

The Rites of Almost-Men: Binge Drinking, Fraternity Hazing, and the Elephant Walk

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The cab meets the foursome outside of Nick's house at 11:45 p.m. In fifteen minutes, he will turn 21, and Tempe, Arizona's Mill Avenue is waiting for him and his crew. Mill Avenue looks like a lot of avenues near college campuses across the country: a string of bars with names like Fat Tuesday, Margarita Rocks, and The Library. (That way if your parents call you can tell them that you are going to "The Library" and not be lying.) "Let's start out at Fat Tuesday and then go from there," Nick says as the cab drops them off. Tonight is Nick's "power hour," a college ritual where the birthday boy goes out on the eve of his twenty-first birthday to have as much fun as possible (read: drunkenness) between midnight and the closing of the bars. The practice goes by many names on many campuses, but a common theme always emerges: You walk into a bar and stumble out of it.

Nick starts his night by ingesting some vile concoction invented solely for the enjoyment of the onlookers. Tonight the drink of choice is a "Three Wise Men," a shot composed of equal parts Jim Beam, Jack Daniels, and Johnnie Walker. Other variations include the more ethnically diverse (substitute Jose Cuervo for the Johnnie Walker), or the truly vomit-inducing (add a little half-and-half and just a splash of Tabasco). The next drink comes at him fast, a Mind Eraser, another classic of the power hour. It's like a Long Island Iced Tea except more potent, and it is drunk through a straw as quickly as possible. Shot after shot after shot is taken, the guys become all the more loud and obnoxious, and the bar manager brings a trash can over to Nick's side, just in case.

Not surprisingly, the trash can comes in handy. Nick's body finally

relents as closing time approaches. He spews out a stream of vomit and the other guys know it's time to go. Fun was had, memories were made, but most importantly . . . he puked. His friends can rest easy; a job well done.

Jason, a freshman at the University of Georgia, has been waiting all semester for this night. He's put up with a lot of humiliating abuse from the brothers, done mountains of their laundry, made their beds, and even written a paper for the pledgemaster. He's mopped up vomit-stained bathrooms at the fraternity house on the morning after parties, done stupid things, and drank a bit more — okay, a lot more — than he ever did in high school. One more night and he's sure he'll be in.

The pledges gather in the rec room at about 10 p.m. Dressed, as instructed, in old T-shirts and jeans, they were told to bring flip flops, a change of clothes, and a jockstrap. (A jockstrap?) An anxious frivolity permeates the room, as brothers drink beer with the pledges. After everyone seems good and drunk the brothers swarm over the pledges, yelling their demands to recite the fraternity's mission statement, rituals, and membership information. Screw it up, the brothers yell, and you might not make it.

Calisthenics, of a sort, follow. Push-ups, then chugging some beers. Sit-ups, and more chugging. Most of the pledges are ready to puke. They are then told to strip naked and stand in a straight line, one behind the other (which is hard enough given how much they have had to drink). Each pledge is ordered to reach his right hand between his legs to the pledge standing behind him and grab that guy's penis, then place his left hand on the shoulder of the guy in front of him. (You have to bend over to make this work.) Forming a circle, they walk around the basement for several minutes, in what is known as the "elephant walk." By now it is nearly 2 a.m. "Okay, you worthless pieces of shit," the pledgemaster screams. "Now let's see if you're willing to give it all for the brotherhood!"

Still naked, the pledges stumble to the second-floor balcony of the house. The brothers measure out lengths of rope, and a cinderblock is tied to the end of each, so that it almost — but not quite — touches the ground. The pledges are blindfolded as the other ends of the ropes are tied to the base of each pledge's penis. "You better have a big enough dick, pledge," the pledgemaster shouts. "If your dick isn't big enough, you aren't getting into this house. This block is gonna rip it the fuck off your body! How do you like that, you little weenies? Our dicks made it! Is yours big enough?"

