

Tom 6, Chris Won

By CHRISTOPHER J. GEORGES

I did not want to go to Harvard.

At least not until I was accepted. Before April, my high school college guidance counselor (I'll call him Tom) had succeeded in convincing me that I was the perfect student for Williams College. My mom, however, had other ideas.

Tom, nonetheless, was quite convincing. He had six good reasons why I should *not* go to Harvard:

- Harvard's too big and I wouldn't get any personal attention.
- I'd never meet any of my professors.
- Everyone at Harvard is egocentric or schizophrenic. And if they weren't either of these, they would at least be arrogant.
- Extracurriculars are overly competitive.
- The Coop is ridiculously overpriced.
- Adams House.

By the time November rolled around, I realized that Tom was dead wrong, but only on the fifth point. The Coop is not ridiculously overpriced. Other than that he was absolutely right.

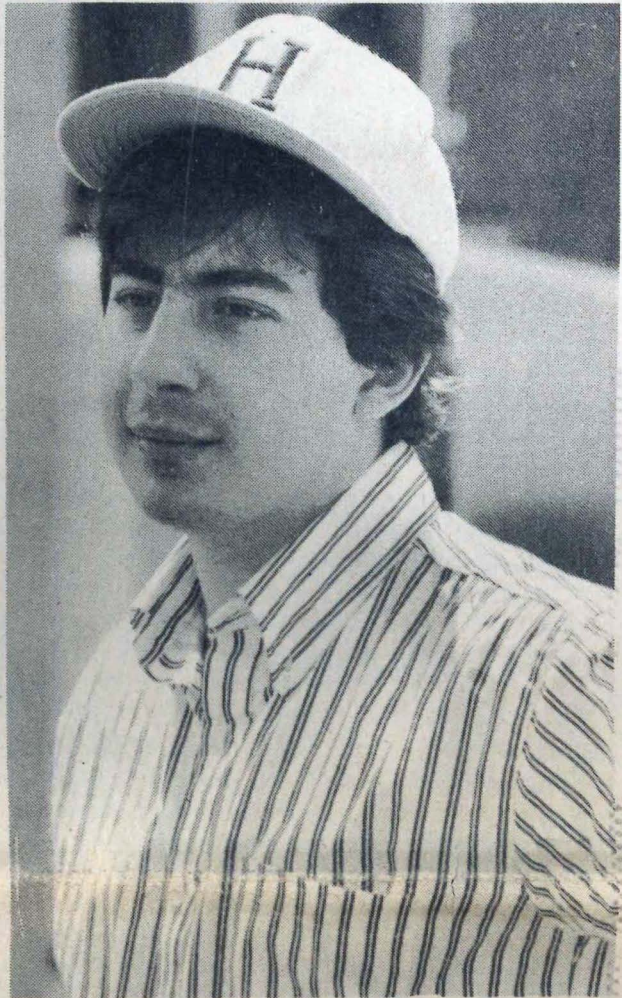
Throughout my freshman year, I was intimidated by my surroundings. Unlike most of the people around me, I was shy and never outspoken. In high school I was well liked but never overly popular. So, when I got to Harvard, I tried—for a brief while—to fit into the mold of the witty, carefree Harvard man that I thought I was supposed to be. I failed miserably.

By November, despite the fact that the Freshman Dean's Office had informed us countless times that the admissions office never makes a mistake, I was ready to inform L. Fred Jewett '57 personally that Harvard had made two mistakes. The first was letting him in, and the second was letting me in.

At the time I often wondered why Harvard selected me. I came to the conclusion that it was because of my close family ties with the University. My mom, originally from Greece, had seen several pictures of Harvard while growing up, and my dad, from New Jersey, had visited Boston several times while in college. I also had a sister at Wellesley, which may have helped, and my younger sister, still in high school, owned two Harvard t-shirts.

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Early on September 17, 1982, Mom, Dad and I drove up from our home in Brooklyn, N.Y. (God's country), to Cambridge. While waiting in the Business School parking with a host of other



Crimson Photo by Ki D. Ingersol

freshmen and their nervous mothers, I managed to meet about 30 or so fellow classmates (none of whom I'd ever see again.) The first person I met, however, was the most memorable. Naturally, I inquired where he was from, and he replied "Michigan." I then continued "Well, I'm from Brooklyn," whereupon, he curtly apologized and moved on.

