

INTRODUCTION

The Accidental Adult

SOME OF US NEVER planned on this happening. But it did. Sometime between grad school and our first mortgage, strangely, our youthful mojo was replaced with a newfound maturity. And we didn't see it coming.

Our two-door coupes morphed into sliding-door minivans. Bar hopping turned into movie nights on the couch. Late-night hookups with babes became early morning feedings with babies. And golf? It's not funny to suck anymore. For me, the transformation played out a little bit like this:

*Aging college buddy, slurring into the phone:
"It's a kegger, Colin! You have to drive up."*

Lame excuse: "You know I'd love to, but gas prices are getting steep. And where am I going to sleep?"

It's not that I am afraid of getting old. I just want to get old in a certain way.

Sting



Getting panicky over a party? When did I start caring if I'd crash on a couch or pass out on the floor? Such trivial concerns never used to bother me. Hell, I was the guy who'd never miss a party or diss his friends. Now I was doing both of those things. (And still using the word "diss.") Who am I becoming? I wondered. Where's that *carpe diem* spirit?

I'll tell you who I've become. Despite my best intentions to remain forever juvenile, I've instead grown reluctantly responsible and marginally mature. My life's biggest shocker? I've become an accidental adult. And I know I'm not alone.

DEFINING OUR TERMS

accidental adult (n.): An individual whose age indicates maturity but whose approach to life suggests otherwise.

What exactly makes someone an accidental adult? It's largely a matter of resistance. For most well-adjusted people, growing up isn't an unwelcome surprise. Many accept the inevitability of adulthood and embrace it. They resign themselves to lives of responsibility, serious endeavors, and a sensible wardrobe. They check their smoke alarm batteries twice a year. They know what kind of gas mileage their cars get. Some can even name their city councilperson.

But some of us join the world of adults kicking and screaming. Yes, technically we are adults. But more importantly, we are reluctant grownups who refuse to accept we're just like every other chump with credit card debt and an aching lower back. When we look in the mirror, the person we see staring back is decades younger and *way* cooler. We may spend an hour researching the best place to meet for

a happy hour—you know, someplace not too noisy, with adequate restroom facilities, convenient parking, and a menu that accommodates our newly acquired shellfish allergy or gluten intolerance. But the point is, we still go, while many other adults hurry home to finish that drop ceiling in the new rec room. Are they conscientious? Absolutely. Fun? You tell me.

Life as an accidental adult may not be what we planned, but it's far more exciting than the existence of an everyday, garden-variety intentional adult. And it has many advantages. Friends don't call me to help them hang Sheetrock. I'm the one they call to answer late-night music trivia questions. No heavy lifting there. If a colleague needs a ride to work, I probably can't offer him a lift. My excuse? In good weather, I often commute on my 1986 motor scooter. And when the backyard parties start, no one expects me to build the best bonfire in the cul-de-sac. Guys like me hand a few sticks to the alpha males and then stand back at a safe distance chatting with the cute young wives while their inattentive husbands debate the ideal tinder assembly. Have at it guys. Some more wine, ladies?

So what is the opposite of an accidental adult?

assimilated adult (n.): One who embraces the responsibilities of adulthood without fearing the inevitable loss of a joyous, youthful soul.

You know these people. They're everywhere you look . . . in your neighborhood, at parties, at your kids' games, in line at the grocery store, and most certainly in your workplace. These are the adults who understand what society expects of them and do the right things the right way. They know how to get a better interest rate on their credit cards. They understand the proper ratio of comprehensive versus collision coverage on their auto insurance. They know what they

pay in property taxes (every year). And to fill in those few holes where they lack the necessary knowledge, they've retained a group of adult subcontractors—their investor, their plumber, their lawyer, their personal trainer, their children's tutor, their caterer—to properly advise them along the way. Yes, their approach to life is always measure twice, cut once, while the accidental adult is more like, "Eh, that's about right."

ACTING MY AGE WITHOUT LOSING MY COOL

Some could say this approach to life seems irresponsible. So to avoid this criticism, it's sometimes necessary for us accidental adults to fit into the real-world adult cult as best we can. I call it "Acting my age without losing my cool." How does it work?

In the chapters that follow, I will offer you a handful of helpful tactics to employ when you absolutely, positively have to assimilate in order to earn credibility, respect, and legitimacy from your peers (even if they are lame-ass, adult sellouts).

What kind of survival strategies work best? That's for you to decide. But here's a preview of my favorite and perhaps the most versatile technique I can offer: *Embrace your inner smart-ass and fuel your inner monologue*. In action, it looks like this: Whenever necessary, try to project an outwardly adult appearance. In other words, act like you care while feigning interest in adultlike topics or issues whenever the need arises. At the same time, tap your inner insincerity, reminding yourself you're really not one of them and that's just fine.

