

Michael Ferris' Ivy Oration as delivered on Class Day, 1983.

Ladies and gentlemen, esteemed faculty, cherished alumnae, respected foreign dignitaries and venerable concession stand operators-- welcome. It's an honor to be here today with Gary Trudeau, as I happen to be one of his biggest fans; "Bloom County" is practically my favorite comic strip. I'd like to extend a particularly warm welcome to my parents, Mom and Dad, you know who you are. No, don't stand up, that's OK. My parents drove down from Vermont this morning to be here. I hope the hotel was OK, Dad, I'm sorry I couldn't find one any closer. Oh, and Mom, I know how proud you are of me today, so I thought this might be a good time to break some... unpleasant news. I was just kidding about getting into Harvard law school. Actually, I was never really studying law at all; I've been sending home Xeroxes of my roommate's course reports for the past four years. I'm in the VES department. That stands for... Very Employable Skills. So you see you've got nothing to worry about.

Last September, by way of transition, I was wandering through the streets of Cambridge, lost in memories of my undergraduate years. Actually, I was just plain lost, never having traveled further north than the Store 24 in the past three years. Suddenly, I was approached by a starry-eyed, freckle-faced lad, fresh out of high school, his cheeks flushed with naivety, still wearing the traditional bright-red freshman hair shirt. "Hey mister!" he cried, thus employing the standard form of address for upperclassmen, "What's Harvard all about, anyway?"

"Well, son," I replied, smiling inwardly at his youthful presumption, "I'll be happy to tell you, but first-- down and give me fifty!" He obediently hit the filthy sidewalk and began his push-ups while I, at a loss for words, walked away. Nonetheless, the question of that plucky freshman has plagued me ever since.

What is Harvard all about anyway? Well, I know that for a young, midwestern farm boy from the wrong side of the tracks, it meant a ticket to undreamed of freedom and happiness-- a future. Unfortunately, he wasn't admitted. As for me, I was thrilled when that letter of acceptance came. Frankly, I wasn't too sure my application essay, "How I Spent My Summer Vacation," would make as much of an impression at Harvard as it did at my back-up school, the McDonald's Training Academy. And I didn't really

mind the fact that the letter was sent from the Office of Computer Errors. Because for me, Harvard conjured up images of Big Ben, the Thames and quaint Cockney accents. Of course, once I was disabused of the notion that Harvard was in Cambridge, England, I found I drew a complete blank. Still, I'd like to think my time here has taught me something of what Harvard is all about. The moment I met that freshman, I vowed to take a stroll down memory lane, which connected with Concord Avenue and eventually got me back to the campus.

I'll never forget my first week here, living in these Freshman Housing Units which my friends and I nicknamed "The Yard." I had especially been looking forward to meeting exotic new people, and my roommate Bruno was typical of the suave, European types I encountered, what with the clove cigarettes, the velvet smoking jacket, the eyepatch, the dueling scar, the limp and the mechanical steel hand. My other roommate Bob was more of a regular guy, the sort who likes to drink beer and watch television, fourteen hours a day. But the three of us soon learned that we shared a common interest--privacy. They had their annoying habits, to be sure-- Bruno, for instance, was into falconry. Although he kept his vicious bird of prey chained to the upper bunk, he used to leave carrion lying about the room in all stages of decay. Once I moved into the hallway, however, I found him surprisingly easy to get along with.

And of course, by now I had other pressures to contend with. During the first week, my proctor issued me a set of deadlines specifying just how long I had to file a study card, declare a concentration and find a girlfriend. In addition, I felt compelled to get involved in as many extracurricular organizations as possible. I made an unsuccessful bid at the Crimson with an article entitled "My Summer Vacation: What I Did During It." I didn't get any luckier at the Advocate with my blank verse poem "Remembrances of a Summer Gone." I toyed with the idea of working at the indie station for a while, until students in the bio department concluded that WHRB's monthly white noise orgy was causing cancer in laboratory rats. Finally, I was in the process of comping for the Spartacus Youth League when the University informed me that I'd thus far failed to enroll in any courses.

