

many pundits and pop psychologists seem to be saying—we do them a great disservice. We abandon boys to be half-men. They will never grow up to be the kind of men they are capable of becoming. And when they go off to college, where the Guy Code is of a completely different magnitude, they'll lack any ambition to become men.

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THE RITES OF ALMOST-MEN: BINGE DRINKING, FRATERNITY HAZING, AND THE ELEPHANT WALK

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 increasingly 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.

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 pledge-master 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 ceremo-

nies, 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 the 1990s, the poet Robert Bly and many other men wondered about how the current generation of elders might initiate young men into manhood. Among the "mythopoetic" men's gatherings of the 1990s, older men, in their forties and fifties and sixties, bemoaned the loss of that ritualized initiation in America, and feared the consequences for the next generation of men. "Only men can initiate men, as only women can initiate women," Bly wrote in his bestselling book, *Iron John*. "Women can change the embryo to a boy, but only men can change the boy to a man. Initiators say that boys need a second birth, this time birth from men."

Instead of criticizing their own abdication of responsibility, as they rushed from careers to affairs to divorces, many of these mythopoetic men seemed angry at the boys themselves for failing to seek their guidance and request their mentorship. The retreats were populated by hundreds of mentors, but with few young men to whom they could impart their wisdom.

Bly may have been right. But in Guyland, it is not men who are initiating boys into manhood. It is boys playing at initiating other boys in 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 where adults are not there, *because* adults are not there—not the coaches, not 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

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.

This holds for girls, too. Historically, as Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz reminds us in her history of the American college campus, “. . . relatively few coeds joined college men in drinking, and both men and women college students generally disapproved of their doing so.” Today, however, when women do drink—and boy, do they ever!—guys set the terms and women often face an impossible choice. She might be praised for “keeping up with the guys” or “drinking like a man,” or just as easily criticized for the same behavior. Here's Jesse, a junior at Arizona:

Omigod! There were like these two girls who used to go here, and they were like friends with one of the brothers, and they could, I swear, drink any guy under the table. They were amazing. I know a lot of guys thought they were like pigs or something, because they drank as much as we did, but I thought they were totally cool. And I will tell you nobody ever got over on them.

On the other hand, if she is responsible and prudent in her alcohol consumption she may be publicly praised for acting like a lady, but she also won't get invited to many parties. Guys in Guyland want girls to be their “near-equals.” If they don't play at all, they threaten the legitimacy of Guyland; if they play the game better than the guys, the same threat holds true.

While binge drinking is found nearly everywhere in Guyland, that doesn't mean that it is spread evenly across every campus, college town,

and neighborhood. Even if two of five students are binge drinkers, three out of five are not. Sixty percent drink responsibly—or not at all.

Nor is it everywhere the same. In my conversations with students all over the country, I heard far more tales of binge drinking on large state university campuses, especially those located in what are colloquially called “college towns,” where the local economy revolves around the campus. Towns like Bloomington, Indiana, and Lawrence, Kansas; Norman, Oklahoma and Boulder, Colorado. Towns where bars line the streets leading from campus in virtually every direction, or where students can walk easily from party to party, and where big-time sports give people an excuse to party every weekend. A downtown where you can stagger out of a bar, plastered to within an inch of consciousness, and be reasonably certain you won’t get mugged or stabbed, run over, or left on the side of the road, where someone will sort of recognize you and make sure you are okay—at least most of the time.

In other words, drinking “dangerously” requires a significant amount of safety. You may not know everyone you’re partying with, but you know that the people you are with are very likely to know people you know. You don’t “lose control” without having a large set of “controls” already built into the system. (As we’ll see later, the same is true of hooking up.) Students at large urban campuses like Temple or Columbia, where personal safety is less of a given, don’t report such high levels of binge drinking.

Binging is also not evenly distributed across campuses. Fraternities and sororities, according to Wechsler, are “. . . awash in a sea of alcohol.” Three-fourths of all Greeks are binge drinkers (80 percent of males and 69 percent of females). It’s also a white thing: The vast majority of black, Hispanic, and Asian students do not binge drink.

