

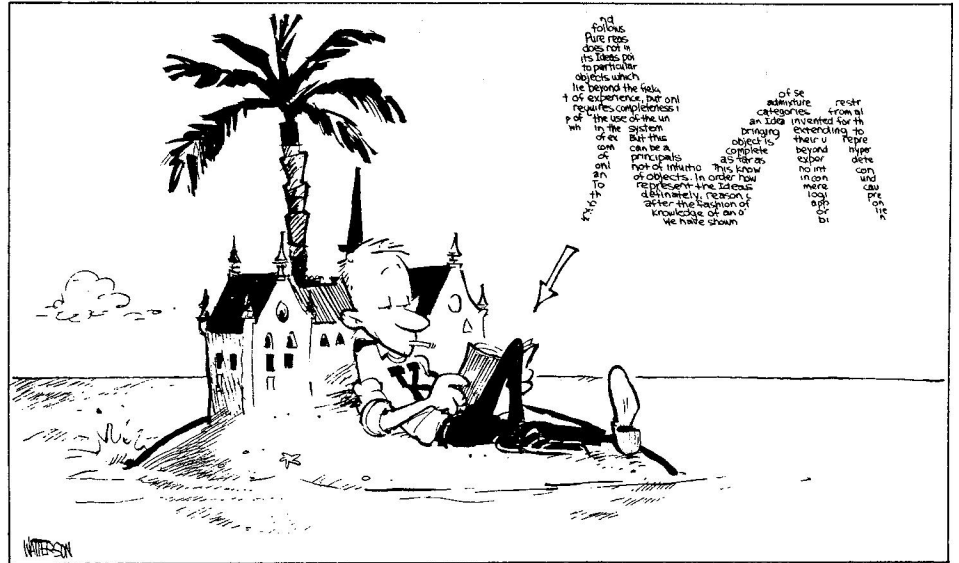
# Class Reunion

by P. F. Kluge '64

I am foolish about reunions, and I take my folly seriously. I cannot believe that I will sink much further into middle age and not see the girl — Joan Pitney, wherever you are — who broke my high-school heart, or the English teacher who advised me against false modesty ("It's only conceit when you fail"), or the debate-club heavyweight against whom I vainly contended, in a mock parliament, that "Red" China ought to be admitted to the United Nations. From college days there are godlike athletes and dormitory stand-up comedians and world-class drunks I wonder about, and some professors — dead or retired, who knows? — I would go way out of my way for another word with. Because we have scores to settle, measures left to take, and too many things unsaid, I never pass up a reunion. Even a reunion at Kenyon College.

My wife, a chagrined veteran of my twentieth high-school reunion, elects not to accompany me, and I share a College shuttle bus from Columbus to Gambier, Ohio, with a retired doctor who hasn't seen the campus in half a century. "Most of us are dead, of course," he says. Twenty years is the length of my diaspora: too short a span to celebrate survival, but high time for reappraisal. John Kennedy was assassinated on the Friday of Fall Dance Weekend, senior year. We watched dormitory TVs as Ed Sullivan welcomed the Beatles, and we doubted they'd last. And the Playmate of the Month whom I have just admired in the airport gift shop had not been born . . .

In May, Gambier is very much the happy rural seat that Kenyon's founder, Bishop Philander Chase, envisioned. It looks the way I wish I could remember it: flowering trees, emerald lawns, gravel paths that are promenades for tomorrow's graduates and their parents. It's a heady, congratulatory time, not only for students, but also for an institution that is proud of the way it has changed. My attention is directed to new dormitories



and commons, swimming pool and tennis courts, theater and renovated field house. And even as I nod appreciation at this and that, I look past these . . . impositions . . . for the College that was. That's the place I wonder about. With reason.

In 1964, Kenyon College was one of a dwindling species: the all-male liberal arts college. All male, as in no girls on campus. All male, as in no girls in town. All male, as in the nearest coeducational college was thirty miles away and the nearest all-female college, Lake Erie College for Women (otherwise known as Lake College for Erie Women) more than ninety. I had four dates in four years at Kenyon, all involving logistics a little less elaborate than a hostage rescue mission, and none of them was very successful.