One point for Tom.

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I was the last of our four-member rooming group to arrive at our three-room Weld 43 suite. The only one there at the time was Joel, a tall, well-dressed student from Cincinnati. After we introduced ourselves, he promptly asked, "Did you apply to Yale?" After telling him that I had, he went on: "That's really where I wanted to go, you know. It's a much better place. Nicer campus. And one of my

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best friends went there to...

By the time he was through, I, too, wished he had gone to Yale.

Joel, a talented orator, had a good sense of humor and possessed a strong air of confidence. For example, on his Harvard application, where it asked "What do you hope to accomplish at Harvard?" he replied that by the end of his sophomore year he expected to win his first Nobel Prize (which he failed to do.) Despite the fact that he had never played a sport in his life, and despite his then-flabby 185 lb. frame, he had decided that he was going to row for the Harvard heavyweight crew team—the best squad in the nation.

A few minutes later, Nick wandered in. First he sized me up and then, with me backed up against Joel's several thousand dollars worth of state-of-the-art stereophonic equipment, he began an interrogation: Where was I from? What were my accomplishments? What was I going to do at Harvard? And why was I leaning on Joel's several thousand dollars worth of state-of-the-art stereophonic equipment?

Nick, easily the brightest of our group, was already an accomplished writer. Originally from England, he was also an exceptional actor. And while Nick possessed a very pleasant personality, he had an annoying habit of locking himself out of our room several times a week. He also possessed a number of wooden African masks, collected during the years when he lived in South Africa. Unfortunately, the masks came with several families of termites.

Finally, Jim walked in. About three minutes after introducing himself to me, he began dishing out orders concerning how we would arrange our room, who would stay where and so on. Jim, one of the finest high school runners in Massachusetts, was thin and agile. Despite his tendency to procrastinate, he was an extremely hard worker and quickly became the best-known and widely liked member of our group.

Anyway, after the first half hour, I was, to say the least, miserable. One roommate still wanted to go to Yale, one thought he was Bob Woodward and the third had elected himself dictator of our group.

I should have listened to Tom.

From here, it all went downhill. Freshman week, I became convinced, was some sort of punishment for thinking I was smart enough to go to Harvard. Without exaggeration, I met about 300 people and got to know about four. Most conversations consisted of three questions: What's your name? Where are you from? Where do you live? When it was all over I felt like I was Bob Eubanks.

In our freshman week activity booklet, we were informed that the convocation ceremony would take place in Tercentenary Theatre. Eager to view



Crimson Photo by Ki D. Ingersol

good, but nothing special. But, again as Tom had predicted, I didn't meet any of my professors. This, however, was not because the big name professors are inaccessible or anything like that, but because most of my courses just weren't taught by professors. Two of my courses were taught by teaching fellows, not professors. In Expository Writing I did get to know my instructor pretty well, which was my misfortune.

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As you may have realized, Tom apparently knew what he was talking about. He even correctly predicted that extracurriculars would pose some difficulties. In the fall, I decided to take up some sort of activity. Although I had spent the majority of my time in high school playing sports, I had enough sense to realize that college athletics would be above my head. I nonetheless figured I would try out for wrestling but quickly aborted this effort after learning that a wrestler who had mauled me in high school was having trouble making the j.v. squad. I thought of giving crew a shot, and even filled out a card for the athletic department listing my height (5'8") and my weight (120 lbs.), figuring that the lightweight team might need some people. I gave up on crew, however, when the only reply I received was from the women's crew coach.

So much for athletics.

I then thought that it might be fun to join some radical organization like the South African Solidarity Committee (SASC) or the Sparticus Youth League (neither of which requires a competition to join.) But despite what the activists told me, I had a hunch that *the* revolution would not come until after I graduated. Besides, I didn't think that the phrase "Campus radical: led sit-ins and protests 1982-1986" would look too hot on my resume.

