

CHAPTER I

Orientation (Four Years Later)

“Rusty, you cannot keep putting it off,” Susan yells at me from the postage stamp-size kitchenette in our temporary one-bedroom rental in the Bestgate section of Annapolis. The television is blaring, and she is having a difficult time communicating with me. “What will your classmates think if you turn up at seminar not having read the assignment?”

It’s mid-August and we have just arrived in Annapolis following a hectic couple of days preparing for my six-month sabbatical. Susan is right. I am once again procrastinating. On this occasion, I have curled up in an overstuffed chair with the TV remote in one hand and a cold beer in the other. I am surfing the channels, searching for the Olympics. My feet rest on a low coffee table, in the middle of which lies a fat copy of Homer’s *Iliad*, all 537 pages of it. This is the book I have been reading all week in preparation for the freshman seminar I will be attending at St. John’s College. I am behind in my reading, and so I pretend it’s not there.

Susan continues to badger me and is beginning to sound like my mother. “You know you are a slow reader. Don’t embarrass yourself by failing to complete the assignment.”

Susan is making me feel guilty. Only a month previously, Chris Nelson, the president of St. John’s College, and Harvey Flaumenhaft, the school’s dean, had agreed to let me enter their institution as a freshman so that I could write about the first-year experience from a student’s perspective. The idea of allowing a college president to matriculate as a freshman was unorthodox, to say the least, and Mr. Flaumenhaft, for one, had his doubts when I first proposed it to him. He wanted to know why any sane human over the age of fifty would want to do this. Did I *really* want to become a freshman again and hang out with eighteen-year-olds? Did I think that I would fit in? And what about all the reading? Did I really want to read hundreds of pages of Greek philosophy and literature each week? St. John’s is the Great Books school, and reading thought-provoking and challenging books is a staple of its academic program.

As I stare at my book on the coffee table, deciding whether to obey my wife or watch TV, I brood over my conversation with Mr. Flaumenhaft. I’m a fairly typical academically oriented guy whose idea of fun is hanging out in a library archive. Does Mr. Flaumenhaft think that I am some kind of eccentric exhibitionist attempting to pull off a publicity stunt? Or that I am just certifiably nuts? And what about all the reading? Do I really want to read ancient literature all day long? What have I gotten myself into?

I put these questions out of my mind and decide to watch the Olympics *and* read the *Iliad* at the same time. Susan looks

dubious as I slowly pick up the *Iliad* from the coffee table and begin reading Book 23.

Against the background noise of an Olympic boxing semifinal, I am reading that Achilles, commander of the Greek Myrmidons, has just buried his best friend, Patroclus, recently killed at the hands of Hector, leader of the Trojans and archenemy of the invading Greeks. It is decided that an athletic contest will be held to honor Patroclus's bravery. The orders are startlingly clear: fighting will stop and the soldiers will engage in a variety of sports, including boxing, wrestling, archery, foot races, and shot put. I am thinking to myself, how can this be? How can they hold a mini-Olympics in the middle of a horrendous war that has resulted not only in the death of a valued comrade, but also the slaughter of tens of thousands of people on both sides?

A news bulletin flashes across the television screen and I instantly look up from my book. NBC's Brian Williams is reporting that a large number of American soldiers have died in a suicide bombing in Mosul, in northern Iraq. A war that began over a year ago continues to take the lives of thousands of soldiers and citizens alike. And these news bulletins are becoming alarmingly frequent. It then dawns on me. The *Iliad*, written 2,700 years ago, is as much about my world as it is about Homer's. Like the ancient Greeks, America can also play Olympic games in the middle of a war. I wonder what else I might learn about my own times from this ancient literature. Will the material suggest that nothing ever changes in a world that continues to be defined by human misery and suffering? Or will I find hope that somehow the human spirit can overcome the past and that a world free of war might be possible in my lifetime?

Classes begin in just a few days, and I can hardly wait to become a freshman again.

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It's now Tuesday morning, the first day of freshman orientation. I enter the registration area in the foyer of Key Auditorium. To the left is an imposing monument to Francis Scott Key, after whom the auditorium is named. Key, a member of the St. John's class of 1796, penned our national anthem, and, indeed, the first stanza of "The Star-Spangled Banner" is engraved in huge letters on the wall for everyone to see, giving one the feeling that this is a college steeped in early American history. Through the large windows that surround two sides of the registration area I can see the rest of the campus.

