

**EVERY SEPTEMBER, ESQUIRE SALUTES CHILDISH BEHAVIOR ON CAMPUS. BUT THIS YEAR, THE KIDS ARE BEHAVING LIKE GROWN-UPS. LUCKILY FOR US THE GROWN-UPS ARE BEHAVING LIKE KIDS. GOOD THING WE HAVEN'T LOST OUR FACULTIES.**

# The Bennington Affair

*How a young college president lost her job for all the usual reasons: bad lasagna, moonlighting, insensitivity, sarcasm, not wearing a bra, unthawed Sara Lee banana cake...and then there was the sex part*

*by Nora Ephron*

What happens when you talk to people at Bennington College about Bennington College is that they keep having to tell you what a wonderful place it is. A wonderful place to teach, a wonderful place to study, a wonderful place to be. The reason people keep reminding you of this is that they'll be in the middle of a story about something that happened at Bennington—like the time there was a sit-in because the Faculty Personnel Committee fired a teacher who attempted to liberate one of his students from a mental institution with a rifle—and they get to that point in the story, and you say, "With a rifle?" and that's when they assure you that Bennington College is a wonderful place.

Or they tell you the tale of Camille Paglia, a young literature teacher and militant feminist. A few years ago Miss Paglia became angry when a student derided her in a campus nightclub act, so she set out to take revenge. She waited until the student walked into the campus snack bar and then kicked him three times and flung his glasses across the room. Afterward, during a

hearing provoked by the incident, she said it was a feminist prank and why didn't anyone understand that. It's at about this point that the person telling the story gets concerned about how this is going to sound and tells you that Bennington College is a wonderful place.

Or they are talking about the reason I went to Bennington College in June—to find out what happened in January when Gail Parker, thirty-three, and her husband, Tom, thirty-four, were forced to resign as president and vice-president of Bennington. They tell you it all had something to do with Gail Parker's relationship with a history teacher named Rush Welter, and that everyone on campus knew about it, and that the two of them even taught a course together called *The Power of Sympathy*, and then they tell you the story of the twin T-shirts. The story of the twin T-shirts is weird, so weird that after you hear it you can't help thinking that what they are about to say is undoubtedly true: Bennington College is a wonderful place.

There are all sorts of ways to think about what happened at Bennington. You can think of it as a classic example of what is happening to presidents of small colleges when the trustees and faculty go to war over budget cuts. You can think of it as a modern Haw-

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thorne novel in which hypocritical moral righteousness triumphs over adultery. Or you can think of it as an episode in the American women's movement. It is a truth grudgingly acknowledged by feminists that a few women who left their husbands in the 1970's turned out to be emotionally unprepared for the demands of independence. What is not as commonly acknowledged is that the women's movement also caused some women to be given power who were equally unprepared for it. Twenty years ago a woman who became powerful was probably a powerful woman. Today she may just be in the right place at the right time.

Gail Thain Parker was twenty-eight years old and an assistant professor of history at Harvard when the Bennington Presidential Search Committee found her in late 1971 and began to interview her. The committee was composed of three students, three faculty members, one alumna and three trustees—including painter Helen Frankenthaler and Time Inc. board chairman Andrew Heiskell. Jessie Emmet, the chairman of the board of trustees, was an ex officio member. Now sixty-seven, she is a stunning woman with huge blue-green eyes, a gentle intelligence and a nice firm backbone. A patrician who never attended college and who went onto the Bennington board as part of the volunteer tradition expected of young, married socialites, Mrs. Emmet was serving her fourth seven-year term as a trustee.

Gail Parker made it clear to the committee that she and her husband were together and that jobs would have to be found for them both. Most of the committee became instantly intrigued with the package: Gail Parker was a Radcliffe B.A., Harvard Ph.D., wife, mother, feminist historian. She looked like a student and she wore blue jeans. Tom Parker, who wears a leg brace from a childhood bout with polio, was a Harvard B.A. and Ph.D. candidate. Assistant to the dean for federal programs at Harvard, he had the administrative experience his wife lacked, and he didn't mind the idea of playing second banana. This was a chance for Bennington to look as if it were as daring and avant-garde and committed to women as it had always pretended to be. This was also a chance for Bennington to get a lot of publicity.