Each pledge feels a little tug on his rope, and then hears the cinderblocks being lifted up to the edge of the balcony. The next thing he knows, he feels a sharp tug and hears the cinderblock being pushed

off the edge and crashing to the ground below. One guy screams and starts to cry. Another pisses. Blindfolds are removed and the brothers are laughing their heads off. Turns out the ropes were not really tied to those blocks after all. They embrace their new "brothers," and it is over: Jason has made it.

These snapshots capture typical events that are taking place at colleges and universities across America. Binge drinking is epidemic, and nowhere near as innocuous as many of us would like to believe. Hazing rituals span the range from the ridiculous to the truly criminal, occasionally becoming lethal as well. There is an impulse — among parents, college administrators, alumni, and the guys themselves — to chalk it all up to harmless fun. College is supposed to be the best years of your life. Yet stories like those above also suggest something important about Guyland that lurks beneath the surface of all that "fun": its chronic insecurity, its desperate need for validation, and the sometimes sadistic cruelty with which that validation is withheld and then conferred.

Here's what guys know. They know that every move, every utterance, every gesture is being carefully monitored by the self-appointed gender police, ensuring that everyone constantly complies with the Guy Code — even if they don't want to. They know that if you do go along, you'll have friends for life; you'll get laid, you'll feel like you belong. And if you don't, you won't. If you're lucky, you'll just be ignored. If you're not, you'll be ostracized, targeted, bullied. The stakes

are so high, the costs of failure enormous. Many guys — perhaps most — suspect that they might not have what it takes. They feel unable to live up to the Guy Code, yet their fear compels them to keep trying. And so many of the other guys seem to do it so effortlessly.

And so the initiations begin — initiations that are designed to prove misguided notions of masculinity, with legitimacy conferred by those who have no real legitimacy to confer it. No wonder the rituals become in-

creasingly barbaric, the hazing increasingly cruel. And at the same time the initiations serve another purpose, perhaps less clear than the first. They also reassure the guys that they are not yet men, not yet part of the adult world, and that there's still time to have a little fun before they have to find their way in the real world.

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Initiation: Replacing Mother

Initiation is about transition, a moving from one status to another. Its power rests on the instability of one's current identity. A person undergoes initiation in order to stabilize a new permanent identity.

Initiations are centerpieces of many of the world's religions. Sometimes the rituals are arduous, other times they are relatively benign. In Judaism and Islam, circumcision is practiced as a rite of passage that marks the boy's membership in the community. In Judaism, it is performed at birth, signifying the covenant of God with Abraham — that Abraham was willing to sacrifice his only son to his belief in God. In Islam, circumcision takes place at different times, depending on the sect. In Turkey, for example, the *sunnet* takes place at 13, roughly the onset of puberty, and is a certifiable rite of passage to manhood.

In Christianity, ritual circumcision is not required but we can consider Christian baptism as an initiation ritual. In the baptism, the old self is symbolically, ritually, destroyed — drowned — and the new self is reborn into the community of the Church. And though baptism is not gender-specific, as both males and females are baptized, it is nonetheless a meditation about gender. (After all, the original baptisms were for men only.) The old "feminized self," born of a woman, is destroyed and the priest, always a man, brings the new self to life. In a sense, then, the male priest has given birth to the new man. The mother may have given birth, but the child does not become a member of the community until the priest confers that status. Women are pushed aside, and men appropriate their reproductive power.

Freud made such a moment the centerpiece of his theory of child development. Before the Oedipal crisis, Freud argued, the child, male or female, identifies with mother, the source of love, food, and nurturing. To become a man, a boy must leave his mother behind, and come over to his father's side. The successful resolution of the Oedipal complex is identification with the masculine and "dis-identification" with the feminine. Whether or not one subscribes to Freudian theory, all theories of initiation pivot on uncertainty, anxiety, indeterminacy. It is an unstable moment, what anthropologist Victor Turner called a "liminal" stage — a stage of in-between-ness, "neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremony."

