At 11 years old I developed an attitude problem. I started fighting. Getting hit in the nose was frightening, but slugging someone else's face was exhilarating. Eventually, I got good with my hands. Play-fighting in the playground became slap-fighting in the boy's bathroom. Soon I advanced to street-fighting. But at home, I never fought. I was the sweetest thing.

But I was becoming a boy bomb.

At home I smiled. At stepbrothers, stepsisters, and especially at my imposing stepfather, a successful attorney, I smiled.

However, I wasn't smiling one day after school. I was with two friends walking down the sidewalk when the town bully, coming from the opposite direction, bumped us. His harsh words led to me punching him into the road. Cars screeched as I pounded his face. I finished him off as he knelt in the driveway across the street. He ended up in the hospital. I hate bullies.

My strict motto was: Never start fights. And I never did: except once. With Mitch.

Mitch bothered me. One day after school, hiding behind a tree, I waited for him. I could see him wearing his madras shirt. When I stepped from behind the tree, he smiled.

That's when I began pushing and punching.

The police arrived. A pedestrian said the boy wearing the madras shirt was the troublemaker. The cop sat us in his squad car and said to Mitch, "Boy, what's wrong with you starting fights?" We were both wearing madras shirts, but Mitch's shirt was newer.

At home I continued smiling, playing alto saxophone and doing homework; in school I was earning decent grades and had cultivated many friendships. I was even voted president of my junior high school. My parents, divorced when I was 8, were proud of me. But using my fists was more gratifying than the saxophone, good grades, being president, or my parent's pride.

I entered high school and was suspended in September. I hit a bully stealing kids' lunch money. After I hit him he slid across the lunchroom table with me on top, still punching. I hate aggressive people.

My mother was called in and the principal confided that he was happy I had hit the trouble-maker. Nevertheless, I received a three-day suspension at home.

Home.

Home was my stepfather's house. I never wanted to be contaminated by it. Nevertheless, I was well-mannered, perfectly polite and always smiled. I pretended happiness.

In October, I punched a sophomore in the school hallway. He had pinned a Playboy centerfold to a boy's locker and swore it was me. Another home suspension.

Down in the basement, I punched my speedbag, a metal coat-hanger hanging from a water pipe. In my bedroom, I rolled up socks and threw them to the ceiling and punched them as they came down. If they unraveled, it was a knockout. I was Jack Dempsey in my bedroom mirror.

My third fight was in December. A kid kept mouthing off. He ended up in the school nurse's office with his front tooth knocked out, and part of his top lip missing. I hate mouthy people.

My artistic mother and soft-spoken father were puzzled by my deep-seated anger. But not my stepfather. He was an aggressive lawyer who understood violence.

My songwriter father was a sweetheart, but it was my combative stepfather who bought me my first set of boxing gloves, a heavybag and a speedbag to replace the metal coat hanger. When I was 11, he brought me to an amateur boxing show. We sat ringside.

I watched angry boys wallop and abuse each other. It was brutal, grotesque, and bloody. At the night's end, a boy was presented with "The Best Boxer Award". A beautiful girl handed him a golden trophy and kissed his cheek. The crowd cheered. I fell in love...with boxing. That's exactly what I wanted: golden trophies, a pretty girl kissing my cheek and a cheering crowd.

Unfortunately, I had to become a fighter to get it.

In high school I joined a boxing gym and won my first bootleg bout by decisioning a Brooklyn kid. "You're an animal!" gasped a young boy after my fight. I felt like Jack Dempsey.

In my senior year I entered the New York City Golden Gloves and reached the finals in. Three busloads of friends bought tickets to watch me fight in Madison Square Garden. Before bouts, I had three strict rules: Whatever I do—do it fast; Hook off the jab and Never throw the first punch. Throwing the first punch was like being the instigator.

I lost in the finals.

After The Gloves I left home. At college I desperately tried to reinvent myself. I didn't want to fight anymore. I started hitting books instead of people. For the first time in my life I studied. I studied myself.

I discovered that debating in a classroom was as terrifying as fighting in a ring. Sitting in a class, nervously chewing the inside of my cheek, I came to horrifying realizations: I hated fighting; by becoming a fighter, I had become exactly what I had hated: my stepfather.

But I also realized that boxing was my sick way of remaining healthy.

I'm married now and haven't punched anyone in years. However, I do shadowbox in New York's Central Park while jogging. Recently, while punching the air, I thought of Mitch and finally

understood why I picked that fight with him. He was me. Neither of us, deep down, was belligerent, but I had to contend with an aggressive stepfamily. I could wipe Mitch's smile off his face, but never my own. I hid behind that smile the same way I hid behind that tree.

(Peter Wood is the author of "Confessions of a Fighter" and "A Clenched Fist" available on www.Amazon.com
or
www.RingsideBooks.com
)