

The Initiation

A long time ago, in the 1950s, there lived a ten-year-old boy named Bernie Jones. He was a chubby, cheerful boy with unruly hair and a great big smile. He lived in a small town, in a big house, with his mom and dad, and his nine-year-old sister, Charmaine.

In a lot of ways, Bernie was lucky. He had a pretty good bike, a new pogo stick, and his best friend, Alex, lived next door. But the unlucky thing about Bernie was ... no matter where he went, no matter what he did, he always got into trouble.

Partially that is because Bernie loved insects. He kept worms in his shirt pocket and potato bugs in the cuffs of his pants. When he found a particularly beautiful bug, he would - without thinking - bring it into the house, to show his mother, even though he knew she disapproved of bugs.

He was so proud of them, one time he brought his entire collection of beetles to school, for show and tell. But somehow they all escaped, into every corner of the classroom, which caused the girls to scream and the boys to roar with laughter. Miss Jamison, dear, sweet Miss Jamison, for whom Bernie would gladly walk barefoot on red hot coals, was so flustered, she sent him to the principal's office - where he got into another big bunch of trouble.

Even more than he loved worms and bugs, Bernie loved snakes. And in this, again, he was lucky because right across the street from his house was a field with a lot of tall grass, and in the grass lived more garter snakes than any boy could ever hope to catch. On many spring and summer days, Bernie and Alex would go on snake safari. Over the years they had caught hundreds - maybe thousands - of the wriggling, writhing reptiles.

But no matter how many they caught, the boys always took the time to hold each snake up close, to admire its sleek, slim smoothness. Some snakes they recognized from previous catchings. To some they even gave names. Each one they returned to the tall grass, grateful to have held it, happy to let it slither away.

One time, early in the morning, Bernie made the mistake of bringing a really remarkable red racer home to show his sister, Charmaine. But she panicked and screamed so loud, she woke up the entire house and, once again, through no fault of his own, Bernie ended up in trouble.

The neighborhood in which Bernie and Alex lived was a good one, not just because it had a whole lot of snakes; it also had a whole lot of kids, boys in particular. Most of them were twelve, thirteen or fourteen years old, and they always had a club that Bernie and Alex - because they were only ten years old - were not allowed to join. The club had disbanded and rebanded many times over the years and they always chose exotic sounding names. The Cobras. The Scorpions. The Amazing Men From Mars. Right now the name of their club was the Blazing Bandits, and more than anything in the world, Bernie and Alex longed to be Blazing Bandits.

No matter what the big boys called themselves, Clark Olsen was always the president of the club, and Brian

Shaunessey was always number two in command. Both of them were fourteen years old, athletic, cool and confident. The twelve-year-old Patterson twins, Richard and Robert, and thirteen-year-old Larry Rustalio made up the rest of the gang. Over the years they had worked out an elaborate system of handshakes and signals. They took great pleasure in dropping just enough hints about their club that Bernie and Alex always wanted to join.

Cleverly, the big boys would let the word leak out about where they were holding their next secret meeting. Then, when the younger boys came sniffing around, they would bombard them with rotten apples, or giant pine cones, or squirt them with garden hoses.

In spite of the punishment they took and the fools they made of themselves, it was still the fondest desire of both Bernie and Alex, to be invited to join the Blazing Bandits. Little did they know that very soon their wish was going to come true.

When Clark Olsen found out that Alex Appleby's parents were buying the old Lincoln Theater, an idea ignited in Clark's teenage brain, like fireworks on the Fourth of July. In full panoramic color, he imagined Mr. Appleby giving his son enough free movie passes that Alex would then pass them along to other kids. Kids he wanted to get in good with. Clark imagined free popcorn being passed to him over the counter. Maybe he could even get a part-time job. If Alex felt indebted to him, maybe Mr. Appleby would hire Clark to be an usher at the theater. That would really dazzle the many girls on whom he had a crush.

To get the ball rolling, Clark called an emergency meeting of the Blazing Bandits. After school they met in the old abandoned shack in the neighborhood apple orchard. When all the members of the club arrived, Clark banged his gavel against the clubhouse wall and spoke in an authoritative tone. "Knock it off, you birdbrains! Let's get right to the point. I've been thinking ... it's about time we brought a new guy into our club. I nominate Alex Appleby."

The other four boys exchanged looks of shock and surprise, for this truly was an outrageous suggestion. One of the best parts of being a Blazing Bandit, or a Scorpion, or an Amazing Man from Mars, was keeping other kids out of the club.

