge of courage been less sought after by young men?

IF HEROIC NATIONAL identity were the only social form eroding in the modern world, we'd be in great shape. But, of course, our families are fragmenting as well. When nation-states consolidated, they monopolized tribal force. Now, at least figuratively, young warriors can remain with their tribes. But the modern, tribeless, nationless male is discovering not only that he is no longer the unquestioned leader in his own domain, but that no one is paying enough attention or setting sufficient limits at home. And that makes him feel abandoned and ashamed.

Looking more closely at the seven American boys who went on rampages, a pattern emerges. Six are white adolescents; all were frequently described as troubled loners, usually with a disrupted home life. Each seemed disaffected with his future prospects in society. Each felt so isolated and deadened that committing cold-blooded murder may have been, perversely, an attempt to feel alive.

Traditional manhood is under siege—and it should be. Boys poke at the bonfire, wondering: Will they command as much power as their fathers did? Are they worthy of respect? How can they ask for care? These are tough questions for any child, but unbearable ones for those who've suffered serious neglect or abuse, and feel in their frightened souls that they must be unlovable. —*Jeffrey Klein*