"The resentment is so deep because we got all that publicity," Gail Parker says now. "You know, during the controversy, Camille Paglia stood up in a meeting and said, 'Those who live by the media will die by the media.' But I was so naïve I never realized that that was why anyone was interested in us. It never occurred to us that the search committee was even taking us seriously."

"I saw us as the youth candidates," Tom Parker says. "You had to have a woman, you had to have a black, and at that time you had to have a bright young person."

"I was operating on the belief that I was being kept in the running to keep the process going," says Gail Parker. "In May, I was in New York and we got a call to come to Helen Frankenthaler's studio. It was the final meeting where trustee members were going to take a look at us."

"We went to Helen Frankenthaler's," Tom Parker says, "and someone answered the door, and I said something that I guess confirms everything people at

Bennington now think of me. I said, 'Is this where Helen Morganthaler lives?'"

"It was a very surrealistic scene," Gail Parker says. "There was an Oldsmobile station wagon in the living room. Tom and I are these academic types. We don't know artists. We could hardly move our lips. Afterward we went out to dinner and Tom said, 'You know, I think they might be serious. You have to decide how you feel about the job.' Well, I'm very good at putting aside my feelings and just *doing*, very good at performing, and that's what I did. We came to Bennington to be interviewed as one of three finalists. There was a sit-in going on, and the joke was that whichever finalist got the kids out of the building got the job. Tom and I were just gaga. What happened—and this doesn't reflect well on my character—was that when I got up here, I wanted to win. I say that with very little pride. I'm the kind of person who, if you hold out the carrot and ring the bell, I salivate. Also, I really believed what Bennington was or wanted to be. I had the faith. I liked the search committee. I didn't really get to see the place."

In June, 1972, the search committee met for its decision, and sentiment was so clearly with the Parkers that two faculty members on the committee who opposed them walked out in a huff; what was left of the committee then voted unanimously to ask Gail and Tom Parker to come to Bennington.

"We came up for commencement to be introduced," says Gail Parker. "There was a party the night before graduation when the graduation speaker was to speak. Instead of a speaker the class had asked Jimmy Garrison, a jazz musician who taught black music at Bennington, to play. Well, it got later and later. Nothing. No sign of Jimmy Garrison. Fights between dogs broke out, which turned out to be a characteristic of the place. The trustees were swacked. Tom was saying, 'Jesus, what is this?' and I was saying, 'I don't know.' Then, suddenly, out of the darkness came a tiny black man with an enormous bass. Jessie Emmet got up and said, 'Before I introduce Jimmy Garrison to you, I want to introduce the new president and vice-president, Gail and Tom.' There was a great deal of applause. Jessie said, 'I think you'll come to be as impressed by them as we are for their quality of transparent candor.' Tom looked at me and said, 'So that's what we're supposed to be.' Then Jimmy Garrison got up. I don't know what he had taken, but he had taken something. He started making these deep throaty laughs into the microphone. He laughed for a while, and then he spoke for a while about how he couldn't get his bass out of the trunk of his car and that's why he was late, and then he started to play. He played well, but it was solo bass, and it went on and on. Tom and I sat on this tarp on the ground, and I remember wondering, What have we done?"

Bennington College opened, in 1932, as an experimental women's college, the only one at the time where an undergraduate could get credit for courses in drama, music, dance and painting. Martha Graham taught at Bennington, and don't you ever forget it; no one at Bennington has. Located in southern Vermont, the college has always had a small enrollment (currently 591





Rush Welter and Tom Parker

students), a low student-faculty ratio (8.3 to 1), a minuscule endowment (\$3,800,000), rock-bottom faculty salaries (\$16,716 average) and an astronomical annual fee that is now the highest in the country (\$6,550). "It's a small and rather isolated spot," says trustee Andrew Heiskell, "where a small number of people live continually and close together. You don't say, 'Bye, I'm going to the theater.' You don't even say, 'Bye, I'm going to a movie,' because you're most likely going with the faculty and students to a movie at Bennington. There's very little outlet for whatever fevers, rumors and passions build up. It's practically as if there were a wall around the place."