I thought about trying for the Lampoon, but

nonetheless felt quite sorry for them. When I walked into our room, I looked at Jim, who was still writing his midterm, due only two hours earlier. He said nothing until I asked him where we would be living. He calmly replied "North House," whereupon I turned to Joel, sure that I would see a smirk revealing Jim's not-so-funny prank. Joel did not smirk.

I learned to like living in the suburbs, although it was struggle making it through the realm of freshman year to avoid the inevitable question "And, where are *you* living next year." Upon musing "N'th H'se," the response I most often received was simply an "oh"—the same "oh" you utter when someone informs you they scored a 410 combined on their SATs.

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By the time the year had ended, I had discovered Harvard was hardly what the admissions brochure made it appear to be. It was silly, in fact, to think

that the reality would be anything like what I thought Harvard *should* be like. But, before the year ended, I also had the pleasure of spending a very unhappy 10 days in Stillman Infirmary suffering from some quirky illness. I mention this only because the infirmary, of all places, is where, after visits from my colleagues and classmates, I realized that the value of Harvard, and of the usually snide Crimson, has nothing to do with the classrooms, Houses, offices and ivy-covered buildings—or anything else that might appear in the slick-looking brochure.

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The four of us from Weld 43, so far, are still rooming together: Nick, an English major, has had several of his works published and has played leading roles in several Loeb mainstage productions. Jim quit track after two years and instead became president of his House and a hopeless Mondale supporter. Joel stuck it out in crew, and just as he said, became a member of the best crew team in the nation.

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By the time freshman year ended, it was clear that Tom had been right on almost every account. I learned more importantly that there were no transformations and no big discoveries. I was still the same shy, quiet person I was when I came here. The only real difference was, however, that I was much happier about it.

But Tom failed to mention that my first year at Harvard would be the most fascinating, not to mention most exciting, nine months of my life.

This, however is not the moral of the story. Nor is it that the most distinctive part of Harvard is that it hits you again and again—and then watches to see if you get up. Instead, it is that when you get here in the fall, don't waste your time looking for Tercentenary Theater.

There's No Place Like Home

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intimidating Harvard. Two-thirds of my high school classmates wouldn't even end up going to college. Of those who did—all but about 11 out of 350, by my estimates—headed mostly to the University of New Mexico and New Mexico State. I guess you could say I was somewhat of a pioneer or, more accurately, a guinea pig.

After that first year, I'd have to say the experiment had worked. I went home for the summer intact, with plenty of pride still left. There were times, however, that first year when I thought

and the Lowells, in the stacks of Widener, and in the ever-classical Core Curriculum—my distinct business, my ethnicity and my geographical uniqueness. I'm not sure, looking back on it, whether I made a conscious or unconscious decision that I wanted to hold onto these things, and that I wouldn't if I followed the typical academic and extracurricular routes.

I took a Sociology course that introduced me to some of the social science literature on Chicanos and other minorities. Second semester, I took John Womack's notoriously difficult course on 20th Century Latin American History. I didn't get a

my new president for the first time, I set out to find the theater.

If there is one thing I would like incoming freshmen to learn from this essay, it is to not look for Tercentenary Theater. The place simply does not exist. The administration, for some reason, thinks that lining up 3000 chairs in the middle of the Yard automatically turns it into a theater. I don't know where they come from, but in Brooklyn theaters have walls and roofs.

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Despite our inauspicious start, the four members of Weld 43 got along quite well. In fact, we are still rooming together. As for the rest of the floor, things were not as sweet. Two of our neighbors liked to take late-night study breaks and play handball against the wall—using our door as a backstop. Across the hall was "Sigma Weld"—six wild and crazy guys who knew how to have a good time. Also on the floor was our proctor, Richard, who learned my name in late April.

The only time I really met with Richard was after our first week of classes, when all of his protees were required to meet individually with him to discuss course selections. I told him I was interested in a history course, a math course and a freshman seminar. He looked at me and then glanced at my records. "Nick," he said, "I've studied your background, and to be honest, you'd be best in Psychology 1, Economics 10, and Government 30." Assuming he was looking at my records and not Nick's, I went back to my room confident that he had advised me wisely. I then asked Jim what he was going to take, and he said that he had checked in with our proctor, who counseled him to take Psychology 1, Economics 10, and Government 30. I immediately scurried to my study card and inked in the seminar and the history and math courses.

