

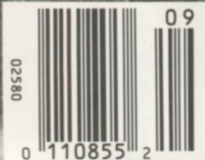
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# Tales of the Prep Schools

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M O N T H L Y





# WORLD WITHOUT END

*The cubicles are gone, the girls are everywhere, they call the masters "teachers." But in most ways Groton — the archetypal New England boarding school — is still Groton.*

BY JOHN SEDGWICK

GROTON HAS never claimed to be the finest prep school in the country, or the most elite. To indulge in such superlatives would be gloating, and that would be, as the students say, "very un-Groton."

Nevertheless, by objective measures, the Groton School is right up there in every category. The SSAT scores of its students are sky-high (eighty-ninth percentile), even though the admissions department would never be so bland as to select solely for IQ. At \$13,900 a year Groton is among the most expensive secondary schools in the nation. With just 320 students, it is smaller than most of its elite competitors. Its graduates are American luminaries (Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Averell Harriman, and McGeorge Bundy among them). Its alumni are so devoted — and rich — as to have forked over a \$57 million endowment, making Groton one of the most highly capitalized schools per student in the country. Half the senior class routinely matriculates at Ivy League colleges or their equivalents. And the place has acquired enough lore and tradition over its 104-year history to give its image a sepia tint: the zebra-striped football jerseys, the cubicles, the English nomenclature ("sixth form," not senior class), the singing of "Blue Bottles" on the school's birthday.

But such facts and figures fail to say very much about Groton. For Groton is less a school than a utopian community. Like New Harmony or Brook Farm of the last century, it aspires to achievements that not only are unquantifiable, but are considered faintly ridiculous by the world at large. "I always get nervous when people ask me

the number of Groton graduates in the State Department," says Headmaster William Polk, himself a member of the class of '58, "because that's not what the school's about." What is the school about? "This school is about character. It's a word that went out of favor in the sixties. That's too bad. It's a good word. It means people living life with integrity, caring about those around them."

Character — good Lord. Polk says the word with nearly religious conviction.

ONE OF THE ODD THINGS about Groton is that no matter how proud graduates might be of the place, they are still generally reluctant to admit they went there. So stand back for a full confession. I went to Groton myself. I am either a good Grotonian or another "snotty Grottie," depending on your point of view. I spent five years of my life there, starting the fall that *Hair* opened off-Broadway and finishing a few weeks before the Watergate break-in. As you might imagine, it was more than a little strange to spend the Age of Aquarius in a prep school. We grew our hair long, smoked dope, dropped acid (well, not me but . . .), challenged the administration on everything from the school dress code to mandatory breakfast, and went through two headmasters. Of the fifty students in our class, sixteen got kicked out (although, to be sure, some of them were reinstated in time for graduation). Still, I loved the place.

Groton likes to think of itself as family; for me, it really was. Sedgwicks had been going to Groton for so long it seemed like some inevitable rite of passage on the way to manhood, like learning to play football or buying a suit.

When I first arrived at the school in the fall of 1967 and discovered the Georgian brick buildings arrayed around the lawn called the Circle, and the high-towered Gothic chapel, I felt oddly that I was coming home. I recognized the buildings — Hundred House, School House, Brooks House — from our family's dinner plates, and I knew the chapel from a watercolor that my father had painted as a boy in the class of '17 and later had hung in my bedroom.

My father had taught at Groton for two years after graduating from Harvard, served on the board of trustees for thirty-five, and married the founder's daughter, Helen Peabody. She died in 1948; my father married my mother a few years later. When I arrived, I found my "Aunt Helen's" name prominently inscribed on the chapel wall with the motto, "Of Such Is the Kingdom of Heaven." My father's brother, my uncle Halla, had died of pneumonia when he was a sixth-former in 1914.

The night Halla died, the family gathered around his bed at the school infirmary, kneeling in prayer, while the school's founder, my father's future in-law the Rector Endicott Peabody, stood over them. My grandfather later wrote of seeing the coffin of his son, whom he called Harry, in the Groton chapel:

He looked very handsome as he lay there in his white linen, with sprigs of many coloured snapdragon about him. . . . The coffin was covered with a deep red pall, and lay in the chapel. A dim light was burning as Minturn [my father] and I went in to bid good night. . . . The chapel looked solemn and beautiful, full of traditional feeling, and of Harry's sentiment for it. Horatio's words burned themselves into me:

Good night, Sweet Prince;  
And flights of Angels sing thee to thy rest.