Since leaving, I have wondered about those four horny, cloistered years. Did they prepare me or disable me for the life that (eventually) followed? Impoverish or enrich? Coeducation is far down on anyone's list of burning issues, even at Kenyon, which admitted women a few years after I graduated. Four years at an all-male school is an experience that I would not defend, repeat, or recommend. Nevertheless, I feel peculiarly attached to it, and to the men who shared

it with me. Those late nights, those long winters, flushed out eccentricity, talent, humor, cruelty. What became of the burly Deke, whom I fought, rolling in the dormitory hallway, for a tiny triangle of Gruyère cheese he had stolen from my room? Will I see him again? Or the drama department star who was going to be our Olivier, or the commons hall headwaiter who wrote sneaky, funky poetry about the back alleys of Baltimore, or the premed grind who wondered — sincerely, solemnly — why I read D. H. Lawrence while *he* was curing cancer? Or the cape-wearing wastrel, fresh from a year in Europe, who told me I wasn't a gentleman unless I contracted clap three times before the age of twenty-one? How do they look back on their days among the cornfields and orchards of Knox County, Ohio? As a Devil's Island? Or a Magic Mountain?

For years, I wouldn't have admitted that the argument had two sides. An all-male school in rural Ohio was, per se, monastic and grotesque. Four years! Youth! It comes back to me now as I walk through my freshman dormitory. It is waxed and scrubbed to receive graduates' parents, but the scent of winter mud and masturbation lingers nonetheless, and I see traces of Scotch tape on dresser

Illustrations by Bill Watterson '80

mirrors where pictures of high-school flames were plastered (in my day isolated Kenyon undergrads turned women into foreign correspondents). I see the hallway telephone, scratched and carved, the receiver worn smooth by generations of sweaty palms, and I recall wondering how to signal my hardworking parents long-distance that their scholarship boy was flirting with a four-point average but not getting laid: Mom, Pop, this isn't like *The Student Prince*! And in the dormitory lounge another discovery awaits, for this is the last place, anywhere, that I stayed up all night to work — "throwing an all-nighter." I remember the forlorn companionship of many other all-nighter devotees, stalking the halls for bullshit, card games, and stashed food, because everyone knew that throwing all-nighters, simply staying awake, was ample sacrifice. You didn't actually have to study. Knowledge, past 2:00 a.m., came by osmosis.

I walk into the College commons, Peirce Hall, wondering how it is that stone and wood and disinfectant give a building a smell as distinctive as a fingerprint. Dining tables and stained-glass windows and paintings of College presidents and benefactors, a whole gallery of them, are unchanged, and so are my memories of the comely wife of the man who ran the food service, making her way toward the kitchen, strutting her stuff, undressed by half a thousand eyes, imaginarily gang-raped among the veal cutlets and the Jell-O molds. And lunch! After twenty years I still can't say "lunch" with a straight face, for at the Kenyon of my era, "lunch" wasn't food; it was vomit, copiously disgorged on spring and fall dance weekends. A lunch was *thrown, blown,*

*arched, festooned, or garlanded,* depending on its trajectory and target. And what about the end of dance weekend, down at the railroad trestle at the foot of the hill? Like a dog returning to mark a special tree, I jog past the trestle, remembering how dance-weekend diehards assembled there — the drunk, the dateless, the bird-dogged dregs — to drink "milk punch" (booze, milk, and sugar) and elect the "asshole of the year." It's a prize that we all, one way or another, richly deserved (the valuable lesson of four years among men-only is that everybody, sooner or later, is an asshole).

I have spent several days wondering which of my classmates will appear at what amounts to a memorial service for a place that no longer exists. When I'm handed the list of returning alumni, suspense yields to disappointment. More than a hundred of us graduated; about two dozen have returned.