I don't mean to say that I didn't take my courses seriously. Why, I still remember the all-nighter I pulled before my exam in Nat Sci 102: "The History of Sand." And

believe me, no small amount of effort went into my final paper for VES 115: "Things In the Environment." It was a detailed analysis of the events of my previous summer. But I like to think that I kept a certain perspective on these academic pressures, a pressure which, tragically, was not shared by my roommate Bob.

No, poor Bob had a little trouble adjusting to the demands of college life. We got a call one morning from a student counselor-- Bob had left a message on the Room 13 Suicide Hotline answering machine the night before, in which he threatened to jump off the roof of Widener unless he received an extension on his final expos paper. Within minutes, squad cars had surrounded the library, Bob's expos teacher approached with a bullhorn and calmly explained that if he gave him an extension, it would set a bad example for the other students in the course. Well, Bob was talked down eventually and, I must confess, we gave him a good deal of ribbing about the incident, until he went completely insane.

I learned something from Bob, something besides how nice it is to have a single bedroom. I realized that the most important thing is to relax-- why, you don't have to succeed at everything in order to be a success, anymore than you have to fail at everything in order to be a miserable failure. I decided to slow down. I came to appreciate the simple pleasures of just reading a book by the banks of the Charles or sleeping for days on end. I became involved in less demanding organizations, such as the People to Whom ROTC is a Matter of Indifference. Oh sure, there were still those crazy nights spent with friends over a box of cookies and a quart of milk, but we were learning the meaning of the word "restraint."

I guess my new relaxed, devil-may-care attitude must have been evident because this year I finally received the ultimate seal of social approval-- I was punched for a finals club. True, it wasn't really one of the most prestigious clubs, but we still have some good times at the Paramecium. Founded back in 1976 in the basement of Mather House, the Paramecium has had to work hard to achieve a reputation comparable to that of the older clubs. Late at night, we sit around in our black bowling shirts flipping through the freshman register looking for conservative names. Many of our members have gone on to become highly influential yes-men in all manner of industries. It was, I must admit,

partially through club connections that I lined up my own job next year in Hollywood, as a sycophant.

But even now, with a career ahead of me and an education of sorts behind me, I felt no closer to some kind of answer to that freshman's question. It was as if my entire "Harvard experience," as I like to call it, had just been some kind of holiday.

Well, that's when it hit me-- the perfect metaphor. Harvard is like a holiday. Halloween, for instance. In a sense, all Harvard students are merely children. Each of us wears a mask when we come here-- no, not Frankenstein or skeleton masks, but masks of cynicism, or shyness or cool indifference. We knock on the hallowed doors of learning, clutching our SAT scores and tuition checks, and boldly cry out "Trick or Treat, Harvard!" Like Halloween, Harvard has its scary moments in the form of hobgoblin professors and food poisoning, but in the end almost all of us get what we set out for-- not a big bag of candy (though that would be nice) but a Harvard diploma. This is the only place in the world you can get one, you know, with the exception of a small printing press in Tijuana. What's perhaps more important, however, is that we learn to drop those masks. Our fellow students are no longer the enigmas they were when we entered this school. And, though a few may have emerged twisted human beings, for the most part it's been a pleasure to get to know them.

Or maybe Christmas. Harvard's sort of like Christmas because you never know just what's going to be inside those cleverly packaged courses. Our instructors are kind of like Santa Clauses, making their class lists and checking them twice, giving out As and Bs to all the good girls and boys and big lumps of coal to the rest. Harvard is... sort of like Arbor Day because... there are... lots of trees here and stuff...

I ran into my freshman friend recently, but he was no longer interested in hearing my philosophy of Harvard. He simply struck me for no reason and walked away. So I've chosen to share my thoughts with all of you instead, and I do appreciate your feigning interest for this long. Though my education has cost thousands of dollars a year, in video games alone, I'm leaving here with something money can't buy-- unfortunately, the rare book section of Widener is a little poorer for that. I'm leaving a lot behind here, however-- dear friends, good times, three meals a day. My expectations have changed: I no longer figure on marrying into the Kennedy family, for instance. But, all in all, I

wouldn't have traded my experience here for anything, practically. I'm sure most of you share my sentiments and, whatever you plan to become in the future-- doctors, lawyers, Indian chiefs-- I look forward to seeing you all in the corridors of power someday. You'll recognize me-- I'll be the one pushing a broom.

Thank you.