Key Auditorium is part of Mellon Hall, whose modern 1960s architecture seems out of place next to the redbrick colonial buildings, several built in the eighteenth century, that dominate the St. John's campus. I'm feeling out of place as well. The registration area is pulsating with eighteen-year-olds, now joined by a balding sixty-one-year-old man with a red beard speckled with gray and the beginnings of a paunch. I am feeling very conspicuous. For one thing, I am much more used to turning up at these events as a college president, greeting the new students, radiating authority and confidence, reassuring parents that their sons and daughters are being left in competent, caring hands. Now, as a freshman, standing alone in the middle of the foyer like an abandoned child, I feel awkward, disoriented, unsure of myself.

As I join the long queue of freshman waiting to pick up their registration packets, a member of the orientation committee, a severe-looking senior, approaches me and says, in a rather

deprecating way, “This line is for students only. Parents wait over there.” As she says this, she points to a vacant bank of chairs. I don’t have the heart to tell her that I *am* a student, and so I sheepishly step out of line.

Not quite knowing what to do next, I wander over to the windows of the auditorium and stand next to the wall engraved with “The Star-Spangled Banner.” From this vantage point I can easily see St. John’s lower campus. Outside, families are madly scrambling to move their children’s possessions from their cars in the parking lots around Mellon Hall into the various residence halls a few hundred feet away on the Quad. Fathers look like packhorses as they haul their children’s possessions up the Quad’s broad steps. The freshmen have a bewildered look, as though they are happy to finally gain freedom from their parents but wonder what they will do without them.

I cannot completely share their experiences because I will not be moving into a dormitory, but instead living in a rented house not far from campus. But seeing the pandemonium outside Mellon Hall reminds me of a similar August day back in 1961, when my parents moved me into Smith Hall, a freshman men’s residence at Denison University. We had driven more than five hundred miles from my home in Mamaroneck, New York. Winding through the rolling hills of Ohio’s Licking County, this small, beautiful university suddenly appeared on the horizon. All of my teenage dreams of going to college came together at that moment. The grandeur of the campus buildings. The spectacle of the central parking lot, full of freshmen and their parents moving books, rugs, clothes, and lamps into the residence halls. The excitement of starting a new life, independent from my mom and dad.

The awe and anticipation I felt then is very much apart of my feelings now as I become a freshman a second time. Is it possible to become a student once again after being a college professor and administrator for more than thirty years? Will I be accepted by my classmates? What unexpected adventures await me?

I turn back to the registration table. The intimidating senior is nowhere to be seen, but the queue has doubled and I don't have the nerve to reclaim my original place in line. Perhaps I'll pick up my orientation packet later and get my ID card instead.

I spot Joy, a staff member in the student affairs office, who seems extremely harried trying to manage the chaos. A determined-looking woman, Joy works for the assistant dean, and, among other responsibilities, she is in charge of orientation. When I ask her where I can get my student ID, she gives me a look of disbelief that suggests, "You idiot. IDs are for the real students, not for a sixty-one-year-old college president pretending to be one." Of course, she is too polite to actually say this. But my need for an ID is real. How am I going to identify myself to campus security when they approach me some dark evening hanging out with students?

I have good reason to be concerned. I recall an event that took place in 1986, when I first became a college president. On my first day on the job at Moravian College, I decided just before midnight to sneak down to the amphitheater in the backyard of my house to watch, from behind a large oak tree, the remaining minutes of freshman mixer taking place. Through the dappled shadows of my lookout, I was spotted by an alert campus security officer, who was probably thinking that I was either a homeless person or, worse, some kind of pervert. And

so, as I left to return to my house, I was grabbed by two burly police officers.

“Let’s see your college ID,” the bigger one said. “I don’t have an ID,” I replied. “Then who are you?” the other chimed in. “I’m the president,” I responded, annoyed at this point. “Right. And I’m Jesus Christ Superstar,” the first cop said. I was arrested for trespassing on the spot. I can only imagine what the St. John’s police might think when I tell them I’m a freshman. And so I ask Joy once again, this time with a sense of urgency, “Where do I get an ID card?”

Joy directs me down a long hallway leading to a small room next to the president’s office, where two juniors are taking photos for the student IDs.

“Hi, I’m Roger Martin. You know, the older freshman,” I say as I enter the darkened room, praying that they won’t make fun of me.

“Oh, we know who you are,” one of them says with a contagious smile, “and we think it’s *awesome* that you are coming here as a student.” *Awesome* is a word undergraduates use to describe anyone or anything that is either unusual or unbelievable, and clearly I meet both criteria. But her generous welcome is genuine, and I feel greatly relieved. Someone has finally recognized me as a bona fide student.

I now need a parking pass. Because I must live off campus, I will have to commute to classes, and the parking situation around the St. John’s campus is hopeless. My two new friends from the photo ID department direct me back to the central registration area and to a table manned by campus security. Great, I think to myself. I can kill two birds with one stone: get a parking pass and also make myself known to the security officers.

