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A Radcliffe Girl at Harvard

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A Radcliffe Girl at Harvard
or Why Members of the Class of 1958 Staged a Revolution in 1993

Ann R. Shapiro

I left New York for Cambridge with my classmate, Dinah, on a sunny spring morning in early June 1993. The thirty-fifth reunion promised to be fun--three days to be college "girls." The painful events from those college days were now just a part of one chapter in a long personal history, no different from most in its combination of joy and sorrow. I was now divorced, but even though the marriage ended, I was not bitter or even unhappy about it. I had three grown children, one of whom had graduated from Harvard with a Phi Beta Kappa key, and I no longer had to please anyone but myself. My career had been far from brilliant, but it was good enough. I was a tenured professor of English at Farmingdale State University of New York's, a second-tier college in New York State's enormous archipelago. I was earning a decent, if modest, living and had two books and many articles in women's studies to my credit. What if I had been a man? Who knows? I had little cause for complaint.

When we pulled into Radcliffe Yard in a much smaller car than the one that had deposited me there 35 years earlier, the building facades looked much the same, and yet much was different. The dormitories were no longer called dormitories but Houses, like the Harvard Houses, whose towers poked up along the banks of the Charles River on the other side of Harvard Square. Harvard now owned the Radcliffe buildings, and when the college was in session the dormitories were occupied by both men and women. Radcliffe girls had become Harvard women, and students of both genders were much in evidence, lounging on the Quad, packing gooseneck lamps and computers into waiting vans, or toting suitcases for the returning alumnae settling in for the upcoming festivities. No one was wearing a raincoat to cover her shorts, and there were no Haaouse mothers pouring tea. Hilles Library loomed over the smallish houses in the Quad. Built as a new Radcliffe undergraduate library, it now opened its doors to all students.

I was shown to my room in North House by a smiling student, who chatted amiably about meal tickets, buses to the Square (for us aging alumnae), and other essentials. The fourth floor room to which I had been assigned looked exactly like the one I had vacated 35 years before--the same thin striped mattress and wooden chest, the same dimly lit mirror. The communal bathroom was down the hall. Radcliffe's benefactors had clearly not been the CEO's or family scions who had endowed Harvard's more gracious accommodations. My helpful companion wished me a pleasant stay as she hurried off to help another alumna find her way in the new Harvard house, which was after all indistinguishable from the old Radcliffe dorm.

Alone now in my tiny cubicle, I began to wonder exactly how different things really were after all these years, but I was interrupted by Dinah who wanted to go over the long list of events to which we had been invited. We would go to the Pops Concert with our Harvard classmates, but mostly we would socialize with Radcliffe women in Radcliffe Yard or Radcliffe Quad. Our class had graduated well before the merger with Harvard in 1977. Therefore, the reunion organizers had decided that our real ties were with Radcliffe, which was still soliciting our money for its ever-growing endowment. In the next three days, we would be with women--a radical departure from our undergraduate years, where most of our time had actually been spent in the company of men--male undergraduates, who dominated the classrooms and social activities; male Harvard professors, who taught our classes.

The dinner that night at Radcliffe Yard under the tent was without incident. President Linda Wilson looked elegant and presidential in her summer suit as she welcomed us back to our college. What college? I had graduated from a male-dominated institution called Harvard and was being welcomed back to a woman's college called Radcliffe. Thank God everyone was wearing a large name tag hanging from an elasticized string around the neck. These were my classmates but, except for those who had lived in my own dormitory, both names and faces were unfamiliar. We had been lost to one another in Harvard's male world. I was greeted several times by one or another vaguely recognizable woman, who invariably cooed, "You look exactly the same." It is a lovely lie that we all tell each other at reunions. There was little resemblance between the aging faces around me and the young women I had seen that morning bustling around Radcliffe Quad. Many of my classmates were attractive, some even distinguished, but we all wore reading glasses, and most of those I recognized were noticeably thicker around the middle.