Another point for Tom.

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As the only person from my high school, Poly Prep (short for Polytechnic Preparatory school—not "many preps"), to come to Harvard in the past three years, I was, to say the least, alone. Having my older sister at nearby Wellesley helped a great deal, and we got together often. Moreover, going out there to see her convinced me that—contrary to what many Harvard students may assume—academically speaking, Wellesley can be a lot tougher than Harvard.

I, like many others, thought of Harvard as something grander than it really is, which is one of the reasons why doing well here meant so much to me. At the same time, the thought of being part of an international tourist attraction had a belittling effect. In one case, while I was studying in Widener Library, a man walked up to the person in the booth next to mine and asked him if he would mind posing with his wife while he took a picture of her "with a real Harvard student."

I felt sick.

* * *

As far as my courses were concerned, they were

flabberking in the Square wearing a chicken suit was not my idea of fun.

Eventually, I decided to try out for The Crimson, Cambridge's only breakfast table daily.

Initially, The Crimson seemed a very cold and businesslike place (mostly because it really was a cold, businesslike place), and at the time I was particularly disturbed by the fact that people used their initials and not their names when writing notes to one another. Although I had little trouble reporting my stories during the fall tryouts (or "comp") for the paper, writing them seemed an exercise in futility. In most cases the editors would read over my copy, say something like "good job," and then ask me to fetch a typewriter so they could rewrite it.

More than anything else, comping can be a very humbling experience. In one case, I was told to write an article about the awarding of the 1982 Nobel Prize to Alva Myrdal, who also happened to be the mother-in-law of Harvard's President Bok. My version of the story began, "The Nobel Prize yesterday was awarded to Alva Myrdal, a noted..." The Crimson president, Paul Barrett, however, decided to edit the story. He read it over, told me I had done a good job, and asked me to get a typewriter so he could rewrite it. In editing it, he changed the first sentence to "President Bok's mother-in-law yesterday won a Nobel Prize..."

Two days later in the Boston Globe an editorial appeared that was devoted entirely to mocking the authors of the Crimson article for referring to the Nobel Prize winner as Bok's mother-in-law and not as Alva Myrdal.

Thanks, Paul.

I, (as did the other writers in this section), found The Crimson to be a very interesting, even addictive, place. At the time, viewing The Crimson from the outside, it was easy to see that this renowned institution, despite all its merits, came with a tense pre-professional atmosphere. It also possessed a suffocatingly cynical outlook and somewhat inflated sense of self-importance. I nonetheless found it an exciting place, and after I passed through the comp, ended up spending a great deal of my time there pretending to be a real reporter.

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By April, I finally began to feel comfortable at Harvard, and our rooming group decided that we would live together in Lowell House the following year. The night before the housing lottery results were announced, Jim had stayed up all night struggling to finish a take-home midterm in a government course Richard had advised him to take, and Joel was in the midst of preparing for the crew racing season. I had spent the morning in class and returned to our room at about 11:00 a.m. just to make sure we had gotten into Lowell House. On the way up to Weld's fourth floor, I passed by a fellow Crimson editor—who happened to be named Charlie—who informed me that he and his roommates had been sent to North House. Although he didn't seem too disturbed, I

about throwing in the towel and reserving a seat on the first flight out of Boston. To anywhere.

The insecurities and the homesickness surfaced suddenly. They crept up, hidden behind political conversations at the Union, physics problems sets at Cabot Library, and keg parties at Pennypacker, only to injure your ego and jeopardize your already tarnished sense of security.

Sometimes I missed the weirdest things about home. I remember the treks to the Union with my four roommates sharing the usual conversation: what French-named, unidentifiable casserole would they serve that night, and which guy did I just *have* to check out, in that order, of course. We'd been known to waste hours there, eating different things (try the main dish, reject the main dish; rush the salad bar, it's good for you; try yogurt, semi-nutritious and almost dessert; resort to peanut butter and jelly) and pondering the typology of The Harvard Man—preppy, jock, intellectual, nerd and slob.