I reenter the foyer, grabbing my orientation packet from a now-empty table as I stride toward the campus security booth. An officer with sergeant's stripes on both sleeves of his white shirt staffs the table.

"How can I help you?" he politely asks, probably thinking that I am a parent.

"I'm a new student and I need a parking pass," I respond, showing him my newly minted ID card.

He looks at the card, then at me, and then at the card again, not quite believing what he sees or knowing what to say. He hesitates, obviously not sure about my true identity, and finally says, "Freshmen aren't allowed to have cars."

"But I'm a *special* freshman who is living off campus," I persist, "and I need to commute to campus."

We aren't getting anywhere, and so I am referred up the chain of command to Paul Mikesell, director of campus security, who just happens to be standing at the door of the foyer. Mr. Mikesell, a muscular man with a kindly smile, patiently listens to my story. He is probably wondering why anyone approximately his own age would want to go back to college. But he is a good sport, and he finally gives me the parking pass I need.

Registration preliminaries completed, I exit the north door of the auditorium for some fresh air. I walk a few yards past Campbell Hall and up the stairs that lead to the Quad, the outdoor gathering place for St. John's students. Returning upperclassmen are assembling here, joining in the carnival atmosphere of move-in day. They are the big men on campus. They *own* St. John's, and the incoming freshmen intuitively know this. These upperclassmen—the men, at least—are not here to reclaim their dormitory rooms. The upper classes

move in tomorrow. They are here to check out the freshmen women.

I remember back to my Denison orientation forty-three years ago and the fraternity men I encountered my first day on campus. Sporting crew cuts and proudly wearing sweatshirts displaying the Greek letters of their respective fraternities on the front, they were helping the freshmen move into the residence halls, giving directions to bewildered parents, wandering around checking out the new arrivals, and generally making sure by the sublime confidence they exuded that you knew who they were. They seemed to me then like Greek gods—erudite, sophisticated, cool—while I felt like an insecure country cousin, inarticulate and unsure of myself.

But hold on. The Greek gods of my past look very different from the Greek gods I am seeing today. Some of these Johnnies look quite normal, wearing jeans and T-shirts and with regular haircuts. Others look quite different, though, with shoulder-length hair, assorted tattoos, and pierced navels and lips. I spot a young man with a black frock coat and long, flowing blond hair coming out of Randall Hall, the college's dining room. He looks more like a nineteenth-century itinerant preacher than a modern college student. A kid with a bright-green Mohawk haircut greets him as if they are long-lost buddies. Two other young men, engaged in earnest conversation, are seated around one of the several wrought-iron patio tables that furnish the Quad. They have shaved heads and, like the Hells Angels, wear jeans with steel chains hanging from their broad belts. I wonder if they arrived on Harley-Davidson motorcycles. Two young women, arm in arm, are exiting the east door of the Coffee Shop. Each sports a variety of silver rings piercing various parts of her body.

These Johnnies look very different from most college students I know. And they seem proud of their nonconformity. But why am I surprised? St. John's isn't exactly your typical liberal arts college either, at least not since 1937, when it adopted one of the most distinctive curricula in America.

Founded in 1696 as King William's School, St. John's was, by 1784, one of a handful of colonial colleges that served the new nation. It had some stature, counting among its early students George Washington's step-grandson and two nephews in addition to Francis Scott Key. Never a wealthy college, St. John's faced numerous financial challenges over the ensuing years. During the Civil War it was occupied by federal troops and had to close temporarily. Later in the century it adopted a program of compulsory military training in order to augment its depleted finances. In 1886, after almost going out of business again, the college opened a preparatory school for the United States Naval Academy, founded forty years earlier on a plot of land next door. The stock market crash of the 1920s and the Great Depression seemed like the final nail in the college's coffin.

Even in the face of financial hardship, however, St. John's was not about to go under. In 1937 Stringfellow Barr, a University of Virginia graduate who had attended Oxford, was elected president of the college and, along with Scott Buchanan, the new dean (and an Oxford graduate as well), completely revamped the curriculum. They introduced the Great Books program that would turn St. John's from a struggling regional liberal arts college into one of the most distinctive institutions of higher education in America.

As at Oxford, which had an obvious impact on the thinking of both Barr and Buchanan, learning was to be accomplished

largely through seminars, tutorials, and labs, with tutors, not professors, in charge. The tutors would be generalists, expected to teach across the curriculum even in areas in which they had little or no academic training. As a consequence, there were to be no academic departments, or even majors. By graduation, every St. John's student would have read the same hundred or so Great Books.

