‘Booking’ the Suspect

It was the first day of the new school year in 1967. I was drifting through life, infected with a classic case of high school senioritis.

I thought having my study hall the first hour of each day was a stroke of good luck. It would provide me with an opportunity to catch up on some of the sleep I had lost to milking cows earlier in the day.

I was surprised to discover that the study room was overbooked. Every student but one had a desk, and that one was me.

I stood at the front of the room as the bell rang to start the school day. I looked at our new teacher, whom I had not met, replete in a nice suit and tie, reading a newspaper at his desk located in the rear of the room.

I was about to ask the teacher where I should sit when I saw a friend wearing a grin as big as his face. He showed me the shiny ball bearing he had retrieved from his pocket.

Before I could say a word, my friend threw the metal orb toward our teacher at the back of the room. It hit the newspaper with a loud “THWAAAAK!”

Just that fast, the room became extremely quiet.

Our new teacher folded his newspaper methodically, placed it on his desk and looked over the students. All of them were seated with eyes pointed straight ahead. All, that is, except one. I stood facing him with a crooked grin.

“You! What’s your name?” asked my teacher.

“Batt.”

“Well, Batt, you march right back here and let’s have a talk.” I was assumed guilty because I was unwilling to finger the true culprit.

The school secretary feigned surprise to see me in the principal’s office so early in both the year and the day. We shared a laugh.

The principal saw me and asked what I was doing sitting on the miscreants’ bench. I told him that the teacher had sent me from the big study hall. The principal nodded, said he had heard the room didn’t have enough desks to go around and sent me to the library.

“Tell the librarian that you’ll be spending your study hall with her,” he said. “I’ll adjust your records so that the FBI will know where to find you when they come looking.”

I liked my principal’s sense of humor and expected he needed it. I didn’t bother him with any of the details about the ball-bearing incident. I figured he had enough things on his mind on the first day of school.

I spent every first hour of every school day in that library. I helped the librarian carry boxes of books and move tables, and she gave me first shot at new books and the daily newspapers.

I never caught up on my sleep. I was too busy reading. It was heaven to a boy who cherished the written word.

The teacher who kicked me out of the study hall would come in each morning to get the newspaper. He got it, but not until I had finished reading it.

He once asked me what I was doing in the library. I told him that the principal had sent me there and that I was helping the librarian.

“Good,” said the teacher. “It serves you right.”

I don’t really know if time in the library served me right or not, but I do know that it served me well.

—Al B., Hartland, Minnesota