I felt increasingly disconnected from the lectures, meetings, and meals on the following day. Something was wrong, and I couldn't put my finger on it. That evening I would understand. Having already grown weary of reunion activities by midafternoon, I met an old friend and shared a glass of wine at her house in Cambridge. It was a pleasant break in the tightly scheduled activities, and I was not at all sure that I wanted to attend the Class of 1958 dinner that evening. But I had promised Dinah that I would be there, and besides, I had paid for the meal. And so I wearily made my way back to Radcliffe Yard to rejoin my classmates. The fruit cup on the tables was past its prime, and there

was bad news from the speaker's platform. Jane O'Reilly, who had written all those irreverent articles in *New York Magazine* about her sex life and other unspeakable matters (while I was changing diapers, as forecast by both my mother and the *Radcliffe Yearbook*) was to be the speaker. We were told that Jane's mother had died that morning, so that Jane would be unable to attend. Someone suggested that since there was no speaker we might use the opportunity to talk about our Radcliffe experience.

I was already bored and in no mood to pretend that I had shared all those happy times with this group of mostly strangers, but by now I was hungry, and even the aging fruit cup was beginning to look palatable. Eyeing the fruit and planning my escape, I was listening only intermittently to the speaker who had just finished apologizing for Jane's absence. But then I was stunned. The speaker was saying something that I had never expected to hear amidst the reunion banalities. She had just declared that she had hated Radcliffe--that she believed that the Admissions Office had made a mistake when they admitted her. I had barely assimilated her words when someone else grabbed the microphone and announced, "If there ever had been a Mother Radcliffe, she had clearly deserted us; we were made to feel second class." Another voice reminded us of the professors who clearly preferred our male classmates and ignored us. Someone remembered the classmate who had been raped and was afraid to tell. "And what about our male classmates? Most of them were now earning six-figure salaries, while we were earning roughly half or less--good for women, but . . .," the voice trailed off.

The comments kept coming. Each of us during our undergraduate years had apparently considered herself the misfit or malcontent--the one person who had failed to

fulfill the promise. We were finally admitting that we had been short-changed at Harvard. It was exhilarating to realize, however belatedly, that no one was alone in feeling cheated. But at the same time I was getting more and more depressed that all this truth was coming up too late in a game that was already lost--at least for us.

Feeling empowered by the wine that had now begun to take effect, I stood up and delivered a short speech that went something like this:

We cannot change what happened to us, but if sexual discrimination still exists at Harvard, we must change things for the young women who are there now--those women students who may still feel the sting of unequal treatment. If today's students are like we were, they may be like the proverbial fish who do not see the ocean; they may not see the sexism that surrounds them and instead blame themselves. As alumnae, we may be uniquely qualified to understand what may be wrong, and we are free to insist on reform. After all, what can they do to us now?

My comments were greeted with applause. I therefore suggested that we write to President Wilson and ask that Radcliffe take a leadership position in ensuring equality for women at Harvard. I added, "If Radcliffe would not take such leadership, then perhaps it was time for Radcliffe to go out of business altogether." There was only one vocal dissenter. Peggy Groome, our class secretary, replied that we needed Radcliffe to protect women because Harvard could surely not be trusted. "It was," she added, "like asking the fox to guard the chicken coop."

I did not want to argue. I responded, “Anyone who wants to discuss how we follow up can meet with me at our hospitality suite after dinner.” It was an amazing catharsis. I finally put into words what I had been thinking for 35 years but had not dared to say, even to myself.

By the time I reached the hospitality suite back at the Quad, the room was jammed. People were sitting on the arms of sofas and standing in every vacant corner, apparently indifferent to the lack of air conditioning. I offered to write a letter to President Wilson stating the problem and asking for redress. I would circulate the letter for corrections and additions to anyone who would give me her name and address. Someone passed a legal pad around the room, and the pages soon filled up. We tried to outline the content of the letter, and I scribbled furiously as people stated their thoughts. But I was getting too tired to focus clearly and suggested that people contact me by mail or phone during the next month. I walked back to my room that night feeling something that I had never felt before at Radcliffe--I was part of a community of women.

The next day there was an urgent phone message from my classmate, Gabriela Schlesinger. Gaby had been eating lunch in Harvard Square when she overheard the conversation of a group of women from the class of 1953, who were talking about the very concerns that had galvanized us the previous night. Gaby soon joined the conversation and learned that they had already organized an action committee. When I completed the letter I was to send a copy to Peggy Schmertzler, chairman of that committee.

That July I wrote the letter. Not only did classmates write and phone, but Joan Baer visited me in the summerhouse I was renting in Vermont. Something had happened that seemed very important, at least to some of us. If we could change Harvard, the most powerful institution of higher education in America and maybe the world, we might be able to move a giant step closer to attaining equality for women. It was an idea almost too marvelous to contemplate.