At the center of this uncommon curriculum was the seminar, which would meet twice a week and would be composed of a dozen or so students and two tutors arranged around a large table. Freshman seminar would focus on classical Greek literature and philosophy, including the writings of Homer, Plato, Plutarch, and Herodotus. By their sophomore year, students would be reading selections from the Old and New Testament, in addition to Italian, French, and English authors such as Dante, Rabelais, and Chaucer. The juniors would focus mainly on seventeenth- and eighteenth-century literature, including classics like Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Molière's *Tartuffe*, and Montesquieu's *The Spirit of the Laws*. By their senior year, St. John's students would hit their stride, reading more "modern" classics like Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, Marx's *Capital*, and Dickens's *David Copperfield*.

In addition to this seminar, all students would be required to take tutorials in language (initially Greek, Latin, German, and French), music, mathematics, and writing, plus labs in physics, chemistry, and biology, all based on the Great Books. If this were not enough to keep the students occupied, the college would also sponsor two lectures each week that would be attended by the entire community. On these occasions a faculty member or a visiting scholar would expound on a wider range

of books than those found in the canon, or what the community called “The Program.” In sum, the St. John’s curriculum was a radical—though some might say traditional—expression of the liberal arts and sciences. And largely because of this audacious curriculum, the college began to prosper.

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Wednesday is the second day of orientation, and I have some time to kill. This morning we moved out of Bestgate and into our new home on Franklin Street. Susan decided to drive to Target to buy some household items, so I have most of the afternoon free.

I decide to check out the Coffee Shop, which is located in the basement of McDowell Hall. This is where St. John’s students congregate after classes. On a bulletin board just outside the main entrance an announcement catches my eye. “WALTZ PARTY TONIGHT. 10:30 PM IN THE GREAT HALL. LESSONS AT 3 PM THIS AFTERNOON.” How cool, I think to myself, for a college with a classical curriculum to organize a social event featuring a classical dance like the waltz.

Arriving at the Great Hall a few minutes after three, I am greeted by a junior woman with a distinct British accent. The handsome room is packed with fresh faces, most of them probably first-year students. An ancient gramophone pumps out loud waltz music. “I’m a special student this semester,” I whisper, not wanting to disturb the proceedings or be overheard, “and I have no idea how to waltz.” I notice that the men have already moved to one side of the Great Hall, and the women to the other, forming two straight lines facing each other. I feel the stares of a hundred pairs of eyes.

The Great Hall, a sparsely decorated room with broad, hand-hewn oak floors, is the perfect place for dance lessons. The elegant white walls sport the portraits of past St. John's presidents, who stare down in stony silence at the unwary students lined up below.

"Terrific," the instructor yells over the music so that everyone in the room can hear her. "Get in line with the men."

As she says this I remember back forty-three years to my first college mixer in the Deed's Parking Lot at Denison and how terribly insecure I felt on that occasion. I was a spectacle to behold: freckle-faced, red-haired, introverted, and terribly homesick. But there I was, hanging out with my male classmates and bravely surveying all the women I wanted to dance with in the worst possible way. Now these remembrances are coming back to haunt me.

"Okay," the dance instructor continues as she turns her back on me. "Now, men and women converge in the middle of the floor, and choose a partner." Could it get any worse?

As the two lines of students walk slowly toward each other, I join the end of the men's line and move forward with them. Across the room, directly in front of me, I see a diminutive blond with a faint resemblance to my youngest daughter, Emily. My future dance partner is staring at me in absolute horror. I can only imagine what is going through her anxious mind. I'm not feeling great about the situation either.

Fortunately for both of us there are more men than women, and as we move forward, the men's line shifts slightly to the right to better match the oncoming women. To the obvious relief of my intended partner—she will now be matched with a student just to my left—I end up with no one.

Suddenly I notice another freshman standing nearby. He hasn't even tried to join the line, probably scared to death that he might experience what I just did. He has good reason to be concerned. He is a skinny, freckled kid. His blue jeans are far too short for his lanky legs, practically shining a light on his white socks and penny loafers. No self-respecting St. John's woman, certainly not one in tight capri pants and stiletto heels, is going to link up with this kid. He's a nerd.

As the waltz lesson begins, I edge closer and introduce myself. Not quite sure who this older man is, he somewhat cautiously tells me, with a slight stutter, that his name is Sheldon. He then falls silent. I sense that Sheldon feels self-conscious. His hands jammed in his sagging pockets, he is a fish out of water.

I ask Sheldon where he comes from. He tells me that he used to live with his parents in a small farming community north of San Francisco and that this is the first time he has been away from home. In a moment of candor he also confides that he is missing his family terribly. Realizing that he perhaps has said more than he should have, he changes the subject and tells me that he considered skipping this event, making some noise about being more interested in the academic side of St. John's. Sheldon is putting on a brave front, but I can tell by his awkward gawks when couples seductively waltz past him that he really wishes he could be part of the action.