Halla's name is inscribed on the chapel wall, too. And, now, so is my father's.

Familiar as I found Groton, it was nonetheless a queer place by any objective standard. While it was undeniably a training ground for the privileged, it was also, as the Harvard sociologist David Riesman once observed, the most egalitarian of schools, since no matter how rich you were, once you entered Groton's gates you suffered equally with everyone else. From the highest prefect to the lowest new boy, we all washed out of identical plastic tubs placed in long soapstone sinks, studied at identical folding desks, utilized identical doorless toilet stalls, wore nearly identical clothes, and roomed in identical archaic quarters called cubicles.

Those cubicles! Each one amounted to a kind of horse stall off a wide central hallway. Each was barely six by ten, with a saggy cast-iron bed, a pine bureau, a small window, a kind of bath mat for a rug, and exactly six hooks on the wall on which to hang your clothes. Like the doorless toilet stalls, the cubicle made almost no concession to a boy's need for privacy: The side walls were mere baffles; the cubicle had no ceiling of its own; and a plain curtain replaced the expected door. But at Groton the whole idea was to live entirely communally — no less communally, in fact, than in a hippie commune. We ate together, studied together in a giant study hall each night, worshiped

together in the chapel every morning before class and twice on Sundays, played sports together, and, with only those flimsy curtains to separate us, virtually slept together.

At Groton we were all brothers. And our collective father was the school's founder, the Rector. He had died a quarter-century before we arrived, but he continued to loom over the school like the Old Testament God. You can't possibly speak of Groton without mentioning the Rector.

Now, there was a man. A Sargent portrait that hangs in the dining room conveys much of the imperiousness of his nature, as he stands cloaked in his ministerial robes, arms confidently folded across his barrel chest, his immense hands tucked in the folds of his gown, his back straight, his eyes fixed on eternal principles. The picture lacks only his voice, which was perhaps his most distinctive characteristic. It was, according to his biographer, "not British, but neither was it ordinary American; it was peculiar to him; full-throated, pleasant, impressive, delightful. When exploding in anger it had in it the feel of heavy artillery." More than one boy, on hearing he had been summoned to the Rector's study, hoped that a relative had died.

The Rector had been schooled in England, where he acquired many of his educational ideas, and, after a stint bringing Episcopalianism to the citizens of Tombstone, Arizona, he founded Groton in 1884 at the age of twenty-seven. It is hard to imagine that the Rector was ever that young. Despite his youth, from the beginning he ran the school as if it were his family, and he the stern Victorian father. He intentionally held the school enrollment to 180 so that he could know all his "sons" personally. And he guided them to manhood by his example. Hoisting dumbbells, he led the entire school in calisthenics on the Circle every morning; he carved the roast at the head table at dinner; he read *A Christmas Carol* to the boys before the holidays; and he shook hands with all of them before they retired for bed at night.

The students continued to be sons long after graduation. President Roosevelt dutifully invited the Rector to administer communion to his cabinet before his inauguration. Later Roosevelt confided to an intimate, "You know, I'm still scared of him." When FDR came back to Groton for the school's fiftieth birthday, the school had counseled everyone to call him Mr. President, but as soon as he arrived, the Rector's wife swept down to embrace him as though he were still a schoolboy. "Franklin," she said, "we're so glad you're back." But there were limits to Mr. Peabody's fatherly pride: He voted for Hoover.

WHEN I CALLED the Rector's fifth successor, Headmaster William Polk, to ask if I could come to see what Groton was like these days, he expressed no reservations about letting me snoop around. He merely requested that I spend as much time as I could, since, he said, it can take a while to sweep away misconceptions about Groton, even for an old boy like myself. When I arrived, he put me up on the third floor of his Headmaster's House. A row of cubicles



**“Groton has always viewed the world with some disdain, as a place of sorrow and temptation.”**

had once been installed here for nostalgic alumni, but the cubes had now been turned into conventional bedrooms, all of them, I noticed, furnished with twin beds. From my corner room, I came and went for three days like Marley’s ghost.

