



Princeton Alumni Weekly

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Charles Gibson '65
on the evening news

Constitutional scholar
Walter F. Murphy

ONE SCHOLAR'S JOURNEY

Historian Anthony Grafton
travels between the
past and the present

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The contender

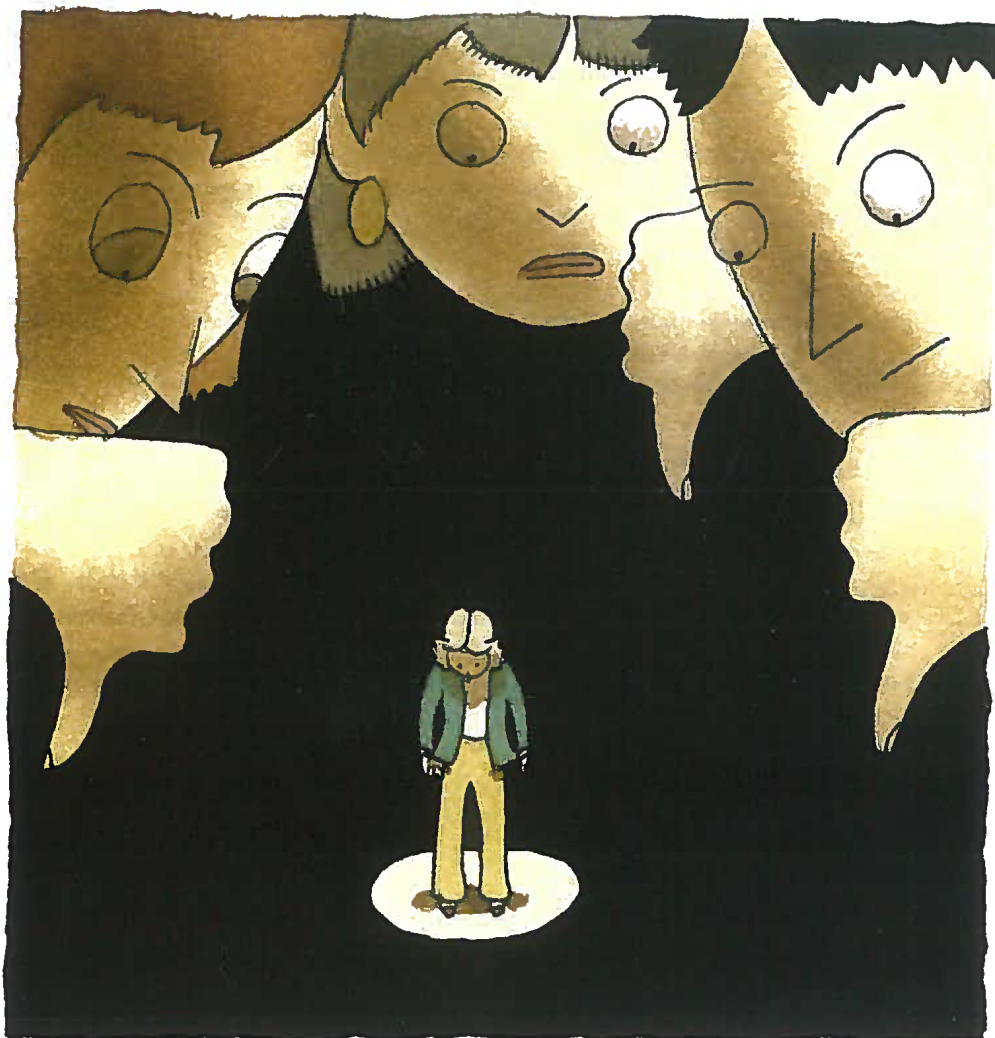
What I learned from bicker's disappointment *By Marcia DeSanctis '82*

Marcia DeSanctis '82, who lives in Connecticut, is a former television journalist who just wrote her first novel.

I did not remember the roses that came to our door in Holder Hall until many years later, when a woman who had been my neighbor there reminded me that I had not been handed one that evening in February 1980. I did recall the excitement in the courtyard and the chill of anticipation. Of course, I remember the sound of my heart hammering in my eardrums. At the time, I did not realize something that today seems obvious. At 19, I was still too young to recognize the urgent beat of wanting something way too much.

Over the preceding weeks, I barely had registered the hostage crisis in Iran, or the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, or the daily gathering of students at Nassau Hall chanting for Princeton's financial divestiture in South Africa's apartheid government. At the time, the fearless Sally Frank '80 was in the forefront of Princeton politics, ubiquitously raking the muck of the beloved men's clubs. Her image, in the one unflattering mug shot used in the newspapers, struck terror in the heart of old-boy tradition. She frightened even me, who had one singular goal that winter of my sophomore year: to gain admission to Cap and Gown.

I had lunged headfirst into bicker. It was, on the surface, a festive endeavor. Prospect Street or Bust was the order of my day, and in the evening, platoons of hopefuls would traverse campus in the wintry dusk toward the clubs to meet our fates. It was casual, but I wanted to look my best. So I accentuated my winter-break tan with the white turtlenecks worn in the style that was fashionable in the day — collars rolled up to meet the oversized gold hoops in my ears. The '70s were only a few weeks behind us, and even staid college fashion had its own breed of garishness, so I bumped up the disco tan with lipstick a shade hotter than Bazooka. This last adornment probably did not raise my stock at Cap, which



was a bastion of cosmetic-free beauties.