As Sheldon and I talk, I notice out of the corner of my eye the dance instructor approaching us. The students out on the dance floor are twirling away, and clearly there will be no wallflowers in her class. "Why don't you guys dance together?" she shouts out to us, again so that everyone can hear. Sheldon's face turns beet red. Having his classmates watch him dance with a man

easily his father's age is all his suppressed ego needs to completely shrivel, so I quickly make an excuse and a strategic exit. I never do learn how to waltz.

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With my photo ID and parking pass in hand, I'm almost a freshman, but not quite. Next I must witness a rite of passage that is the staple of most college orientations. The new students must be officially welcomed by the faculty and the president and formally matriculated into the college. I have presided over this ceremony many times myself during the eighteen years I have been a college president.

Susan returns from her shopping expedition and joins me at Key Auditorium, a concert hall that seats about six hundred people. Upper-class students and parents of the freshmen are filing through the auditorium's side and back doors. The freshmen and the faculty are nowhere to be seen. They are probably somewhere in the bowels of Mellon Hall, robing up for this grand event. The upperclassmen have that look of confidence that says, "I've been here before. I know the ropes." The parents are looking extremely fatigued from moving books, computers, televisions, clothes, and mini-refrigerators into the residence halls all day.

At the last minute, I decide not to robe up for the ceremony because technically I am not matriculating at the college. I am also having a difficult time putting aside my presidential persona. As Susan and I enter the auditorium, I automatically move to where most of the parents are seated.

"But Rusty," she scolds me, "shouldn't you at least be sitting with the returning students?"

Once seated in a row populated by some upper-class students, I begin to wonder about the mechanics of the matriculation ceremony: Will there be a good faculty turnout? Did the building and grounds crew remember to turn on the public address system? Is the lighting right? I've fallen into my old ways. I'm becoming my old self again—a controlling, micromanaging college administrator. I'm obviously neither thinking nor behaving like a college freshman.

The chatter of parents and upperclassmen subsides as the president, followed by the dean and faculty, all in colorful academic regalia, finally enter from the side doors of the auditorium and solemnly march down the aisle. They are followed by all 120 members of the freshman class, who seat themselves in the front rows. The president and dean mount the stage.

President Christopher Nelson is dressed in a doctoral gown with three purple chevrons on each sleeve. He is a stout man in his mid-fifties, of medium height and with light brown hair. A St. John's graduate himself, Chris Nelson has been president of the college for well over a decade.

The president approaches the podium and announces the beginning of St. John's 214th convocation. I feel shivers going up and down my spine, something that always happens to me on these ceremonial occasions. The dean then begins a forty-five minute ritual during which each and every freshman is introduced to the faculty, signs the matriculation book, and receives a Greek lexicon as a gift from the college. Freshmen here are required to take Greek.

The president gives a convocation address about "beginnings," an appropriate topic for new and returning students. He says that we have embarked on a wonderful journey, one that

will begin over and over again throughout our lives. This is because even if our journey and the search it entails take us to a secure place as college students—what he calls a “secure landing”—that landing will only be the jumping-off point for another journey, for a further search. The goal of this search, he says, is to return and, for the first time, know the place from whence we started. He cites Homer’s *Odyssey* to make his point, suggesting that Odysseus’s long journey home from the Trojan War proved to be the jumping-off point for yet a new journey and perhaps a better understanding of himself.

Mr. Nelson ends his oration by citing a verse from T.S. Eliot’s poem “Little Gidding”:

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

The president’s words resonate. I, too, have embarked on a journey, a strange and wonderful journey into the unknown. And like most of the freshman, who are now receiving their Greek lexicons, I am scared half to death.

At the reception after the ceremony, Susan and I notice parents saying good-bye to their children, causing me to remember when my parents said good-bye to me after Denison’s convocation in Swasey Chapel. I remember how very ambivalent I felt when their car pulled out of the chapel parking lot. They weren’t leaving me for just a couple of weeks, as they did when I went to Boy Scout camp each summer. I would not see them again until Thanksgiving, three long months away. I knew deep in my heart that I would miss them dearly.

As Susan and I leave the auditorium, we hear in the distance the Navy Marching Band playing a John Philip Sousa tune. Perhaps the Naval Academy is having its convocation as well.

Later that evening, Susan and I return to the Quad for the first Waltz Party of the semester. I have not yet learned how to waltz, but I wouldn't miss this event for the world. It is 10 P.M., and a multitude of students are hanging around and engaging in animated conversation. Some of the patio tables contain six-packs of beer, but I do not see the kind of binging that we all too often hear about at other colleges. The beer is just a prop. The conversation is far more important.