Then one day it hit me. I began dreading, really dreading, those twice daily visits to the Union. (I did try for awhile to get up for breakfast. My 9 a.m. Spanish class professor swore it would improve our attention. He was wrong.) Dinner was especially difficult. There was something about standing in line to get your tray of food, only to have to enter the cave-like dining room (the chandeliers and huge portraits of unidentified men there didn't lessen this comparison) to search for a place for five people to sit. I tried to find dining solace in the smoking room. But that didn't work. I didn't smoke, and I wasn't into the theater or music scene, or whatever it was that people who ate there did. I found temporary relief in the more secluded rotunda, where the noise level seemed several decibels lower. Finally, second semester I ended up eating most of my meals in Adams and Quincy Houses. The environments were still intimidating, but now because of the people, whom one could avoid or ignore, and not the structure, which one could not change.

I think it was the stark contrast of eating at home as opposed to eating at school that bothered me. Eating, especially dinner, was a family ritual of sorts. At home, it brought all four of us together. It was so natural to begin setting the table toward the end of the local news and to sit down to hear about everyone's day. It took place in a small room. It was quiet and, well, it was private—just about everything the Harvard dining experience was not.

There was also a more obvious reason for missing eating at home; the food was so much better and, for me, very different, too. After the first few months at school, never again would I take for granted the smell all through the house of beans cooking and tortillas just off the grill.

That first year, I sought out other students with whom I could share these things. When I got together with other Chicanos, we'd longingly *recollect* the taste of this or that Mexican dish, *elaborating* on *our* mother's variation. Looking back on it, I think it was a survival mechanism of sorts. I was afraid I would lose—among the Cabots

very good grade, but I enjoyed the course and took a personal interest in reading, for instance, Womack's own chronicles of the Mexican Revolution. I got into a popular freshman seminar on the Depression and tried to discover its effect, in particular, on minorities, even though the people writing on the subject ignored this aspect.

I also deliberately sought out other minority students through social and political organizations. From the first event sponsored by RAZA (the Mexican-American student organization)—a tostada dinner at Currier House (not even close to Mom's, but an exponential improvement over the Union)—during the second week of school, I took an active part in campus world activities. Prodded by a senior (God, a senior *had* to be right about these things) who is now an admissions officer for Harvard, I joined the socio-political committee of the Harvard Foundation for Race Relations.

I went to monthly RAZA meetings at the "Chicano Resource Center," a small room on Dunster St. with a leaky roof, no heat and lined with a decade's worth of writings on Chicanos and by Chicanos. At first I was disappointed by the absence of a political agenda but later I appreciated the organization's role as a support group. In addition to being a gateway into Harvard's small Chicano community (120 can be difficult to find on a campus of 6400), the organization allowed me to meet upperclassmen. Boy, was I impressed. In February, I was elected to RAZA's steering committee and went on to serve until my junior year. I helped organize the annual Cinco de Mayo celebration and several conferences. And it continues to strike me as incredible that, at the nation's most elite university, I have found a community that celebrates a Mexican holiday just as Chicano communities in the Southwest do.

By the description of my freshman year so far you might conclude that my solution to the difficulties of adjusting to Harvard was to isolate myself in a "safe" community. And I guess that was part of the answer. Equally important, however, was my attempt to get to know that part of Harvard that seemed most alienated. I think I felt as though I would have been cheating myself if I had avoided the part of Harvard that intimidated me. That took the form of comping and being elected to The Crimson in the spring of my freshman year.

There is a real danger at Harvard, of meshing into the homogeneity, of losing your uniqueness, whether it be geographical origin, talent, interest, ambition, race or culture. I believe I made the choice to avoid that as a freshman. Maybe everyone doesn't have to take such an affirmative step, but for me, taking that step has brought me full circle to understanding the different, sometimes contradictory, strands of my personality. It has made it easier—not easy but easier—to live with the Laura Gomez who went to Valley High School, who became an editor of The Harvard Crimson, and who wants one day to go home to New Mexico.