Once I had gotten back to the old campus, at the outskirts of the town of Groton, in Massachusetts, I felt I had never left. As always, Groton looked like a pretty little English village, its Georgian brick buildings dominated by the soaring chapel. But when I saw the students, and talked to them, I knew that the Rector had finally died. I thought at times that a neutron bomb had struck the place, devastating customs but leaving the bricks and mortar intact. Worse, I felt somewhat responsible. The school had enacted all of the changes I had argued for so vociferously as a student radical — coeducation had come in, formality had gone out. And now, as I wandered about the campus eyeing the girls, hearing masters called “teachers,” and hardly ever seeing a necktie, I kept thinking: *Surely you didn’t take me seriously.*

To me, Groton looked more like a camp than a campus, and I was amazed by the informality of the place. “Look about you,” said Robert Gula, a classical pianist and one-time sprinter who teaches Greek, geometry, and English,

with a sweep of his hand about the dining hall. “We are a school at ease.”

You sure are. Why, there are *girls* here. Girls — at Groton! In quantity! If they had turned the chapel upside down, the effect could not have been more astounding. Girls — everywhere you looked: rounding the Circle, sitting in class, singing in chapel, playing basketball in the gym, slouched in the dorms. Girls with high voices, with their textbooks hugged to their chests, with beautiful long hair, with . . . Well, you know girls. Everybody knows girls. *But I did not know girls* — not at Groton anyway. Seeing them now, I kept wanting to nudge the nearest guy and say — hey, did you see what I just saw? But, of course, he wouldn’t have seen anything. For, after thirteen years of coeducation, Groton has grown so used to girls, no one even sees them as girls any more. They are merely students. I’m the weirdo, some kind of bizarre relic from the class of ’72.

And when the girls moved in, my Groton moved out. To be sure, for a school that had made such a virtue of manliness (“muscular Christianity” was what we had been taught to call it), Groton has accommodated itself to the presence of girls remarkably graciously. Indeed, they have practically taken over, feminizing it in mysterious ways.



**"I can see how the world views Groton: as unreal, magical, and like all magical things, naive."**

What was once cold and hard is now soft and warm.

Think of this: A full-time psychological counselor has set up shop in the School House just down the hall from the classroom I had dreaded most. I had taken second-form French there from Richard "Block" Pleasants (so named for his massive cranium). The counselor, Ms. Burch Ford, moved right in with a shag rug, orange tapestries, three cozy chairs, and a Kleenex box. In contrast to the booming voices of all the "real" teachers, Ford speaks in a near whisper, and her eyes radiate motherly concern. She says she considered an office in the infirmary, but decided that location didn't possess the right "implications." "Besides," she says, "I like to think of therapy as an educational experience." Nearly a quarter of the school called on her last year, and, for the first time in her ten-year tenure, more boys than girls did so. A common complaint she hears is that students feel like total failures in a school full of well-adjusted, athletic, popular, attractive geniuses.

Popular as therapy may be, it is still not socially acceptable at Groton to be thought to have . . . problems. So Ford is discreet about arranging her appointments. Students merely X off the space on the schedule posted outside her door, then show up a few minutes after classes

start, so they don't have to worry about being spotted in the hall. She deliberately makes an effort to know everyone in the school, so that heads won't turn if she greets someone by name in the hall.

Or imagine this: Daily chapel in this church school has been transformed from a brief liturgical service into something closer to an encounter-group session. Along with a hymn and a prayer, the service features a student or teacher standing up at the pulpit to deliver what is often a remarkably personal talk. "Speakers' Corner," one faculty member put it, intending no criticism. And, whereas we had always pretty much slept through the chaplains' homilies, the whole school listens with rapt attention. "Chapel talks are sacred here," said one student without irony.

On one morning during my visit, one student got up and, dropping references to Twisted Sister, Ed McMahon, and Jack Kerouac, confided that he had tried to commit suicide two years previously. He even joked about it, claiming to have called the suicide prevention team but gotten a wrong number. "Oh, I can't do *anything* right," he wailed.

The confessional urge has grown so widespread that it is considered surprising when people choose to keep their feelings private. When the son of a widowed faculty

member died, the students kept waiting for the woman to give a talk about the experience. They felt a little hurt when she never did.

And my cubicle was gone! My fifth-form cubicle in Mr. Sackett's dorm had turned into a double room, with comic book posters and everything, looking out on a new common space called The Mall (so named because, with its exposed brick, it looked like a new age department store). Cubicles remained for the lower-schoolers, but they were cubicles in name only, with blond wood and earth-toned designer curtains. Boys and girls both have cubicles; the only difference is that the girls decorate theirs with stuffed animals, the boys with posters of Arnold Schwarzenegger.