Susan and I sit by ourselves in the shadows of McDowell Hall, just soaking in the atmosphere. I start to yawn. It's now almost 11 P.M. and the Waltz Party has not yet begun, but the students are having a blast just hanging out.

Soon we spot some upper-class women emerging from Campbell Hall, the residence immediately to our left, dressed to the nines in fancy gowns and accompanied by young men decked out in tuxedos. More students gradually emerge wearing dresses and suits right out of the 1920s. Here comes a kid who looks like John Dillinger, except instead of a machine gun, he is cradling a bottle of champagne in his right arm. He escorts a young woman who looks like a flapper right out of the Roaring Twenties. She is wearing a sequined dress complete with long, white gloves, a feather boa, and a cloche hat, and she carries a long cigarette holder in her left hand. But still, no one enters the Great Hall. Obviously, the scheduled beginning of the Waltz Party has long been forgotten. The students are just enjoying themselves outside in the dark.

It's now almost midnight, and since Susan and I are dressed more like adult chaperones than freshmen, we decide to call it a night.

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Thursday, the last day of orientation, has arrived. My classmates and I have navigated registration and heard from the president. We have also attended our first Waltz Party. We now have three final tasks to accomplish before classes begin: first, to hear about the social and residential life at the college; second, to take a tour of the campus itself; and finally, to enter what Johnnies fondly call "The Temple," where we will meet the college's athletic director and learn about the school's athletic programs.

The residential life orientation takes place in the Conversation Room. Located just off Key Auditorium in Mellon Hall, the Conversation Room is a modern version of a Greek *bouleuterion* (council meeting hall), complete with dark wood columns and a gallery for chairs around three sides of the room. The center of this room, configured as an oval, is now occupied by chairs facing a podium. Above is a skylight that during the day illuminates the room with sunlight. This is where guest lecturers meet informally with the community after delivering the Friday-evening lecture in Key Auditorium, still a St. John's tradition. But the Conversation Room is also just big enough to accommodate the entire freshmen class.

The freshmen have assembled. Seated behind a small podium in front of them is Judy Seeger, assistant dean (a.k.a. dean of students), together with her staff. Ms. Seeger (deans and faculty members are never referred to by their academic title at St. John's) is a graduate of Harvard, where she majored in history,

and of the University of Chicago, where she did her doctorate in Romance languages and literature. She has been instrumental in helping me prepare for my time at the college. Even before I arrived, she was alerting her colleagues to the unusual freshman who would soon be in their midst (although I think she forgot to tell campus security). She has also given me some good advice on extracurricular activities, encouraging me to join a choral group (she is a singer herself).

It was also Ms. Seeger who suggested that my true identity not be kept from the students, but rather revealed soon after my arrival. Today, then, she will formally introduce me to the assembled freshman. Probably not that many of them care who I am, but there has been enough confusion about my identity (at the waltz lessons, for example) that being forthright really makes sense.

I pull up a chair next to a young man wearing a University of Pennsylvania sweatshirt who is sitting alone to the side. He has a pungent body odor, so I can understand why no one wants to sit next to him. He is a tall kid, maybe six feet, two inches, with a spaced-out look that reminds me of a young Albert Einstein. He seems to be so smart that he cannot communicate with common earthlings like you and me. His full head of brown hair is a picture of chaos, and he is generally unkempt. I introduce myself and he reluctantly tells me that his name is Phil, but he doesn't say much more than this, even though I try to engage him in a conversation. Maybe he isn't accustomed to speaking with adults. Maybe he is nervous. Either way, he isn't buying my pathetic attempt to identify with him as a fellow freshman. So I just settle back in my seat and quietly wait for the program to begin, feeling somewhat conspicuous since the rest of my

classmates are engaged in animated teenage prattle with their newfound friends.

The noise in the room subsides as Ms. Seeger approaches the podium. She surveys her expectant audience for a minute or so and then begins to speak. She has a voice of authority.

“Before we begin this morning’s session, I would like to call on a very special student to introduce himself. Mr. Martin, will you please greet the freshmen?”

As I stand, students turn around in their seats and impassively stare at me. For once in my life, I am almost tongue-tied.

“Thank you, Ms. Seeger,” I begin, once I have composed myself. “Well, you all have probably been wondering who this old guy is.” My clumsy attempt at familiarity only draws blank stares. “My name is Roger Martin, and while in real life I am a college president, I am joining you this semester as a freshman. Well, not *really* a freshman. But I plan to write about the freshman experience, and I hope to get to know as many of you as I can.”