The truth - and they didn't want anyone else to know this - was that they didn't really do all that much at their meetings, except read comics and argue a lot. Plus, if they let Alex Appleby in their club, they would also have to allow Bernie Jones in too, because Alex never did anything without Bernie. So there'd be not one but two ten-year-olds in their midst. There'd be nobody in the neighborhood to exclude.

Clark Olson wasn't worried. Now that he knew Alex Appleby's potential value as a Blazing Bandit, he wasn't about to let any of these bozos ruin his plan. He whacked the gavel against the flimsy plywood wall of the clubhouse, then paused a moment to make his voice come out calm and cool. "For as long as we've had a club, Bernie and Alex have wanted to join it. I say it's time we gave them a chance. I move that we let them join."

Brian Shaunessey jumped to his feet. "No way! Not a chance! Think about it ... they're practically babies! We can't associate with ten-year-olds!"

"Yeah, that's right," echoed the Patterson twins, who were at that moment racing midget cars on their knees, making motor noises out the sides of their mouths.

Larry Rustalio was rifling through the brown paper bag which held his leftovers from lunch. At that moment his mouth was stuffed with a big hunk of chocolate-covered cherry cake, so all he could do was nod his head in agreement with the twins.

“Listen you guys!” said Clark. “I’m the president of this club. I’ve always been the president of this club, and I’m telling you, this is a good opportunity.”

He opened his mouth to say more, but at that moment Brian Shaunessey and the Patterson twins spontaneously jumped onto Larry Rustalio, and tried to wrestle the remains of the cherry cake out of his hands and into their mouths. Their club meetings often fell into chaos such as this.

“Order! I call for order!” Clark insisted, beating his gavel on the wall, on the floor, on the palm of his hand. When order was not restored, he frowned and beat the gavel harder. Then to demonstrate his authority, he stood straight up, forgetting that the clubhouse was less than five feet tall.

For Clark to bang his head was a personal victory for the other four boys. They hooted and howled with laughter. They pointed their fingers and rolled around on the floor, hands over their stomachs, laughing hysterically, which really made Clark mad. He could already feel the goose egg rising on the top of his head. Blinking back tears of shame and pain, he said, “You guys make me sick. Just look at you, rolling around on the floor, cackling like a bunch of hens. I’m trying to take care of some serious business here, and all you can do is fool around.”

That prompted a whole new round of laughter from the four boys. Clark was not amused. “We might as well bring in a couple of ten-year-olds. They can prob’ly come up with better ideas than you guys can anyway, and obviously they’ve got you hands down when it comes to maturity.”

The boys’ laughter ended. “Are you calling us immature?” asked Robert Patterson.

“No,” said Clark. “I’m saying ... you’re a clown! And your brother is a clown. In fact, you’re all a bunch of clowns!” He squeezed his face up into the tightest of frowns, folded his arms across his chest and glared at the other boys. Clark often had to assert himself in this fashion. He didn’t really mind, though. He was practicing for the Marine Corps. He hoped to one day become a drill sergeant like his Uncle Joe.

Half an hour and seven votes later it was unanimous: Alex and Bernie were invited to join the big boys club. To insure this result, Clark had, one at a time, taken each boy behind the clubhouse and promised him a free movie pass in exchange for his vote. None of the boys had thought to question him, and Clark did not say where he was going to get the movie passes.

Later that night Larry Rustalio leaked the news to Bernie while they were playing tetherball in the Rustalio’s yard. Bernie’s jaw dropped and his mouth hung wide open. Just to be included in a game of tetherball with one of the big boys was enough, but to be invited into the Blazing Bandits ... for a full five seconds Bernie was speechless. Then he managed to say, “You’re kidding! I don’t believe it! This is too good to be true!” He felt weightless, as though his body had taken flight.

Thanks to his mother’s spectacular lunches and after school snacks, Larry Rustalio was twice the size of most boys. He frowned and gave the ball a mighty whack, spinning it around and around and around the pole. “Yeah, well don’t get your hopes up,” he told Bernie. “First you have to pass the initiation. And let me tell you ... it isn’t gonna be easy.”

Larry’s words were meant to strike terror in Bernie’s heart, but Bernie was way beyond that. All he could think of was that his dream was coming true. He let the tether ball wrap itself around the pole and took off running as fast as he could to Alex’s house.