Who can forget the fliers posted around campus, reading: "Any questions? Call Bicker Central." Being a budding Sovietologist, it was vaguely ominous, calling to mind a Politburo-like cabal behind bicker's self-satisfied democracy. Nevertheless, I gamely slogged ahead. I tossed back liters of beer, daiquiris, and piña coladas (all legally — the drinking age in New Jersey then was 18), while I sat for informal "fun!" interviews in the Cap basement with peers who ultimately would chime in on my fitness to share a table with them at dinner.

I was not shoo-in Cap material, but I was a contender. My roommates — who remain to this day my best friends for life — were athletes and scholars, the finest of Princeton women and all-around winners whose admission to Cap was all but a foregone conclusion. I was iffier. I did not have a high campus profile, or a role in sports, or much else besides

a notebook full of Russian verbs. I had, of course, my friends, better ones than I expected or deserved, but would my association with them be enough to gain admission into the club's hallowed sanctum?

I made sure not to seem like I was trying too hard, because any whiff of desperation would be death for a hopeful like me. I laughed with the various Cap guys who sat with me and sussed me out, and many of them wondered why they never had met me. "Too busy in my dorm room with my cigarettes and absurdist Russian literature!" I would answer, while they howled with laughter at my carefully self-deprecating reply. Many shared with me their disdain for the process, and I nodded sagely, even obsequiously, as I still needed their good will to vote me in.

The word, from an insider doing some reconnaissance for me, was that I was interesting and unique. It was agony just the same. The stakes seemed too high, and that anxious pulse in my ears was whispering to me something I already seemed to know: Not a chance, Marcia.

Though to say so would have been met with protest, Cap and Gown was not for people like me — for people who needed it. It was for the casual, the cool, the people who — like the man who would become my husband 12 years after waltzing into Ivy Club — just belonged, period — no justification needed. I did not know the right people, or enough people, and at long last it was just not meant to be.

The night I became a Cap reject for life, I was a wreck, but I feigned nonchalance (my roommates seemed genuinely so) while waiting for the knock on the door. I pattered around, organized the toiletries on my dresser. I spritzed my neck with Miss Dior. My room was on the second floor, and already Holder courtyard was abuzz: the crescendo of a carnival for the lucky. Footsteps on the stairs, and then a rap on

They already knew what I had yet to learn: My dignity was intact.

Two pals, one my best friend and a new inductee, the other a junior in Cap and Gown, took me to Newark Airport. Was it the lipstick? No, my friend said, there were not enough people who knew me; my name came up near the end. It did not make sense, he said, shaking his head with compassion and regret, and he was so sorry. My friends each silently held one of my hands as I waited at the gate, still weeping.

On the plane, I read *Fathers and Sons*, Turgenev's masterpiece about the doctor Bazarov's belief in the triviality of human existence.

My mother and father met me at the airport with big smiles, and if they felt pity, they never showed it. They sent me to Princeton with a belief in my intelligence and my ability to contribute something to the world, and nothing — certainly not social defeat — would shake their conviction. They were both children of immigrant stock, and my father had made it from Arizona to Harvard Medical School armed only with his brain and his potential. Of course, now that I have two children of my own, I barely can conceive the pain they must have felt at their daughter's humiliation, and their anger at all people and institutions that allowed this to happen. They were the brave ones while I fell apart, and they never showed any emotion but joy in seeing me home, loved and safe.

I returned to school that Sunday night. Time wore on and, remarkably, I healed. Soon, I no longer imagined a neon "Hosed" sign hanging above my head. My friendships remained loyal and strong, but my world expanded in unforeseen directions when I joined Campus Club. Truth be told, though my roommates were like family, the Campus

folks were more my kind of people. There were smokers! I made friends there, many of whom never would have subjected themselves to the slaughter-

house of bicker. Ironically, many of them looked down on selective clubs, and it made me feel silly for having wanted, desperately, to be in one.

I found myself sometimes eating with my oldest friend from home. We had ended up at Princeton, and at Campus, and we strengthened our particular, nourishing bond. Eventually I made it back to parties in the basement of Cap and Gown, or was invited to the club for dinner, socializing normally with my friends who were members. I never again thought of them as the chosen ones. At long last, I was comfortable at Princeton.

I took a few lessons away with me that winter of 1980. The good it did me is valuable for what I can pass on to my own children, whose father experienced only the winning side of bicker. In short, I would do it again, the very same way, because I learned that though there may be no reason behind hope, there is also life in disappointment. ■

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the door. We approached the door to greet the messenger, but I sensed that I should lag behind.

Pity and regret caught my eyes with a flicker as I stood in back of my friends. There were hugs, and — now I remember — three red roses, one for everyone but me. Of course it was awkward, as bad for my poor friends as it was for me. The pain was sudden and searing, and my body, as if on its own, curled up on the carpet in the fetal position. I was sobbing with nothing less than full-on grief, my body wracked in a childlike lament. I was truly pathetic, and my spontaneous display of anguish embarrasses me to this day.

When my roommates collected me off the floor, I decided that I would go home to Boston for the weekend, and remove myself — big downer that I was — from the parties and festivities. I could not pretend that I was comfortable with this colossal rejection. Of course, my friends did not see me that way — they loved me, in Cap and Gown, or out.