I sit down. A few students nod their head in acknowledgment, but it’s early in the morning, and I sense that my presence has not yet registered with most of them, especially with those who stayed at the Waltz Party until 3 A.M. last night. In any case, my moment in the limelight is over. Once again, I’m just another freshman in the room. Ms. Seeger thanks me and the session begins.

Although St. John’s academic program is very different from those at most colleges, the social issues here—matters concerning campus safety and residence life—are pretty much the same. The program begins with Joy talking about dorm life. Apparently, in addition to running orientation, she is also in

charge of the residence halls. We are told to respect our roommate's privacy, to always lock our doors when we leave our rooms, and to be nice to the janitorial staff and not leave big messes for them to clean up. Joy then introduces each of the residence hall assistants who are sitting around the room. The RAs are mostly juniors and seniors.

The college nurse is next up. Dressed in a white uniform, she seems very open and compassionate, just the kind of person you would want to go to if you were sick. She gives a few health tips ("since we can't get flu vaccines this year, be sure to regularly wash your hands") and encourages students to drop by the infirmary to meet her staff. At the conclusion of her remarks a student wearing a T-shirt with a big peace symbol on the front and who has had his hand in the air for several minutes asks if students can get free condoms from the infirmary.

There is nervous laughter from the assembled freshmen. This question is a throwback to the previous generation. They didn't ask about free condoms, they *demand*ed them. But these kids are Millennials, and sex is a private matter, not discussed in public. The nurse, who is probably used to this question, says that contraception issues can be addressed by her staff and, yes, condoms are available for the asking in the infirmary.

We next talk about the *big* topic on college campuses these days—drinking. At the Waltz Party the other night beer was obviously visible, though I saw no evidence of alcohol abuse. No matter. This morning we are lectured by Paul Mikesell, the security chief who got me my parking pass, not to consume alcohol until we are twenty-one. I can see students rolling their eyes, much as Randolph-Macon students do when I make the same pedantic speech at their freshman orientation. Millennials have

heard this sermon a million times since middle school, and no matter what any adult says or how many times they say it, they will, unfortunately, still illegally drink alcohol.

As the session ends, we are divided into groups for student-led tours of the campus. My group is to meet our tour leader, a senior by the name of Don, on the Quad in ten minutes. Twenty-five of us leave the Conversation Room and briskly march through the auditorium foyer, across the walkway, and up the Quad steps. We spot Don sitting on one of the Quad's wrought-iron chairs, chatting with some other upperclassmen.

I had actually met Don several days ago. An affable guy from New Haven who puts you at ease as soon as you meet him, he has been hanging around campus since Wednesday checking out the freshmen. Don is joined by his friend Pat, and together they begin the tour by taking us through the basement of Campbell Hall, where the washing machines are located.

"If they don't work, just give them a swift boot," Don tells the group as he kicks one of the machines. He is very much in charge, and the freshmen are impressed.

We continue through Campbell's basement hallway, and, when we emerge on the other side, we hang a sharp left past Humphreys Hall, where the bookstore is located ("You can purchase any classic in print," Don claims). We then walk past the Greenfield Library, until a few years ago the home of the archives for the state of Maryland.

We are now standing in the center of the college lawn. "This is the heart of St. John's," Don says as he makes a grand, sweeping gesture with his right hand. He does this as though we were standing on the north rim of the Grand Canyon, surveying the majesty of the surroundings. Don points to McDowell Hall

about fifty feet away. He tells us that McDowell was built before the American Revolution and is the third-oldest academic building in America. He mentions that it is the center of campus social life, along with the Quad on the opposite side and the Coffee Shop in the basement.

Don continues his spiel as we make our way across the well-kept lawn, past Pinkney Hall, a student residence, and toward Woodward Hall, at the northeast boundary of the campus. As we take the tour, members of my group begin to chat with me. Some heard me introduce myself just a few minutes ago and are curious.

A student from Washington, D.C., asks whether I am living in a residence hall. “No, I’m living off campus with my wife, Susan, and our flat-coated retriever named Angel,” I tell her.

“Oh, can I come over and pet your dog?” she asks with a melancholy look. “I miss my dog so much.”

“Any time,” I say, amazed at how many of these students seem to be missing their pets. “Angel loves to be petted.”

A second student, a young man from Oregon with jet-black hair, asks me whether I’m taking the entire course of study. “Primarily the freshman seminar and some extracurricular activities, and only until the end of December,” I reply.

A third student, a young woman with purple hair and who is almost as tall as I am, introduces herself as Shannon. She asks what a college president does. “We read lots of memos and raise money,” I say, somewhat with tongue in cheek.