As part of the general trend toward ease and comfort, the jacket-and-tie dress code of my day has been eliminated for all occasions except sit-down dinners, Sunday chapel, and, curiously, away games. Anything but athletic garb and blue jeans is allowed, and, perhaps inevitably, in determining their own sartorial code the students have dropped exactly to the lowest permissible point. This is not the fabled chinos-and-Weejuns Preppy Look, but what one student termed "the potato sack look." It consisted for the most part of baggy sweaters, loose pants, mussed hair, and grubby sneakers. This was rumpled chic — anything was wearable as long as it looked as if it had been rotting at the bottom of a laundry bag for six months. The designer craze sweeping through suburban high schools had obviously given Groton a wide berth. One student said that the girls bring lots of Laura Ashley dresses with them when they first come to school, but that the dresses all disappear before the end of the first semester, never to return. "I don't know what happens to them," she mused. "I guess it's like, why bother? Everyone knows you so well, it doesn't matter what you look like. Besides, you're in such a rush, you don't have a chance to get dressed up. You just roll out of bed and roll into class."

On my visit, the only student to depart very markedly from the unofficial dress code was a fifth-former named Katya Fels, who dressed Gothic Punk, an alarming ensemble of blackened eyes, blue lips, a black scarf over her head like a shroud and, some days, tiny human skeletons for earrings. Her classmates occasionally tittered, but Katya didn't understand why. "I'm doing this because this is who I am," she said. She had nevertheless received considerable attention, if only because she was the only student to cultivate any discernable eccentricity. (Faculty members had to think for a while to recall the last political dissident on campus. They remembered Carter Bundy, a boy who had graduated three years before, but they couldn't remember what he'd advocated.) Still, to Katya's credit, and to Groton's, she had changed her appearance only slightly over the years. Last fall, she stopped dyeing her hair blue.

Even the faculty had, for the most part, gone casual. The administration's second in command, Peter Camp, dressed in old khakis and shabby sneakers, as if he were about to paint his house. Appropriately, I suppose, the only faculty members to maintain the old dress-up standards were in the classics department.

Along with coats and ties, a lot of the old English public-school formality is gone, too. Students are called by their first names. (That may not sound surprising, but we never called anyone by a first name; they hardly existed. I spent five years of my life as Sedgwick. On those rare occasions when Grotties wished to convey intimacy, they shortened your last name into a nickname — Sedge, inevitably, was mine.) More amazing still, besides calling masters teachers, the students sometimes address teachers by their first names. To me, about the chummiest term available for a master was "Sir." I don't think I heard that word once while I was on campus. Groton, for the first time, seemed like a normal place.

There was a far more diversified student body in evidence than in my day. I remember Ethel Kennedy refused to send a son to Groton because so few of the students' names were unpronounceable. I doubt she would have such problems today, were she to scan the list of the current second form, with Dagon Chen, Tony Tuan Minh Huynh, and Aleksandra Tatur Maliszewski. Although nearly a third of the students are legacies, the only descendant of any of the students from my day was Jerine Gadsden, the daughter of Jeremiah Gadsden, a black kid from New York City who had been a sixth-former when I arrived.

Groton seemed like a *nice* place now. I've never been said hello to by so many strangers as I was during my visit. Perhaps more important, instead of the subtle (and not-so-subtle) put-downs that so frequently spiced conversation when I was there, the prevailing tone is now supportive and kindly. One faculty member reported that students sometimes come up to him and say, "You look really tired; are you okay?" And when a sixth-former gets into a top college now, the halls ring with excited congratulations.

Sixth-form prefects' traditional role as campus policemen has changed into something closer to den mothers. They now take it as their duty to ease the transition for youngsters coming to the school, rather than expecting them to tough it out as they had with me. They try to console dorm members who are experiencing troubles at home, as many are. And they hardly ever give out black marks anymore. "It's considered a failure on your part if you have to give a black mark," one prefect told me. "You didn't make it clear how the student is supposed to behave."