Initiations in Guyland are about the passage from boyhood to manhood. Boyhood is the world of women — Mama's boys, wimps, wusses, and losers — or the world of men who are considered women — gays, fags, homos, queers. Or babies. One guy told me of the "Baby

Dinner" at his fraternity house at a large public university in the Northeast. Pledges dressed in diapers, with little white bonnets on their heads. The pledgemaster would put gross previously chewed food on their heads, simulating pabulum, and the pledges would scoop it off with their fingers and eat it. Many fraternities have equally infantilizing rituals. If initiation is going to validate your manhood, first you have to regress to babyhood.

Initiations, then, are all about masculinity — testing it and proving it. It's not that women don't initiate girls into womanhood. But rarely does becoming a woman involve danger, or threats, or testing. A girl might be inducted into womanhood when her mother explains menstruation at puberty. Or she might be briefed by her friends about the hows and whys of sex, or by her roommates about how to navigate the world of men. But a woman doesn't typically feel the need to prove she is a "real woman." In fact, if she feels a need to prove anything, it's usually some misguided notion of being equal to the guys. Katie, a 22-year-old junior at Hobart and William Smith Colleges, explained:

A "real woman"? Hmmm. Yeah, I had to prove it, had to prove I was a real woman. I hooked up with a guy I didn't know after drinking several guys under the table. That sort of showed them. You know, sort of a "anything you can do I can do better" sort of thing. And you know what? They haven't bothered me about it since.

"But," I asked, "how does drinking to excess and having sex with someone you don't know prove your femininity?"

"Uh, I guess it doesn't," she said after a pause. "It meant I was equal to the guys. That's sort of proving it; isn't it?"

Who Does the Validating?

In the United States, proving masculinity appears to be a lifelong project; endless and unrelenting. Daily, grown men call each other out, challenging one another's manhood. And it works most of the time. You can pretty much guarantee starting a fight virtually anywhere in America by questioning someone's manhood. But why must guys test and prove their masculinity so obsessively? Why are the stakes so high? Why so different here than elsewhere? In part it's because the transitional moment itself is so ill-defined. We, as a culture, lack any coherent ritual that might demarcate the passage from childhood to adulthood for men or women. Not surprisingly, it also remains unclear who, exactly, has the authority to do the validating.

In non-Western cultures, it is the adult men of the community whose collective responsibility it is to ensure the safe ritual passage of boys into manhood. The older men devise the rituals, they perform the ceremonies, and they confer adult male status as only adults can. They have already passed over to adulthood — as husbands, workers, and fathers, often of the very boys they are initiating. As legitimate adults, they can authentically validate the boys' manhood.

As a result, once initiated, men no longer have identity crises, wondering who they are, if they can measure up, or if they are man enough. It's over, a done deal. There's nothing left to prove.

Not so in Guyland. . . .

. . . In Guyland, it is not men who are initiating boys into manhood. It is boys playing at initiating other boys into something they, themselves, do not even possess — that they *cannot* even possess. In America's fraternities, military boot camps, and military schools, and on athletic teams, it's always peers who are initiating peers. In fact, initiation and hazing are required to take place when adults are not there, *because* adults are not there — not the coaches, nor the professors, nor the administrators. In some cases, this is because the adults want to have "plausible deniability." They want to be able to claim that they didn't know — couldn't have known — what was happening. But they do, of course; odds are that they went through it themselves, and feel powerless or unwilling to stop it. They may even believe in it.

Perhaps that is why initiations in Guyland are so perilous — and so pointless. Maybe it doesn't work because it can't work. Since peers cannot really initiate peers into a new status, the initiations must be made ever more arduous. And because they are trying to prove what cannot be proved, each generation raises the ante, indulges in more cruelty, and extracts greater pain.

The very mechanisms of initiation in Guyland are so distorted that they can never produce a real man—sensible, sober, responsible, a decent father, partner, husband. Initiations in Guyland have nothing to do with integrity, morality, doing the right thing, swimming against the tide, or standing up for what is right despite the odds. In fact, initiations in Guyland are about drifting with the tide, going along with peer pressure even though you know it's both stupid and cruel, enabling or performing sometimes sadistic assaults against those who have entrusted their novice/initiate status into your hands. The process makes initiation into fraternities or athletic teams or the military closer to a cult than a band of brothers.