Alex, like Bernie, was speechless at first, but not because he was happy. He scrunched up the entire left side of his face to get his eyeglasses to slide back into place. Alex had concerns. He had questions. “What about the initia-

tion?" he asked. "You know how mean those guys can be. What if they make us walk the Patterson's picket fence blindfolded? What if they dress us up like girls and make us go to the Five and Dime?"

Over the years many legends had sprung up about the initiation rites of the big boys clubs. Supposedly one time a kid was forced on a midnight march, to swim naked in the freezing water of Peabody Creek. Rumor had it, another kid had to spend a night all alone in the cemetery near a freshly dug grave.

The big boys were hard to pin down about the specifics of these events. When asked to name the names of these unsuccessful initiates, they grew silent and serious, and kept to the Blazing Bandit pledge of secrecy.

"I don't know, Bern," Alex said, "it seems to me like ... something's fishy about this deal." Ever the optimist, Bernie's response was, "Don't worry, Alex. Everything's gonna be just fine."

The following Saturday dawned bright and beautiful. Bernie awoke with a smile on his face. It was a perfect day to be initiated into the Blazing Bandits. From now on he and Alex would be included whenever the big boys went hiking or camping, or swimming at the public pool. They'd be in on all the basketball games and baseball games, and they'd finally get to learn the secret handshakes and passwords - all the really cool stuff.

But Alex was not so sure. He looked perfectly all right when Bernie showed up at his door that morning, but what he said was, "I've kinda got a stomach ache, Bern. Do you think maybe the guys'll let us wait 'til next week?"

"Nnnn, I doubt it," Bernie answered. "Something tells me this is a once in a lifetime opportunity. If we blow it, they'll probably never let us join."

Alex frowned and nodded in agreement. He knew what Bernie said was true. His dad had just spent a whole month convincing his mother that they should buy the old Lincoln Theater. Alex had heard plenty of talk about once in a lifetime opportunities.

And so it was that Bernie, light of heart and high of hope, and Alex, full of doubt and dread, headed out the door toward their rendezvous. The big boys had told them to arrive at the far corner of the apple orchard at high noon and not to tell any of the other kids ... or else.

All the other boys were already there. The Patterson twins were rolling around on the ground, trying to stuff squished and rotting apples down each other's shirts. Larry Rustalio was eating an enormous three-layer sandwich and staring off into space. Clark Olsen and Brian Shaunessey were deep in conversation, their backs turned to the other boys. At their feet was something that Bernie and Alex could not quite see.

"Well, well, well," said Clark, when he turned and spotted the two younger boys. "There they are, the newest members of our club. That is, if they're in the mood for eating ... mayonnaise!" He stepped aside and there at his feet were two giant jars.

The Patterson twins stopped their scuffling around and Larry swallowed his last bite of sandwich. This was an unexpected treat. Clark had been promising for years, that someday he would force someone to eat a whole jar of mayonnaise. Now, in addition to a free movie pass, they would finally get to see this much-awaited spectacle. They shoved each other aside to get a better look.

Clark was pleased to have the undivided attention of all the boys. Even though he appeared calm, cool and collected, he had passed a restless night and had come to the conclusion that maybe this wasn't such a great idea after

all. What if there were no free movie passes? What if these two new guys brought scorn or ridicule to the club? Clark had stared at the luminous dial of his alarm clock as the minutes ticked into hours. By morning he had come up with a solution. If Bernie and Alex disappointed him in any way, he would simply expel them. Throw them out of the club. Tell them it had all been a joke. So, really, there was no way he could lose.

“As I was saying, all you guys have to do is each eat a jar of this wonderful, delicious mayonnaise and you’ll become the newest members of the Blazing Bandits.”

Bernie could not believe his luck. He loved mayonnaise! It was one of his favorite things. But it was bad luck for Alex, who had a delicate stomach and, whenever possible, avoided such things. He liked his sandwiches plain: cheese and baloney, with nothing added, or good old peanut butter and jam.

“Here ya go, boys.” Clark handed Bernie and Alex each a jar and a spoon. He had not revealed his true motive for wanting Bernie and Alex in the club. Word had not yet gotten out that the Applebys were buying the theater. Clark’s mother, a real estate agent, was among the first to know.

“All right, you two,” he said, “you have to finish off the whole jar. No stopping. On your mark, get set, GO!”

This was not Bernie’s favorite brand of mayonnaise, but he didn’t really mind. Tablespoon after tablespoon, he happily gobbled down the gooey white stuff. The initiation was a lot easier than he figured it would be. In his mind he saw himself hitting a fly ball clear out of the neighborhood field, way beyond the reach of any of the big boys. He imagined lazy afternoons at the swimming pool, impressing all the teenagers with how well he could dog paddle.