Unhealthy Hangovers

Of course, college campuses have been drenched in alcohol for a very long time. University presidents have constantly complained about drunk students since, well, since there were students. Henry Adams recalled that his mid-nineteenth-century Harvard classmates drank so

much that they had bouts of delirium tremens. F. Scott Fitzgerald felt obliged to add a drunk driving accident in *This Side of Paradise* (1920) his debut novel, about his eating club days at Princeton.

More recently, though, it’s become ubiquitous. A 1949 study found that 17 percent of college men and 6 percent of college women reported drinking more than once a week. A 1979 survey at four universities in Florida found that 80 percent of the students drank, 40 percent specifically “to get high” and 13 percent drank “to excess.” These days, the percentage who are drinking at all is about the same four out of five but those who drink more than once a week is even higher—more than one-fourth of males (26 percent) and more than one in five females (21 percent).

Getting drunk beyond consciousness may be a way of proving yourself to your friends, your fraternity brothers, or sorority sisters, of showing your teammates that you’d take one for the team. The number of athletic teams that use alcohol as a ritualized form of hazing is astonishingly high. It’s usually an easy initiation: You drink, you puke, you sleep it off. Nobody gets hurt. In fact, it may be so popular because it’s so easy.

But let’s not kid ourselves. Binge drinking can also be dangerous. Experiments on laboratory rats found that after significant abstinence, binge drinkers are able to learn effectively—but they cannot relearn quickly or effectively. According to Fulton T. Crews, director of the Bowles Center for Alcohol Studies at the University of North Carolina, when faced with a new situation, binge drinkers become disoriented and cannot adjust. They continue to show toxicity in their brains long after they stopped drinking. And drinking both hampers the development of new nerve cells and destroys older ones.

What’s true in rats seems to be equally true in humans. According to psychiatrist Paul Steinberg, binge drinking “clearly damages the adolescent brain more than the adult brain,” especially in the orbitofrontal cortex, which uses associative information to envision future outcomes. Binging “can lead to diminished control over cravings for alcohol and to poor decision making. One can easily fail to recognize the ultimate consequences of one’s actions.”

Binging can even be lethal. Jason Kirsinas, a Presidential Scholar at Cal State, Long Beach, lapsed into a coma and died after a night of drinking on his twenty-first birthday. Jason Reinhardt, a student at Moorehead State in Minnesota, had sixteen of the “required” twenty-one drinks in one hour on his twenty-first birthday and died at a fraternity house a few hours later with a blood alcohol level of 0.36 percent (more than four times the legal limit of .08 percent).

Every year, according to a 2002 report from the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, 1,400 college students aged 18 to 24 are killed as a result of drinking; nearly half a million suffer some sort of injury. Most deaths and injuries are the result of drunk driving accidents. Hospitalizations for alcohol overdose or alcohol poisoning are a regular feature of campus life. To put it in perspective, 4,039 American servicemen and women have died in the Iraq war since the invasion began in March 2003, more than five years ago. Every two years, American college campuses lose the same number as perished in the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center.

The campus papers reporting these deaths invariably list the students’ ages, and they are almost always 21 or around 18. In fact, the 21-year-olds are often exactly 21; indeed, it is during their birthday celebration that they drink themselves to death. The 18-year-olds are first-year students, and theirs are the result of binge drinking at a level they had never even approached in high school.

Every weekend hospital emergency rooms in college towns are crammed with students, campus infirmaries offer extended hours, and every residence hall advisor needs special training on responding to alcohol-induced trauma or injury. One report found that in fraternities on campus “. . . exclusive drinking to the point of vomiting was tolerated and even celebrated.” In the 1980s, the number of claims from binge drinking and hazing had become so enormous that the National Association of Insurance Commissioners ranked fraternities and sororities as the sixth worst risk for insurance companies—right behind hazardous waste disposal companies and asbestos contractors. Some insurance companies began to refuse to cover fraternities. Even the Arizona Supreme Court weighed in: A 1994 court ruling found that “. . . we are

hard pressed to find a setting where the risk of an alcohol-related injury is more likely than from under-age drinking at a university fraternity party the first week of the new college year.”