Possibly out of respect for the girls, a major effort was under way to take the machismo out of the masculine ideal. The school chaplain, Jack Smith, was outraged that one of his advisees was getting into so many fights on the JV hockey team. "Are you *that* afraid of your femininity?" he wanted to ask the boy. At the same time, he was pleased to see that the girls were taking the sissiness out of femininity, and applauded at one girls' varsity basketball game when the girls fought for loose balls. My old football coach, Jake Congleton, is one of the most ardent feminists on campus, and the first one to catch you out for making a sexist remark. (There are lapses nonetheless. I heard that one boy greeted a girl (*continued on page 106*)

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## GROTON

(continued from page 57) not long ago by saying, "Hey, your breasts are looking pretty perky today.") Congleton had been pressing for years to get a girl elected senior prefect — the Groton equivalent of senior class president — but was continually frustrated by the fact that, while girls would vote for boys, boys would not vote for girls. No girl, consequently, had ever made it. Finally the school solved the problem by instituting dual elections — one to elect a male and one to elect a female.

Of course the girls have brought something else to campus: sex. Groton makes no explicit rules about sexual behavior, but has written plenty of rules to make sex difficult. Although boys and girls are allowed to visit each other in their dorm rooms one hour per evening, they have to leave the door open.

For all the mingling of boys and girls on campus, by most estimates only ten percent are actually "going out." Partly this is a matter of definition. At a boarding school such as Groton there is no place to "go out" to — you can't leave campus for a movie or a hamburger. So going out instead involves a rather subtle behavioral shift in which a couple allow themselves to be seen together during their brief moments of free time.

Far more than any rules the school might make, the students themselves have established a social code that severely restricts sexual activity. Although friendships between the genders are common enough, for romantic pursuits, boys and girls regard each other warily. Girls are especially suspicious of a boy's overtures toward them. And girls know better than to initiate anything themselves for fear of being regarded as wanton. As a result, the relationships between boys and girls resemble that between brothers and sisters: friendly, often jocular, but carefully distanced.

So Groton had loosened up, but had it really changed? One of my old bow-tied classics masters, Warren Myers, had just finished handing out the recess cookies, which he had done for the last few years, when he came up to me. "*Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*," he said with a shrug. Quite so. Different cookie distribution system, but the same cookies, and the same cookie tin.

I RECOGNIZED that the things that made Groton Groton were still there: the classical education, with its required Latin; the regular chapel; the many sports; the concern with doing well in everything. But other, subtler characteristics also tipped me off that today's Grotonians were my brothers — and sisters — too.

For instance, like me, all Groton kids regard bragging as a heinous sin. One new girl claimed to be a terrific soccer player — and then proved little better than average. She was duly ostracized. "The coolest kids are the quietest ones," said another girl. "That's what Groton really likes, the ones who are really quiet, but really good. That's so true here!"

Such reticence is a standard WASP value, but in Groton's case it trickles down to the students from the school's own emphasis on education — an emphasis that is never stated, merely assumed. The education is not showy, but the standards are high, and the teachers are good. I sat in on a sixth-form English class on fantasy in fiction with Judith Klau, the chair of the English department. Klau conducted most of the session while sitting cozily on her desktop, her legs dangling in front of her. She was much less daunting and much more familial than the masters of my day (one Latin instructor routinely threatened to chuck his students into "the Black Hole of Calcutta" if they flubbed a translation); but she was just as knowledgeable, and probably more inspiring. As she spoke, Klau paused occasionally to let the students fill in the blanks of her discussion, which they eagerly did. One student had brought in a chess set to elucidate the many chess moves in *Alice in Wonderland*, which the class had just finished studying. Others acted out scenes from the book. The class was more casual than usual, since it was the last one before the end of term, but I was impressed by the intellectual and emotional energy that students and teacher brought to the occasion. When it was over, Klau sang out to her departing students: "Farewell, my darlings!"

No matter how much Groton students care about their grades, they never talk about them. Instead, a code has developed by which one can communicate how well one did without directly saying so: Having done "well" means over 85, "all right" means 75 to 85, and "badly" means under 75.



Everyone was aghast last fall when the results of the fifth-formers' PSAT tests were left, presumably by accident, in a stack in the hall *with the scores right out in the open*. "That was *really* un-Groton," said one girl. "I was shocked."