Alex’s thoughts were not nearly so lofty. He visualized how much his stomach would have to expand in order to accommodate an entire jar of mayonnaise. He was a lot smaller than Bernie; his insides couldn’t hold as much. He scooped out the tiniest of bites and forced it into his mouth. According to what Clark had said, as long as he didn’t stop, he wasn’t breaking the rules.

Alex stole a glance at Bernie, who was halfway done with his jar and showed no sign of slowing down. Bernie had many outstanding qualities. He was loyal. He was trustworthy. He loved bugs and worms and snakes. But the way he tackled that jar of mayonnaise, without struggle or complaint, made Alex admire him more than ever.

Bernie was in heaven. This initiation was a cinch! Soon all the secrets of the Blazing Bandits would be revealed to him: the special handshakes, the coded messages, every sacred thing. In his heart he vowed that whatever was involved with being a member of the club, he would keep the secrets well. He would show these guys that a ten-year-old was worthy after all.

Bernie was almost done with his jar but Alex still had a long way to go when he started feeling woozy. *Uh oh*, he thought, *this is serious. This is bad. This is really really bad.* With every tiny spoonful he forced into his mouth, Alex thought the word *mayonnaise* until it lost all meaning, lost every bit of sense. He tried to think of how to spell it, M A Y O ... what was next? He was a championship speller; he could outspell any of the big boys. But right now the word was so distasteful, so repulsive, all it meant was goo, slime ... sick.

The taste in his mouth went from bad to worse. As Bernie was spooning out the last of his jar, Alex was running for the bushes. The mayonnaise was coming back up, and along with it, his longtime dream of becoming a Blazing Bandit.

The big boys thought this was funny as could be; they all stood around howling with laughter. The Patterson twins, who were easily amused, were once again rolling around on the ground, holding their sides, laughing ‘til

tears streamed down their faces. Brian and Clark were also delighted; anything for a laugh, as long as it was at someone else's expense.

Only one boy offered to help Alex: Bernie, of course. He patted Alex's shoulder and said, "It'll be all right. It's okay. I just wish there was something I could do to help."

Then came the voice of Clark Olsen, shouting above the laughter. "There *is* something you can do, Bernie. You can eat the rest of his mayonnaise."

Just hearing the word was enough for Alex. He had to duck down behind the bushes and get sick again. There was more laughter and shouting, then Bernie was dipping his spoon into the second jar.

Time seemed to slow down. The boys' voices got softer and softer until they almost seemed to fade away. Bernie felt all floaty and strange. He knew for sure that he did not want to eat another jar of mayonnaise. But he knew something else for sure too, something about himself. He had seen it in the eyes of his best friend when he patted him on the shoulder. He didn't know what it was, but it was something real, something powerful. And right now, if he had to, Bernie Jones would eat a dozen quarts of mayonnaise; he would eat all the mayonnaise in the world. He and Alex would become Blazing Bandits ... nothing could stop them now.

All the big boys were thoroughly dazzled by Bernie's accomplishment. They hadn't believed it was possible, that anyone could pass the mayonnaise test. Now they had a guy in their club who could eat two whole quarts. That might come in handy in the future, for pie-eating contests and dares from kids in other clubs.

"I've never seen anything like this before," said Brian Shaunessey. "We should've let him in the club a whole lot sooner."

"Yeah," said Clark Olsen. "Just look at him go."

As Bernie scooped out the last spoonful, a cheer went up from the crowd. Then all the boys rushed over to him, to congratulate him and shake his hand. Larry Rustalio even asked him for his autograph.

But Bernie did not let the attention go to his head. He made sure that Alex was okay, then both of them were ushered into the clubhouse, and the future they had dreamed of for so long began. The secret handshakes were demonstrated. The passwords and coded messages were explained. Plans were made for a hike next Saturday down to the depths of Peabody Gulch. Then the meeting broke up and all the kids hurried home for lunch.

Bernie Jones wasn't in the mood to eat, though. He wouldn't be for the whole rest of the day. Instead he walked Alex home, then he climbed to the top of the big apple tree in his backyard. There he looked out over the town and enjoyed the glow of his accomplishment. Not only had he become a Blazing Bandit; half a day had passed already and he hadn't even gotten into any trouble. And though his stomach *did* feel kind of gurgly, Bernie figured that, whatever else happened to him the whole rest of his life, he would never ever feel this good again.