The scope of campus drinking has seeped into virtually every crevice of the academic edifice. Campus parties are alcoholic soak zones. Every weekend, dorm bathrooms are clogged with students worshipping at the porcelain God. Partying ’til you puke is hardly deviant; it is the norm. College students spend \$5.5 billion a year on alcohol—more than they spend on soft drinks, tea, milk, juice, coffee, and schoolbook combined.

But while it’s clear that college students today are drinking more than ever, the reason behind all that drinking isn’t as clear. There are several factors at play, all of which relate. Once, drinking was one of a range of recreational activities. In my college years, one was a beer drinker or a pot head, and the campus seemed evenly split between the two. There were also more serious drinkers and druggies, but hard liquor and psychedelic drugs were hardly the norm. Today drinking is not only the norm, it often feels like the only thing going. “My roommate freshman year didn’t drink at all,” said David, a recent graduate of the University of Wisconsin at Madison. “And I felt sorry for him. He was a loser, a total zero. He had no friends. I mean, everybody drank. Everyone who was cool.”

We usually think alcoholism runs in the family—that kids become heavy drinkers when they see their parents drinking a lot. But it turns out not to be the case in Guyland. Psychologist Mark Fondacaro found that having family members who were heavy drinkers was actually *negatively* related to students drinking. Drinking behavior was instead overwhelmingly related to peers—alcohol abuse runs across friendship networks rather than intergenerationally.

That is a most important finding. Students do not, typically, binge alone, but rather in a network of drinking buddies, what sociologists call a “risky network.” “The bonds of friendship,” writes Wechsler, “always tighten when they are wet.” Or, as the kids say, “Friends who sway together stay together.” The more drinking buddies you have in your network of friends, the more you will likely drink.

Closely related to this is the misperception that all the other kids are drinking just as much, if not more, than you are. Research consistently finds that college students dramatically overestimate the amount that other students drink—and then that they drink to keep up. This misreading of others' behaviors may lead to a distorted self-marinating “keeping up with the Joneses,” but it also serves as an entry point to discussions with young people, as the awareness of what people are *actually* doing may be a way to set a different gauge for one's own behavior.

And even when guys do recognize the blossoming of alcoholism among their friends, the culture of silence ensures that they won't intervene in any meaningful way.

“I'd say I know maybe three or four guys who, well, who might meet the legal definition of the term alcoholic,” says Matt, who is all of 22 and a senior at Kansas. “I mean, they don't just drink at night or on weekends like I do. I mean they pretty much drink all the time. Like in the afternoon. Sometimes in the morning to help with a hangover. And like pretty much every day.”

“Why,” I ask him, “don't you do something about it?”

“Well, I don't think they'd take too kindly to that. I mean, everyone is entitled to act like they want in college, right? Our fraternity has a sort of ‘live and let live’ attitude. And besides, they're cool guys and everybody likes them.”

Jeff, his 21-year-old fraternity brother walks by our conversation and joins in.

“It's not like nobody cares. I do, really, but I do it like quietly. Once, I tried to talk to Billy about it. He told me he was fine, completely under control, and that I shouldn't worry about him. I backed off, but like now I sort of keep an eye on him. Like if we were somewhere and he was wasted, I would definitely not let him drive. But it's cool here; he won't get hurt or anything. So I watch him on campus.”

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.

This also explains why the bingeing usually doesn't last forever. Guys who binge drink in college don't necessarily binge drink through the remainder of their twenties, let alone their thirties and forties. That's not to say that guys in their late twenties and early thirties don't get together in bars and clubs, drink to excess on occasion, and have raucous parties. Of course they do. But the steady practice of bingeing—drinking copious amounts to get as drunk as possible in the shortest amount of time—seems largely confined to the college years. The demands of adult life simply won't allow it. Eventually, those ubiquitous red plastic cups give way to stemware and martini glasses, beer goggles replaced by reading glasses. Here's Ted, 26, now living in Chicago:

Oh sure, we go out and party, go have some beers in the local bar after work or on weekends. But Christ, I have to get up in the morning. I have to go to work, and I have to do at least a minimally competent job.

