The Secret Handshake of Ham Radio

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If you wander into the world of amateur radio, you’ll hear the same lament on repeat: “The hobby is dying. We need new people. We need fresh voices on the air.”

Sounds like an open invitation. Until you actually accept it.

Because here’s the truth: the ham radio community loves the idea of recruits but hates the reality of them. Behind the callsigns and chatter is a wall of gatekeeping, a quiet little club where newcomers are welcome in theory but discouraged in practice.

Start shopping for gear and you’ll see it fast. That shiny Icom 7300 you’ve read about? Too nice for you. “You haven’t earned it yet. Go start with a Baofeng like the rest of us.” That vintage HF transceiver sitting in someone’s garage? Suddenly it’s twelve hundred bucks — unless Bob, the sixty-year-old club buddy, wants it. Then it’s a “pay me whenever” radio.

This isn’t about radios, though. You’ll find the same script in sailing, woodworking, photography — any tight-knit hobby. Veterans swear they want new blood, but they secretly want it on their terms. They want apprentices, not equals. They want to hand out scraps and wisdom at their pace, to decide when you’ve “paid your dues” and when you’re allowed to actually enjoy yourself.

It’s a guardian complex. The belief that the hobby is fragile, sacred, and must be defended against anyone who hasn’t slogged through the same muddy years of frustration. Newcomers are invited in, but only if they shuffle respectfully, act grateful, and never look like they’re having an easier time than the old guard.

The irony? These same guardians complain constantly that participation is shrinking. Clubs are aging out. Repeaters sit quiet. They worry the hobby will die — but when someone new shows up with energy, money, and curiosity, they freeze up. What if the rookie learns faster? What if they bring new gear, new contacts, new ideas? What if they don’t need the elders as much as the elders need to be needed?

It isn’t just ego — it’s insecurity. The veteran ham who tells you not to “skip steps” doesn’t want you outrunning him on day one. The sailor who insists you buy a clunker first doesn’t want to see you glide past in a boat nicer than his. The rules are unwritten, but they’re enforced all the same: crawl before you walk, and walk slower than the people who came before you.

And to be fair, newcomers can be insufferable too. Wide-eyed, YouTube-trained, convinced they’ll reinvent the hobby in six months. They bristle at tradition, they mock the gear, they underestimate the skill. Sooner or later, most of them either burn out or — worse — turn into the same crusty guardians they once cursed.

Maybe that’s just how hobbies work. A cycle of recruits, resentments, and rituals, each generation building walls for the next. But it doesn’t have to stay that way. Imagine if equipment really was passed down at fair prices. Imagine if experience wasn’t a weapon to keep people in line but a gift handed freely. Imagine if the community actually meant it when it said, “We need you.”

That would be a hobby worth defending. Not a secret society with gatekeepers and handshakes, but an open frequency — where anyone can tune in and call out, without needing permission.

Until then? To every new voice on the bands: here’s the initiation. No matter how you start, no matter what gear you buy, no matter who you talk to — you suck. And that’s exactly how they like it.

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