When what there is of us assembles for a group picture, I feel like a veteran of a far-off war, lost and probably not worth fighting in the first place. That evening we gather for a reception and a small dinner (mystery meat, of course: College food services are forever). My companions are not the eccentrics I have wondered about. For the most part, they are students-I-sort-of-knew, whom time has turned into doctors, dentists, lawyers, businessmen. The exception is a classmate, a fellow English major, who returned to teach at Kenyon. In him, enthusiasm for today's coed college mingles with nostalgia for the all-male place that exhilarated and embittered everyone who knew it. ("When they brought in the girls they said they were worried about the impact on standards,"

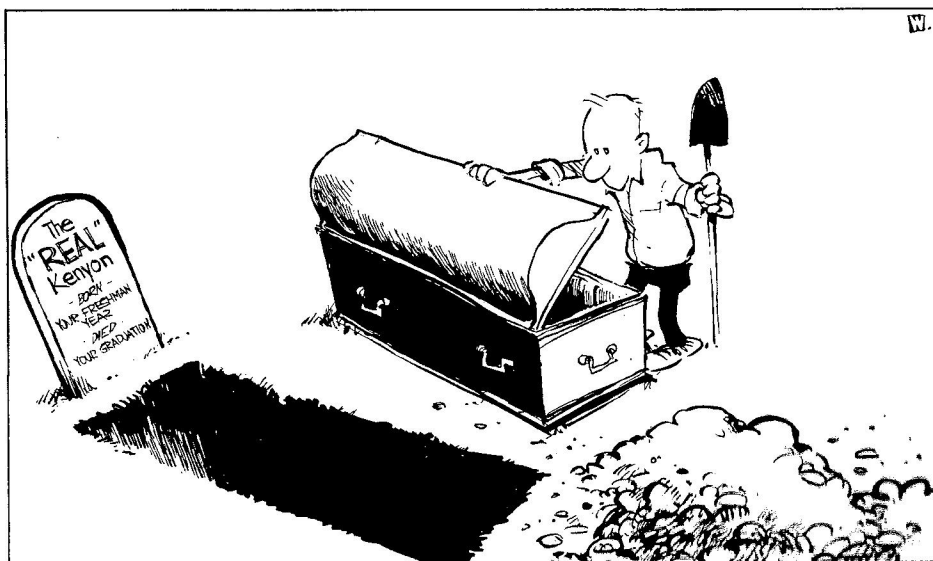
he tells me. "They were right. It was like bringing in the Pittsburgh Steelers.")

As we take turns with after-dinner speeches, it seems everyone can name one or more classmates who have no nostalgia for Kenyon, no desire to return, no interest in donations, phonathons, recruitments, or reunions. And even those who've come have mixed feelings. "This was a liberal arts gulag." "The all-male college is dead as a dodo." "You couldn't not have mixed feelings." "After Kenyon, I never ate Jell-O again, not an inch of it!" But there is also a funny loyalty to the place we shared. It's as if we had all been shipwrecked on the same island. In retrospect, the island looks good. It keeps us talking, drinking, singing . . . like alumni . . . until, around 2:00 a.m., the idea of the all-male college is transformed from painful anachronism to ahead-of-its-time experiment — gutsy, noble, well worth the cost.

My last morning I head toward a local graveyard, light-headed and buoyant. Kenyon College was the last place I stayed up all night to read a book, and the last place I believed that the work I did would be fairly measured and marked, and the last place that good talk, by itself, wherever I found it, was the making of my day. It was the last place I passionately cared about people's opinions of my work. Would I have been as open, as vulnerable, as eager, if I had fallen in love?

I walk toward a grave at the corner of the cemetery, recalling the bearing, the syntax, the style of the man, a Kenyon English professor, who is buried there. I remember his handwriting on my papers, a careful, slanting script that seemed to have formed itself to fit into the margins of the American novels he taught. His books belong to the English department now, and the day before, I had leafed through his much marked-up *Moby-Dick*. "Ishmael accepts life on its own terms," he reminded himself at the start of one chapter. "Contrast Ahab." Now he is part of the College that was. He never got to teach girls. I never got to sit next to them. We both missed out. Yet my memories of him are uncluttered, vivid, pure. I'm glad we had that kind of time, and for the moment, I can find nothing to resent.

*P.F. Kluge '64 is the author of Season for War. He lives in New York City. This article first appeared in the May 1985 issue of Gentleman's Quarterly.*



Courtesy G. Q. Copyright © 1985 by The Gentle Next Publications, Inc.