Richie, 25, agrees:

Those days were wild. We would drink 'til we passed out, or until we could get some girl drunk enough to score, or just drink and laugh together and do stupid crazy shit all night. But who can do any of that now? I mean, I'm in law school, I have a girlfriend, I gotta stay sober.

He pauses, a cross between embarrassed and nostalgic. "Listen to me! I'm beginning to sound like my father. Holy shit, I'm a fucking grownup."

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.

At first glance, one might be tempted to see these sexualized rituals such as the elephant walk as homoerotic. (Indeed, it would be difficult not to see them that way.) But they are also about the sexual humiliation of presumed heterosexual males—and part of that degradation is homophobic taunting. Perhaps the more obviously homoerotic the ritual, the more overtly homophobic must be the accompanying narra-

tive. But it also has everything to do with women. Initiation rituals are more rigorous and significant in societies that are highly patriarchal—in fact, the greater the level of gender inequality in a society, the more centrally important is their initiation ritual. These rituals demarcate the line between men's space and women's space.

The rituals are often sexually humiliating, sometimes violent, and always about manhood. Take, for example, "teabagging," named after the visual similarities between a tea bag and a scrotum. In this ritual, a brother opens his pants and squats over the face of a sleeping pledge, then rubs his scrotum on the pledge's face. Awakened, the pledge is greeted by someone's genitals dangling in his face. Or take egg races, in which all the pledges shove a peeled hard-boiled egg up their rectums and then have to either walk or run around to the delight of the brothers. Or the wedgie, involving the forced removal of another brother's underwear while he is still wearing them—without taking off his pants. To administer the wedgie properly, one guy told an anthropologist, ". . . several brothers wrestle the victim to the ground and reach inside his pants and grab the elastic portion of the underwear and pull until they are ripped off the victim." A brother described this process as a very painful experience and added, "When I go to a party, I either don't wear any underwear or I wear an old pair that would be easily ripped off. They did it to me once in front of a date I brought and it was embarrassing. She thought we were real immature."

Other hazing rituals are unmistakably homoerotic, like "Ookie Cookie," which depends first on another homosocial ritual, the Circle Jerk. In the Ookie Cookie, a group of guys masturbate together and ejaculate on a cookie, which the pledges are then required to eat.

Such rituals provide ample evidence that hazing is less about younger males trying to impress their elders, and far more about the sense of entitlement that the older males have to exact such gratuitously violent and degrading behaviors from those more vulnerable than they. Hazing is brutal because brotherhood cannot be cemented by words—by oaths or declarations. The cement of the brotherhood is blood, sweat, and tears—and, apparently, vomit and semen.

What is driving the initiation rights? What are they really about?

The groups proclaim that the point of the rituals is to test the commitment of the prospective members. Yet closer examination reveals something far more subtle at work. The rituals may be proving manhood, but it is the manhood of the members themselves rather than of the initiates that is on the line. Inflicting such punishment confirms the *members'* legitimacy. It is a way for them to reassure themselves that they belong to a group so worthy that other guys are willing to suffer just to join them.

And that means that ending the brutal assaults that constitute hazing cannot only be about instilling some sense of morality or compassion among the brothers—that is, it can't only be about appealing to their better selves. Efforts to confront hazing must also confront the sense of worthlessness that these brutal rituals are designed to mute.

Black Brothers in White Guyland

Fraternities are historically white groups; indeed, the Greek system really became entrenched in the United States during the late nineteenth century, when large land-grant universities, like Wisconsin and Minnesota and Michigan, were required to admit women, newly arrived immigrants, and freed blacks who had migrated north. Fraternalities were an answer to the question: Where can a white guy go where he won't have to be around all these women, minorities, and immigrants?

I recall my own experience of freshman rush in the late 1960s, when I was politely told that one fraternity wouldn't be interested in me because in the oath of membership one had to solemnly swear to uphold "the Anglo-Saxon heritage"—something that I, a Jew, couldn't hope to do. Nor could a Catholic, or a black, Latino, or Asian student.