"Proof-ing it" All Night

Drinking to excess is the lubricant of initiations—but it can be an initiation itself. As we saw with Nick earlier, power hours are a birthday celebration, a rite of passage, and an initiation all rolled into one. Ever since Congress passed the Uniform Drinking Age Act of 1984, turning 21 has become a national birthday party, in every state, in every community. "You go out, hang out with your friends, you drink a shitload, and you throw up," says one 21-year-old. "And if you don't throw up, then your friends didn't do their job."

For most college students, by the time they turn 21, they've already had ample opportunity to work on their tolerance. A recent survey in Montana (a heavy drinking state across all age groups) found that 38 percent of high schoolers had binged in the previous thirty days—higher than the national average of 28 percent. (Yet that national average is pretty significant itself!) Binge drinking—drinking several times during the week and throughout the weekend—has become a staple of college life. Two out of five college students are binge drinkers according to a survey by Henry Wechsler, a professor of public health at Harvard. Among fraternity and sorority members the rate balloons to 80 percent. Wechsler defines bingeing as consuming five or more drinks in one session for males and four or more in a row for females, at least once in the past two weeks. By Wechsler's count, 6 percent of college students would qualify as alcoholic and nearly one-third would be given a diagnosis of "alcohol abuser." Almost half—44 percent—reported at least one symptom of either abuse or dependence. . . .

For the parents of college-aged guys, all this extreme drinking is often incomprehensible. It's a waste of time, a waste of money, alarmingly dangerous, and their own hindsight insists that it isn't even actually *fun*. What's fun about vomiting? What they might not understand is that drinking for these guys involves a lot more than just getting drunk. It's also about freedom—or what they think freedom means. It's about being a man.

By the time most young men go off to college, they've been living under the watchful eyes of their parents their entire lives. It is their parents who oversee the college admissions process, their parents who make sure their homework is done before they're allowed to hang out with their friends, their parents who make sure they're home by midnight. In middle-class America, parenting is a full-time job, and it's taken seriously. And this is not necessarily a bad thing. Yet one of the unintended results of overinvolvement is that the child never learns to develop his own internal compass regarding what

constitutes appropriate behavior. All his guidelines are imposed from outside. If you get drunk, you'll get in trouble. If you don't do your homework, you'll get in trouble. All their lives they've tested the limits, gone to the edges, only to have their parents say the final "No," or bail them out if they've gone too far.

Then they go off to college. Their parents drop them off, say their tearful goodbyes, and leave—and they are transformed from overinvolved helicopter parents to absentee parents in the space of one afternoon.

As a result, for these guys, freedom is equated with a lack of accountability—not having to answer to anyone—and so being irresponsible becomes a way of declaring your freedom and, hence, your adulthood. And they've never had so much freedom. They are accountable to no one, and as long as they maintain a reasonable GPA, they're free to do as they like. It might not exactly be adulthood, but they certainly aren't kids anymore.

At the same time, college is considered the last hurrah before the real demands of adulthood begin. Most know that when they graduate they'll be expected to get jobs, support themselves, be responsible. As they see it, they've only got four more years of boyhood left, and they're going to make the best of it. And perhaps this is why binge drinking is so attractive. It allows them to prove their manhood and hold onto their boyhood all at the same time. All the freedom and none of the responsibility. . . .

Uncivil Rites

Binge drinking is both ritualized—the expected norm for parties in Guyland—and a specific ritual, often tied to initiation into a club or organization like a fraternity or an athletic team. There it may be coupled with other activities that fall under the heading "hazing."

Hazing takes place everywhere men gather on campus, whether on athletic teams, in fraternity houses, secret societies, or even in clubs and organizations. (Indeed, the very first mention of President George W. Bush in the *New York Times* came on November 8, 1967, when, as a Yale senior, he was asked about a story in the *Yale Daily News* reporting that his fraternity, Delta Kappa Epsilon, was ritually branding its pledges with a hot coat hanger. The newspaper called the practice "sadistic and obscene," but Bush defended it, saying that the resulting wound was "only a cigarette burn.")