But this code of silence also reflects the importance of trying to remain somehow unknowable, of always holding your truest self slightly out of reach. This probably stems from Groton's group living, where, as one student said, "everyone is totally into everyone else's life." In such a place, it can be satisfying to confound people with the quirks of your character. "You know what the worst thing is?" one girl said to me. "It's to have somebody look right at you and feel they know you through and through. I *hate* that." And, more deeply, Grotties may simply resist being typecast as Muffy and Chip. So Grotonians are full of surprises. Sixth-former Mike Nickson plays tackle on the football team, but he also wears an earring in his left ear, is spending winter term studying in France, and plans to learn Arabic in college.

IN AN OFT-QUOTED LINE from the school prayer, Grotonians beseech the Lord to keep them "forever unspotted from the world." Groton has always viewed the world with some disdain, as a place full of sorrow and temptation. When I was a boy, one of the chaplains would sometimes make a kind of prayer by reading the headlines from *The New York Times* — "Twelve Die in Houston Sniper's Shooting Spree"; "Vietnam Death Toll Tops 50,000" — while we kneeled in silence. The idea was that the world was inherently woeful. Now that I have been out in the world a while, I can see how it views Groton: as unreal, magical, and, like all magical things, naive. And, in this, I have to say that the world may be right.

After the Rector retired, he lived across the road from the school, and, keen to continue his education, he audited a Groton American history class taught by the dedicated master Richard Irons. One day Irons happened to mention that five percent of the American population controlled seventy percent of the country's wealth. The Rector looked quite shaken by the information. "This is very disturbing," he told Irons. "This is very disturbing." Apparently, he'd had no idea. There are differences between rich and poor, but, around the Circle at least,

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Groton acknowledges none of them.

In fairness, Groton's scholarship program is still one of the most progressive in the nation. And Groton was one of the first secondary schools to admit blacks, which it did in 1952. Yet blacks have never been perfectly assimilated. In my day, they formed an Afro-American Society and kept almost entirely to themselves. Now, the Afro-American Society has given way to the Alliance for Student Harmony. But the kids from Harlem still have little in common with the kids from Grosse Pointe. Some of Groton's black students speak two languages on campus — jive among themselves and Grotonian English the rest of the time.

Though Groton's attempts to reduce class consciousness are certainly noble, they also make the school a kind of refuge in a world that has other ideas. Only at Groton can students feel completely comfortable being Grotties. Outside the school's gates, the class ramifications of that designation loom. Nearly all Grotonians instinctively conceal the identity of their school from strangers. "You find yourself downplaying it," said one sixth-former. Explained another: "You want to show you're a real person first. If you come right out with 'I go to Groton,' then you're a step behind."

Groton avoids class conflict in part by virtually banishing money from campus. Students sign for books and athletic equipment, and there is just about nothing else for sale. One boy said that two quarters are more desirable on campus than a pair of ten dollar bills; you can use the quarters at the school's one Coke machine.

So flush themselves, proper Grotonians act surprised that others should value money so keenly. There was an incident of theft in one dorm not too long ago, and it was considered shocking not because \$200 was taken, but because someone cared about money that much.

Moreover, Groton is bound together by a common definition of honor. There are only four serious offenses at the school — lying, cheating, stealing, and drinking or taking drugs. All of them violate the cohesive trust on which Groton's social order depends. But the worst by far is lying. A few weeks before I arrived, seventeen students had broken curfew and sneaked into a girl's dorm at two A.M. The most disturbing aspect of

the incident was the rumor that one of the ringleaders had refused to confess. "At Choate," one student explained, "they ask if you were drinking, and then if you say no they give you a Breathalyzer. At Groton, they just ask you."

The world may be going to hell, as the campus consensus has it, but Groton doesn't have to tag along. "Being a church school means we don't buy this culture," says chaplain Jack Smith. "We don't want students to feel they have to accept the values that society offers if those are corrupt values. I mean, look what's out there: materialism, selfishness, you name it. But here the ethos is different; at least I hope it is."

*Ethos* is a Groton word. I hadn't heard it for years, probably not since I graduated. But I heard it over and over while I was visiting, from students and faculty alike. It is what makes Groton so utopian. For all its high academic standards, the school has always cared much more about its students' souls than their minds, and it continuously scrutinizes the community for signs of sexism, racism, materialism, snobbery. When I tweaked Smith for this liberal high-mindedness, he fired right back: "Well, maybe it *is* liberal, but what the hell?"