We did not see each other again until the following December. On a snowy morning 15 women from the classes of 1953 and 1958 met for breakfast at the Copley Plaza Hotel in Boston to strategize for a meeting with Radcliffe's President Wilson the following day. We came mainly from New York and Boston, but also from Chicago and Maryland. The Committee for the Equality of Women at Harvard was founded that morning and incorporated shortly thereafter.

The next day five of us congregated at 8:30 a.m. in the president's conference room at Radcliffe to meet with President Wilson. We had masses of data, and everyone was impeccably polite as we systematically went through the evidence of a century of discrimination against women. Linda Wilson praised us and we, in turn, lauded her efforts and good intentions. Although she proved to be both competent and intelligent, Wilson made it clear that she had no power at Harvard. That afternoon we resolved that not only would we pursue our cause with Radcliffe, but we would also have to meet with members of the Harvard administration. Over the next several years we talked to Harvard and Radcliffe deans, faculty, students, and Overseers. We solicited Radcliffe alumnae and soon had a group of almost 2,000 supporters. While there were many issues

on our agenda, we agreed that the central concern was the paucity of tenured women on Harvard's faculty. We created a junior faculty fellowship for a nontenured woman on the Harvard faculty and attempted to draw attention to our goals through seminars, mailings, and an occasional *Crimson* article, but we needed to do something more dramatic. With the help of a wealthy Radcliffe alumna, we therefore set up an escrow account and asked all Radcliffe alumnae and targeted Harvard alumni to contribute their gifts to the account rather than to the Harvard Campaign. The money would be distributed to Harvard when some specified changes had occurred.

The escrow account was dynamite. The response to our press release exceeded our expectations. Articles soon appeared in *Newsweek*, the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Women in Higher Education*, and the *Boston Globe*, *Washington Post*, *New York Times*, and *San Juan Star*. We were even featured on CBS television news in Boston. Harvard and Radcliffe finally took notice. Whether they approved of our actions or not, at least they knew we existed, and over time we were invited to meetings, lunches, and dinners with administrators and donors.

In the next few years, we expanded our activities. With grants from two foundations and a supportive Harvard alumnus, we held a national invitational academic conference, the proceedings of which were published in a book. Although we were pleased with our accomplishments, change at Harvard was glacial. More women were being tenured, but Harvard still lagged behind most other universities.

Then one day everything changed. Provost Harvey Fineberg called to announce that Radcliffe College was about to become the Radcliffe Institute of Advanced Study.

While the new Radcliffe Institute would have a “commitment to women, gender, and society,” it was unclear what that meant. We were uncertain whether women would now play a greater role at Harvard or whether they would be marginalized as in the past.

When Radcliffe acting dean Mary Dunn suggested that we might give our escrow account to the Institute, we refused because we were told that the Institute would have no professors tenured at Harvard. The turning point came one afternoon when I was startled by a phone call from Mary Dunn. She wanted me to speak to incoming dean Drew Faust, and she had alerted Drew that I would probably call in the next few days. I spoke to her that evening and by the end of our conversation, I was won over. She saw the crucial need to increase Harvard's women faculty and had negotiated that there would be some joint tenured appointments at Harvard and the Radcliffe Institute. She further assured me that she shared our goals of advancing women's equality in the Harvard community. A few months later she convinced the rest of the committee, and we unanimously voted to give the Institute the escrow money.

I was immediately put in touch with Ellen LaFollette 1954, who had raised money from two alumnae groups in California, and together we launched a campaign for the Radcliffe Alumnae Professorship, a joint professorship between the Radcliffe Institute and the Harvard Faculty of Arts and Sciences. With the help of alumna Carol Pforzheimer, Mary Dunn, and the Radcliffe Development Office and a matching grant from Harvard, we not only endowed the professorship but we have also provided substantial seed money to endow a new junior faculty fellowship.

A few weeks ago, I resigned as cochair of the Committee for the Equality of Women at Harvard. I am content that I found the community of women that eluded me in my undergraduate years at Radcliffe, and with them I may have moved Harvard a few steps along the road to women's equality. Gloria Steinem once wrote, "One day, an army

of gray-haired women may quietly take over the earth.” Perhaps she is right, but I believe that it is now up to younger women to complete the revolution.