Does this sound familiar?

Coworker on a warm day: “You know, it’s not the heat. It’s the humidity.”

Outward response: “I suppose you’re right about that!”

Inner monologue: *What a moron.*

Outraged neighbor: “Did you see what those punks built in my yard?”

Outward response: “Yeah, that’s just sick. Who thinks a four-foot snow penis is funny?”

Inner monologue: *Nicely done guys! Great attention to detail.*

Parent at a children’s dance recital: “I’m really impressed with the girls’ hip-hop teacher.”

Outward response: “Yes, she’s very impressive.”

Inner monologue: *Impressive indeed.*

Now who couldn’t draw strength from a sanity system like this? See, I’m convinced everyone has a little inner monologue. It’s just that us accidental adults have developed that voice into more of a primal scream than a whisper in order to survive these awkward, yet inevitable, assimilated adult interactions.

YOUR WORLD FRIGHTENS AND CONFUSES ME

Clearly, I’m not afraid to admit that I don’t feel entirely comfortable in a world where it seems by now most adults understand things like umbrella insurance policies and Roth IRAs. In fact, that *Saturday*

Night Live skit where Unfrozen Caveman Lawyer confesses, “Your world frightens and confuses me,” sums it up perfectly for me. Many days I feel like a thawed Neanderthal. It’s like I’ve been awakened to a new era where people my age are now supposed to be accomplished, serious, and wise. Instead, I’m treading water in a sea of rising expectations and diminishing praise for accomplishments that are no longer considered spectacular but are now expected of me. And try as I might to fit in, the accidental adult in me still shines through. Consider these examples:

Instead of showing disgust at petty vandalism, I laugh whenever I see that someone has scratched an additional “Step 3: Wipe hands on pants” on the automatic hand dryer instructions in public restrooms.

I don’t usually wear an earring anymore, but I like to keep my options open. So about once a month, I force a metal stud through the closed-over puncture in my left earlobe. Sure, it bleeds, it stings, and it swells a little bit. But growing up is supposed to be painful, right?

For me, the adult activity of lawn care is merely a painful obligation, a neighborhood courtesy, if you will. And unfortunately, I live on a street where the real men care a hell of a lot more than I do about the appearance of their lawns. How can you tell? Most of my neighbors wisely retained professional lawn-care services to properly fertilize their yards. But like any accidental adult, I fought this assimilation for years. Instead, I’d go out there and kick and curse that fertilizer cart as I dragged it haphazardly across my lawn. I only relented and hired a lawn care pro after I accidentally burned a dozen jagged yellow stripes into my front

lawn when the fertilizer spreader broke halfway through the job. For the better part of two months, I felt like the teenage son who ruined his daddy's lawn. But, hey, at least the burn pattern didn't spell out an obscene word. (Note to other accidental adults: repeatedly kicking a jammed fertilizer spreader does NOT ensure even application of the product.)

While the details might not match exactly, chances are you've had your own experiences that scream "accidental adult in action." Don't be embarrassed. The real adult world is a frightening and confusing place for people like us. But don't worry, you're running with the right crowd.

GOOD COMPANY

I'm willing to bet that a psychiatrist would tell me my perspective on adulthood is really just a coping mechanism to avoid the crushing reality that I'm a married man responsible for a mortgage, three kids, and replacing the furnace filter regularly. Could be. And I suppose I'll get a therapist someday soon like other assimilated adults and find out for certain.

But in the meantime, I'm comfortable knowing that I'm in good company. And I even feel oddly mature realizing that some of my advice can help other reluctant grownups as well. I'm happy to help! Because every day I see evidence of other accidental adults like me—people my age who are capable, working professionals who don't feel confident handling jumper cables and who can't taste the difference between a cabernet or a Chianti. People like you.

And the best part is, we really don't care. Why? Because we know life is too short to worry about succumbing to adult convention at

every opportunity. If acting our age is going to mean losing our cool, I'm here to tell you it really doesn't have to be that way—especially when ignoring a few cultural standards and embracing our inner smart-ass can be tons more fun.

So sit back, hide this cover (pretend you're reading *The New Yorker* like a real grownup might), and prepare to learn a few techniques to help you muddle through your reluctant journey.

As we get older, we may not drive up for last-minute keggers as often as we used to—unless we can sneak in a little power nap first. But every day, accidental adults like us are navigating an important and sometimes perilous passage nonetheless: a crossing from the carefree playgrounds of the sophomore life to the more solemn soils of adulthood. This may not be the roadtrip we had bargained for, but why not have a little fun along the way?

Now let's go, and enjoy the ride!