It is one thing to establish high moral standards, and quite another to get students to accept them, and in this Groton has been remarkably successful. Over half the student body participates in the Groton Community Service program, working in a nearby homeless shelter or at a hospital for handicapped children. If a student really wants to upset a teacher, he might taunt him by saying, "Well, I'm just going to go out and make a lot of money!" And, as a teacher pointed out, nobody comes back to school, puffs out his chest, and says, "Hey, I make 80K."

"At Groton, you can't pretend to be anybody you're not," said one student. This is the ultimate consequence of Groton's openness, its open cubicles and open chapel talks: Everyone can see right into you. I asked a prefect how he would feel if he heard that a classmate had gotten into a much better college than anyone had expected. "No different," he said. "We'd think it was a mistake."

Groton, in short, is still family. If the school has changed, it may be because the nature of the family has changed. The

all-powerful Victorian father has been toppled, and his authority ceded to his wife and children. A gentler, more maternal attitude prevails, by which love is more important than order. Daughters are now the equal of sons.

All this is happening at Groton. Even the headmaster has become less headmasterly, operating far more by consensus and far less by fiat. Disciplinary matters, once solely within his purview, are now decided by a committee of students and faculty. The headmaster's role is merely to approve or disapprove its recommendations.

Compared with the Rector, the current headmaster, William Polk, is not at all an overpowering personality. While the Rector was tall and golden-haired, Polk is short and bald. "I'm not terrifying," he says. "And I don't want to be." He has not been afraid to be openly emotional, a few times in chapel nearly to the point of tears. Students do not shrink from him in the corridor. "I think I'm a teacher figure for them," he says.

Polk's own Groton career was, significantly, "not entirely bliss." He'd been at Groton exactly five days as a first-former when the headmaster brought him into his study and told him his father had died. And he was in almost daily detention because his marks were routinely at the bottom of the class. Yet he was a splendid athlete, despite his small size, and was elected senior prefect. Shortly after graduation, classmates started calling him Headmaster.

His style represents much of the new Groton. He is low-key, physically unprepossessing, and no great enthusiast about rules. But his sky blue eyes, set deep in their sockets, can pierce you, and his bass voice resonates with an impressive fervor as he speaks the greater truths that Groton has always espoused. At Groton, the Rector is still God, and Polk is his prophet. As Groton headmasters have done for 104 years, he speaks of trust and faith and honor and service to one's fellowman. "It may sound simplistic," he says, "but we teach the values of how a person is going to live, and what you are going to do with your life. We are a prep school in the sense of the old cliché. We are a preparation for life." ~

*John Sedgwick wrote about the Maine Caribou Project in the April issue.*

## WOODS HOLE

(continued from page 51) Wherever two, or better three, men convene, talk breaks out. It's man-and-the-sea talk, with heavy bullshitting and a faint ironic edge, because everyone knows this is a good berth, not like some tanker in the Gulf, a parking lot gone to sea in a hot fog, not like a naval vessel with its infinite and unsuppressible hierarchies. The scientists leaven the dialogue with their own brands of strangeness. No longer just a steady conversational diet of engines, sports, weather, the physical goodness of women, food, and more goodness; scientists add electronics and geophysics and academic gossip and their odd nooks of knowledge and then, of course, they turn again to the usual subjects. When the lights in the galley have gone down at night and the amazing shrimp rolls we had for lunch are just a memory and the only sound is the thrum of the diesels and the gurgling of the fountainized fruit-drink machine, who knows what exotic talk will get talked? It begins like this: "When I was cruising the Northwest Passage . . ." and ends in a rupturing belly laugh. Then it gets serious with nodding and acumen. This goes on forever, players changing hourly.

DRIFTING between black sea and black sky, the *Endeavor* looks like an incandescent iceberg. Our fourth and last night aboard ship has come, and we are working urgently under outside spots. The ship's white deck and hull gleam to the distraction of ocean birds, and, in the pool of light that falls from the crane, schools of squid glance back and forth. An occasional dorado enters the circle. The captain has told us we have until midnight to conclude our tests, and then the ship must begin the long steam back to its home port at Narragansett. I did not expect such a Cinderella finish.

The last two days have gone well enough, a mix of successes and failures. The soundness of the scope's design has been confirmed, but a nagging problem waits to be solved. In the early tests, the scope went down with only blasting caps attached. Now, on each run it descends fully armed: For every barrel there are two caps, thirty meters of Primacord, and a five-pound charge of PETN (pentaerythritol tetranitrate). The

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