Hazing is a broad term, describing behavior that ranges from dumb pranks or silly skits to seriously dangerous and even potentially lethal activities. It can involve things that you are forced to do, from

memorizing arcane trivia about your fraternity chapter or singing pornographic songs to doing people's laundry or fetching their mail, from drinking contests to participation in ridiculous, humiliating, or degrading rituals. Or it can involve things being done to you, from being subject to verbal taunts and humiliating yelling to physical assault, sexual assault, branding, torture, and ritual scarification.

On campus today, the overwhelming majority of the nearly half-million men who belong to collegiate fraternities have undergone some form of hazing. Most of the quarter-million women who belong to sororities have as well.

The most recent study of collegiate hazing, released in March 2008, surveyed more than 11,000 students at 53 institutions. Survey directors, University of Maine professors Elizabeth Allan and Mary Madden, found that more than half of students who belonged to campus organizations — from fraternities to the glee club — had experienced some forms of hazing. It was most common on varsity athletic teams (74 percent) and fraternities and sororities (73 percent) but 56 percent of all members of performing arts organizations, 28 percent of academic clubs, and 20 percent of honor societies also reported being hazed. For 31 percent of the men and 23 percent of the women hazing included drinking games; 17 percent of the men and 9 percent of the women drank until they passed out. About one-fourth believe that their coach or advisor knew about it.

Most hazing rituals are just plain stupid. Lots of vulgar references to body parts, symphonies of farting, belching, and gagging. "The truth is, most of it is just plain dumb," says Jake, a twenty-four-year-old and former pledgemaster at his Michigan State fraternity house:

We'd line 'em up at all hours, yell at them for a while, quiz 'em on chapter history, lore, and make sure they memorized all the brothers' names, hometowns, majors, and favorite beers. Like who cares, really? Dumb shit like that.

"Oh," he adds as an afterthought, "we'd make 'em drink. A lot." Now he smiles for a moment, remembering. "A real lot."

Often, these hazing rituals result in a sort of cat-and-mouse game between the pledges and the brothers. Jared, 20, tells me about his experience as a pledge at Duke:

The brothers were always calling us to do stuff at weird hours, or drinking until we passed out or puked or something. But who can do that shit all the time? I mean, I'm pre-med, and I can't be like staggering into my organic

chemistry lab with a blinding hangover, can I? So the pledges would do all sorts of things to sort of get out of it. We'd fake being plastered,' I mean so drunk that they'd stop making us drink. Or we'd conveniently miss a lineup the night before a test. One time, I went to the infirmary and said I had a bad stomach ache because I just knew they were going to call us at like 2 a.m.

Yet at least some hazing rituals are sufficiently degrading or humiliating — and dangerous — that they qualify as physical or sexual assaults. . . .

Why Do Guys Put Up with It?

Why do guys participate in ceremonial degradation? Part of it is simply because they want to be liked, want to be accepted, want to be one of the cool guys, the in crowd, aligned with the alpha males. "I went along with all that [hazing] because I wanted to be liked and couldn't figure out a way to accomplish that except to be all things to all people. In trying to be something I could not be I prostituted myself," one former pledge told journalist Hank Nuwer.

"By the end of freshman orientation you pretty much know that the fraternities rule here," said Chuck, 21, a junior at the University of Oregon. "This isn't like Reed or Santa Cruz, where everything is hippy dippy. This is fucking rah-rah college. The frats have all the parties, get all the hot girls, and have all the cool guys. You want to hang around with the athletes and the hot girls, right? Well, they are the only game in town. I joined even though they seemed sort of stupid and definitely seemed sort of smug and arrogant, you know. But they were *it*. There wasn't anything else. And I wanted a social life."

Dave, 26, recalls his first week in the dorm at Cornell:

From the second you arrive on campus, the frat guys are everywhere. During freshman orientation, in the evenings, they come around the guys' floors, like selling stuff, like school spirit sort of stuff, like beer mugs, and college jackets and stuff. They're like the concession guys at the ball park. They come in, socialize a bit, show you what they're selling. But really, they're selling being frat guys. And all the freshman guys wanted to buy that.