As we approach Woodward Hall, Don suddenly points to bald patch of lawn where an enormous poplar called the Liberty Tree recently stood, until it was severely damaged by a storm and had to be taken down. Don claims that Thomas Jefferson

and George Washington plotted the American Revolution under this stately tree.

After passing this sacred spot we enter Woodward Hall, formerly the college library, but now the Graduate Institute where St. John's runs a small Master of Arts program in the classics. Don wonders whether all twenty-five of us can cram into the tiny elevator just inside the front door. I reluctantly go along with the group wondering what Don and Pat will do if the elevator gets stuck between floors. But we safely make it to the top floor, where Don shows us a beautiful seminar room named after William III, patron of the school that preceded St. John's. Don claims that this area is open all night. "Great place to study and sleep," he says, "especially if you can't stand your roommate."

As we leave Woodward Hall, on our way back to the beginning point of our tour, Don dispenses some useful information. "See that parking lot over there?" He is pointing to a lot behind Chase-Stone House, another residence hall. "Campus security doesn't check that area as carefully as they should. So if you are a freshman and illegally have a car, that's the best place to park."

Once again we are approaching McDowell Hall and the northeast entrance of the Coffee Shop. "Want cheap food?" Don rhetorically asks. "The coffee sucks, but the burgers aren't too bad."

Our tour is running late, but for some reason that is not clear, Don wants to return to Mellon Hall. Most of us could probably skip this part of the tour. We have already spent countless hours in Mellon trying to get registered. But as we enter the foyer to Key Auditorium for the umpteenth time, Don points out an older woman briskly walking in the opposite direction.

“See that lady?” he says, muffling his voice with his right hand as she leaves the building. “That’s Eva Brann. She’s an icon. The St. John’s experience isn’t complete until you’ve had her in seminar.” He is referring to one of St. John’s most celebrated faculty members, an archaeologist of international reputation who is celebrating her forty-seventh year on the faculty. I make a mental note that this is a person I would like to meet.

“Oh my gosh,” Don says as he checks his watch. “Mr. P is going to kill me.” He is referring to Leo Pickens, St. John’s athletic director. Mr. Pickens’s not-to-be-missed introduction to St. John’s athletic program was scheduled to start five minutes ago.

“Okay. We’re going to skip the Mellon tour and jog over to the gym,” Don says as we turn around and leave Mellon the way we came in. We all thank Don for his perspective on the college and then start running across the lawn to the gym, which is located on the opposite side of the campus.

All the freshmen tours except ours have converged on Iglehart Hall, but Mr. Pickens has patiently waited for us. As we enter the side door of the gym, half out of breath, and into a small reception area, he asks us to remove our shoes as though the gym were recently constructed and he didn’t want us to scuff up the new floor. But this is hardly the case. Built in 1910, Iglehart Hall isn’t exactly a state-of-the-art athletic facility. It probably looks exactly as it did when St. John’s freshmen entered through the same door almost a hundred years ago.

Basically, the building is a basketball court with a wood-beamed cathedral ceiling and brick walls. The gym is too small for bleachers, but circling around the basketball court, maybe ten feet off the playing floor, is a banked wooden track that can

be used either for jogging or for spectators when a basketball or volleyball game is being played below. Out of sight, behind the walls, are very modest weight rooms and lockers. The gym has a musky smell that betrays its antiquity.

We sit on the floor in a wide semicircle as Mr. Pickens, a man of modest build but piercing eyes, looks over us in pregnant silence. I sense that we are in the presence of a sage. Mr. Pickens begins to speak, softly at first. He explains that we are not seated in a gymnasium, but rather in a sacred building, what he calls his temple. He talks about how athletics was as much a part of Greek culture and society as political discourse and debate, and he tells us that athletics must therefore be taken seriously and treated with worshipful reverence. Throughout his oration he uses quotations in Greek from Plato and Herodotus, giving the freshmen a sense that somehow what is done here has a symbiotic relationship with what happens in the classroom. He says that although the athletic facilities at St. John's are somewhat limited compared to those of most colleges, participating in almost any type of athletic competition is possible. For those inclined toward something a bit uncommon, he notes that Ultimate Frisbee and croquet are very popular at St. John's. He also tells us that St. John's is the national croquet champion, and the annual spring match with the Naval Academy is an event not to be missed.

Mr. Pickens continues his sermon by saying something quite extraordinary, something you would not expect to hear from an athletic director.

"Skill and previous experience," he says, "are not required here at St. John's, only *thumos*. Passion." As he says *thumos* he

lightly pounds his chest. “Everyone who shows up will be on the team. *Everyone.*”

As he repeats this last word, he seems to be looking directly at me, perhaps because I stick out in this sober-faced crowd of youngsters. Mr. Pickens’s invitation is meant for me as well.