Predictably, these groups responded to racial and gender exclusion by establishing their own sororities and fraternities. Today, fraternities are nearly as dominant on historically black campuses like Morehouse and Howard as they are at some predominantly white universities. And sadly, contemporary black fraternities have embraced many of the same hazing rituals as the white ones. One hears some rather harrowing tales of initiation, including branding and whipping that might make white fraternities sound tame. No one could have predicted that more than a

century after slaves were routinely branded by their owners that black fraternities would actually be branding their pledges. In one 1993 incident, pledges in one black fraternity at the University of Maryland were ". . . punched, kicked, whipped, and beaten with paddles, brushes and belts over a two-month period. All of the recruits sustained serious injuries, some of which required hospitalization. . . ."

Whipped and branded? Perhaps, as one anthropology professor commented, it is a ". . . way of taking the symbol of horrible oppression and turning it into something positive. . . . It's the African-American male seizing command of his body and conveying the message to white America—'I'm taking command of my body.'" Or, as another said, it's an ". . . attempt by a fragmented, victimized, and marginalized group to seize agency, create space, and become men." Or that branding expresses ". . . a sense of commitment and permanence in an uncertain and impermanent world."

This is what the culture of protection sounds like. This is what it sounds like when grown men so heavily identify with the younger men they are supposed to be supervising, monitoring, and mentoring toward adulthood. Failing to condemn such practices is a sign not of solidarity but of cowardice.

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. "[I]t's a damn shame it's got to end. The fraternity and everything," wrote William F. Buckley Jr. fondly recalling his days in a secret society, and imagining the plight of a young man facing a world entirely infiltrated by women. "Someday we should build us all a fraternity house that wouldn't end. And we could initiate our friends and go off and drink like freshmen and never graduate. Hell! Why build a fraternity house! Let's build a gigantic fraternity system!"

As we've seen, the ability *not* to grow up, *not* to become a man, is 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.

Defending the Cavemen

In the mid-1970s, Hank Nuwer was a graduate student at the University of Nevada, Reno, and witnessed a few initiations near his home. Then he heard about another in which a student was killed and another experienced serious brain damage. Since that time, he's been on a virtual one-man crusade to eliminate hazing. Nuwer is now a journalism professor, and his book *Wrongs of Passage* is a chilling compendium of hazing-related deaths and injuries on America's campuses. "With at least one death every year between 1970 and 2007, it seems incredible

that this collision of deadly and bizarre behavior can continue to exist, let alone flourish, on as many campuses as it does," he told me.

Since the 1970s, there has been at least one student fatality every year involving hazing. Most have a similar trajectory: The pledges are forced to drink massive amounts of alcohol in a short amount of time while the brothers, if they are watching at all, are usually hurling epithets at the pledges. One guy blacks out and can't be revived, or he begins to lose consciousness as he throws up, suffocating on his own vomit. By the time any of his utterly wasted brothers or the other pledges notice anything, it's too late.

Lynn Gordon Bailey, known to his friends as Gordie, was captain of his high-school football team at Deerfield Academy and member of the drama club. On September 16, 2004, this 18-year-old from Dallas, Texas, was enjoying his first night as a pledge of Chi Psi fraternity on the University of Colorado's Boulder campus. By the next morning, he was dead of alcohol poisoning, having consumed seventeen shots of whiskey in about thirty minutes in a hazing ritual. His blood alcohol level was 0.328.

Here is where the dynamics of Guyland kick into high gear. While fraternity members refused to speak to reporters, other Colorado students were distraught, and spoke publicly about it. Some came forward to talk to reporters about their own participation in alcohol-sodden parties and drinking rituals at what was being trumpeted as America's #1 party school. The response of the administrators was to send threatening letters to those students who spoke with reporters. The Vice Chancellor wrote, "I hope you realize how your portrayal in the newspaper negatively impacts so many CU students."

Again, that's the culture of protection. Don't do it, but when you do, for God's sake, please don't tell anyone about it because it makes us look bad. And don't post it on Facebook, MySpace, or any other website where some activist can bust us! Less than two weeks later, a 19-year-old CU student was arrested for the drunken sexual assault of a sorority member in the restroom of a swanky downtown hotel during a fraternity party.