"Not to be in a fraternity or sorority was widely regarded as being nothing at all," writes Larry Lockridge recalling his father's experience in a fraternity at Indiana in the 1930s.

Part of it is the Guy Code — the desperate desire to feel worth, to feel powerful, to be validated as a man. Somehow these almost-men seduce themselves into believing that these guys, a year older and so much cooler, hold the magical key that will open the door to a feeling of confident manhood with nothing left to prove. As Jackson, a senior at Lehigh, explained:

I knew from the moment I accepted a bid to pledge Beta that my fate was sealed. I would be a cool guy. I would be one of them. No, I mean, I would be one of us. It was a really special feeling. Like I could do anything, because the other guys would always have my back. And we could do anything because, well, because we were Betas, and on this campus, Betas rule. No one — and I mean Greek types, administrators, other guys, and, yeah, well, even you professors — would ever be able to touch us.

In reality, of course, going through the torture of hazing doesn't make you a man. In a sense, fraternity hazing is the distorted mirror image of cultural rituals of initiation, where boys actually do become men in the eyes of their culture. In the collegiate fraternity something else is happening. Just at the moment when your entire culture tells you that it's time to grow up — be a man, step up to sober adult responsibilities, declare a professional ambition, pair up romantically, settle down and get married to the person with whom you will spend your entire life "forsaking all others," have kids, a mortgage, a responsible job, bills to pay — just at that sad, depressing moment of the actual transition to adulthood here is a group of slightly older peers who collectively scream "No!" Not so fast. No need to grow up just yet. Be our brother. Remain a boy. Irresponsible and carefree. . . .

As we've seen, the ability *not* to grow up, *not* to become a man, is 45 Guyland's definition of freedom. And guys believe that it's certainly worth undergoing some humiliating rituals, doing gross and stupid things, and even getting sick over. In fact, doing that gross and stupid stuff is what convinces you that you have not crossed over the threshold of adulthood, that you are still just a guy. It's a man's world, all right. It can wait. . . .

Understanding the Text

1. What does Kimmel complain about in relation to "peers . . . initiating peers" (p. 145) in fraternity, military, and sports culture? What is his complaint about the current role of adult supervisors, instructors, and coaches? What is his proposed remedy?

2. If, according to Kimmel, initiations help people transition from one status or identity to a new one, what are the hazards when it comes to taking on an identity as a "man" in the kinds of fraternity culture he discusses? What is Kimmel's alternative conception of manhood?
3. When Kimmel discusses initiation ceremonies for girls' clubs and teams, what does he note about them?

Reflection and Response

4. Kimmel references the "Guy Code" as a set of informal "rules" young adult males must adhere to in order to gain acceptability and credibility among other "guys," who act as "the self-appointed gender police" (p. 142). How do young men learn about the Guy Code? How do kids and young adults become the "enforcers" of the Guy Code? What kinds of rules exist in the Guy Code beyond the ones mentioned by Kimmel?
5. Kimmel generalizes a lot about fraternities, which many people defend as important social organizations that do good work on campuses and in communities. In your experience, is hazing as important an issue as Kimmel makes it out to be? Why or why not?
6. What significant differences do you see between the initiation ceremonies in male and female organizations? What kinds of hazing practices occur in girls' organizations?
7. Why do you think so many initiation rituals involve sexual humiliation and homoerotic overtones?
8. The kinds of rituals Kimmel discusses have to do largely with establishing "brotherhood," or strengthening social bonds among males in fraternities. What kinds of male bonding rituals continue after college, and into adulthood? What other kinds of groups do men seek to belong within?

Making Connections

9. Hazing on college campuses has become an increasingly visible problem met with all kinds of campaigns and efforts to curtail it. Research the problem of hazing on college campuses, and find one, two, or several examples of hazing crimes that Kimmel's article helps to clarify. Analyze the specific incidences in terms of Kimmel's argument about masculinity.
10. Examine another reading (or a set of readings) from this book in terms of rituals, rites of passage, and the "Guy Code," applying Kimmel's ideas to another process in the social construction of gender.