While hazing and forced bingeing are common in Guyland, the adults who are supposed to be in charge are often running for cover. They know

what is happening, even if they profess shock and dismay when they hear about another fraternity hazing death or the death of a 21-year-old at a power hour. Certainly coaches, deans of students, residence hall advisors, and the heads of Greek organizations on campus know what's happening. Even though it takes place off their watch, they know. They just pass the buck.

Or perhaps the culture of protection is actually a bit more pernicious than we think. To be sure, administrators are often hamstrung between complicitous silence from the hazers and indignant bribery by some of the wealthy alumni on whom the administrators depend. But perhaps they also believe in the hazing and the bingeing and the rest of it. They may even identify with these guys.

Some colleges and universities actually seem to promote the very alcohol soaked environments they are simultaneously trying to police. Henry Wechsler suggests that one can easily measure the alcohol-friendliness of the administration. It's a simple equation: the higher the number of bars within walking distance of campus and the greater the amount of alcohol sold at sporting events, then the higher the number of students who report that they are both drinkers and binge drinkers. In the case of the University of Colorado, the biggest liquor store, with the closest proximity to campus, was owned by the Director of Athletics.

Hazing and bingeing certainly have their defenders. Every time a university president decides it's time to reign in the fraternities, monitor the athletic teams, or try and restrict underage drinking on campus, howls of derisive protest go up—from current students for whom college is one nonstop party, to alumni who threaten to withdraw their financial support if the administration or Board of Trustees displaces one metaphoric hair on the college's head or interferes in any way with the autonomy of the fraternities. This is especially true at private colleges and universities, where alumni financial support is the lifeblood of the institution. Every time, it seems, there is a campus investigation, alumni threaten to stop donating, sue the college, and otherwise make life miserable for any reformist administration.

Alumni successfully blocked former Dartmouth president James O. Freedman from disbanding the fraternity system even after the film

Animal House, written by former Dartmouth frat guys, exposed the college to disastrous publicity. Currently, the administration at Colgate is under constant fire from alumni who fear that disbanding the fraternities will emasculate the university—this from a school that has been coed for nearly forty years, currently enrolls more women than men, and has a female president.

And these administrators are stymied from within. “Investigators of hazing deaths and injuries are often stymied in their attempt to get facts because members of secret societies believe that breaking their code of silence is disloyal,” writes hazing expert Hank Nuwer. What’s more, insurance carriers “instruct fraternities never to admit liability when faced with a potential claim.”

Many a university president has been hounded by the righteous anger of alums, who recall their own beer-sodden college days with a mixture of fondness and pain, and believe that today’s battalions of political correctness have siphoned all the fun out of the college experience. Alumni have been claiming forever that they had it far tougher—and they turned out all right, didn’t they? At the turn of the twentieth century, for example, the Board of Regents and the administration at the University of Kansas outlawed the fist fights that had become commonplace on campus. Most undergraduates supported the administration, finding the “tradition” silly and dangerous. Not the alums. One, class of 1896, taunted the younger KU men:

What’s the matter with K.U.? The May Pole scrap is gone, or emasculated into “Ring Around the Rosy”; the junior prom and the senior reception are as tame as a pink tea in an Old Ladies Home . . . and the authorities seem to think that the University is a school for namby-pambies and Lizzie boys.

Today, when alumni suggest that the ritual torture they experienced as frat guys is what made them the men they are today they make two mistakes. First, they engage in what psychologists call “attribution error.” That is, they attribute some consequence (having a great time in college, becoming a man) to the wrong cause (drinking oneself into

unconsciousness, being sexually ridiculed and humiliated). Actually, this is the way many of us respond to trauma: we believe it has had some healing or strengthening quality and our passage through it is an indication of our successfully overcoming the trauma.

Second, it’s bad history. Every generation thinks they had it tougher than the one that comes after them. Asking “Is it worse today?” is the wrong question. Even if it was worse back then, which it probably wasn’t, so what? A lot of things were different. Back then, drivers didn’t wear seat belts, hockey goalies didn’t wear face masks, kids didn’t sit in car seats, or wear bike helmets. Back then, doctors didn’t do genetic screening for diseases, MRIs, or colonoscopies. Back then, most Americans believed that women shouldn’t vote because they were too delicate and fragile. Just because it might have been worse in the past doesn’t absolve us in the present.

The point is, of course, that standards change. Today we insist on greater safety for our children. We demand to know what’s in the food we eat. We believe in equality, in individual dignity, in protecting those who have no voice, in leveling the playing field. Timeless universal truths turn out to be flexible in light of new information. Change isn’t necessarily bad or good. It just is.

As we’ll see, there are some positive signs coming from the nation’s campuses about how to deal with hazing, bingeing, and other assorted activities of Guyland. Some schools are returning to a more active monitoring of the students under their charge, and some fraternities are going dry, eliminating hazing altogether, or building some positive bonding experiences into the brotherhood equation.

And while the overtly sexualized hazing rituals are evident in many noncampus groups as well—workplaces, military barracks, sports teams, essentially, wherever guys of a certain age gather—it’s equally true that eventually guys grow out of it. Bingeing, hazing, and the like virtually disappear by the late twenties; few corporate law firms or manufacturing plants rely on such sexualized graphic humiliation as a way for men over age 30 to prove themselves. It may be that these institutions have simply developed other ways to extract that commitment or indulge the sadistic pleasure in humiliating others, or it may simply be that the

potential initiate has other arenas—as husband or father, perhaps—in which his masculinity is now demonstrated, and so there may simply be less on the line.

And yet, as these stories continually remind us, the stakes are enormous. The February 2005 hazing death of 21-year-old Cal State, Chico junior Matt Carrington led to indictments of several of his fraternity brothers. Carrington did not die of alcohol poisoning, but of “water intoxication.” He and another pledge were left in a cold wet basement doing calisthenics for hours with their feet in raw sewage while fans blasted icy air at their wet bodies. They were ordered to drink from a five-gallon jug of water that was continually filled.

The pledges urinated and vomited on themselves and each other. But then Carrington began having a seizure. Fraternity brothers didn’t call an ambulance, perhaps for fear their hazing activities would be exposed. By the time they did call, it was too late. Carrington’s heart stopped beating, his brain and lungs swollen beyond recognition from the water.

As they were sentenced to six months to a year in prison for their part in Carrington’s death, his fraternity brothers expressed remorse instead of defiant silence. “I did what I did out of a misguided sense of building brotherhood, and instead I lost a brother. I will live with the consequences of hazing for the rest of my life,” said Gabriel Maestretti, a former altar boy and volunteer coach who was a leader of the fraternity. “My actions killed a good person, and I will be a felon for the rest of my life. . . . Hazing isn’t funny, it’s not cute. It’s stupid, dangerous. It’s not about brotherhood, it’s about power and control.”

Here is the beginning of the conversation that should be happening across the country.

6

SPORTS CRAZY

My son Zachary and I were returning by subway from a Mets game last season when a group of about eight black teenaged boys got into our subway car. They were talking loudly to each other as they stood near us. Some of the other riders became visibly anxious; a few moved away in the car, a few others got out at the next station to change cars. But Zachary was listening to them as they nearly shouted at each other in mock anger. Gradually it dawned on him (and me) that they were constructing the best starting five in NBA history, yelling back and forth, pulling players in and out. As is typical, they were dramatically overrepresenting current players—at least to my Baby Boomer ears. I mean, Dwayne Wade is good, but. . . .

Zachary looked up at one guy and said, “But Magic Johnson was the best passer ever, and he could shoot from outside and drive the lane. You have to have Magic!”

The guy looked down at Zachary. Stared at him. So did his friend standing next to him. And another. A few seconds passed. Then, the guy closest to us smiled broadly, put his hand out to high-five Zachary, and claimed Magic as his own choice. Zachary looked at me. “Dad,” he leaned in close and asked, “who was the guy you said was the best shot