Almost no one can define exactly what Bennington was like in the beginning, but this much is clear: it was different from the way it is now, if only in that it had no past. Bennington's past, particularly its so-called Golden Age, is invoked in the name of almost everything that comes up at the college—what the Founders wanted, or intended, or would have opposed, or might have done had they lived—and all these invocations are generally ineffectual because there is total disagreement at Bennington over whether the Founders wanted to establish precedents or merely to establish a place where precedents could be disregarded. The bust of John Dewey stands in the corridor of the main building, and everyone knows that his concept of "learning by doing" animated the Founders and probably ought to have something to do with the way the college operates today, but no one can agree on what that something is; Dewey himself is very little help, since what he stood for can be twisted to apply to

almost any sort of educational question, particularly those he never dealt with. Whether the art division needs eight new gas-fired kilns, for example.

Bennington debates everything, both in committees and through a system of galleys, or papers. Anyone is free to write a galley and to use the campus mimeograph machine and post office to distribute it to everyone in the community. "You must understand," says literature teacher Alvin Feinman, "that at Bennington there's a great pride in the tradition of democratic procedure." You must also understand that at Bennington there's a great pride in the tradition of never resolving anything through this procedure.

"Bennington is not about proofs and puddings but about trials and errors," says poet Ben Belitt, who has been teaching there since 1938. "Constantly, out of bemusement, the college reevaluates itself, but it flinches from Hegelian minds who conceive of total systems and who think an idea becomes viable educationally if you drive it through the constituency. I've been here through every president, and every president eventually forms a committee to reexamine ourselves and make proposals. In 1960, a committee was formed and it wrote what is called the Golden Book. The faculty approved the text in the first draft, the second draft and the final draft, and then voted it down. I'll tell you why. You'll say I'm being mystical or romantic, but we did not see a real belief in error. If you want to know why the faculty has flinched from these manipulations, it's because there was no belief in error—that's what bothers them and seems laughable. It's also what makes others say that we can't make up our minds,



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that we're congenital quibblers, that when push comes to shove we won't accept these realistic designs."

So Bennington College has gone its defiantly irrelevant way, its image managing to remain connected with the avant-garde partly because it was once connected with it and partly because of something else: Bennington was famous for sex. The college placed no restrictions on its students; its founder, Robert Devore Leigh, believed that since Bennington girls were old enough to marry, they were old enough to do as they pleased. The tradition of sexual freedom at Bennington has extended to faculty-student relationships as well. Bennington was a women's college until 1969; its faculty was largely male; one thing often led to another. There were no consequences (except for an occasional divorce and/or marriage); one's sex life was one's business.

You can probably already see the trouble coming. You can probably already see that any couple rendered speechless by Helen Frankenthaler's Oldsmobile, which in any case was a Volvo, was probably going to graft badly onto Bennington College. But you can see it only because that's exactly what happened; it wasn't nearly as clear at the time. There are plenty of people at Bennington who give the impression that they knew all along that Gail Parker was not going to work out; they say her voice bothered them from the beginning, that she was supercilious and cynical and ironic from the beginning, that she was elitist and solipsistic and jejune from the beginning. They see the Parkers' first three years at Bennington as nothing more than preparation for the crisis that brought them down. But this was not exactly the case. What actually happened was that things went along fairly uneventfully; and then, of course, they got more complicated.

The news of Gail Parker's appointment ran on the front page of *The New York Times* on June 17, 1972 (WIFE-HUSBAND TEAM TO HEAD BENNINGTON), and in September, when school opened, *Life* magazine came to record the event. All the publicity was full of quotes that were later used against the Parkers but seemed fairly harmless at the time. Gail Parker told *Life* that she had already made a small change: "Until last year, all faculty wives were asked to bring an hors d'oeuvre to the president's yearly faculty party. That would be the last thing I'd ask them to do." The Parkers conceded that they had not come with a philosophy of education. "Anyone who says he has one is an impostor," said Tom Parker. And Gail Parker said she was certain her husband would not mind working for her. "After all," she said, "it isn't everyone who gets to sleep with the president."

In the beginning there was a honeymoon—or, at the very least, a cessation of the hostilities of the 1960's. "Everyone was willing to give her a chance," says literature teacher Richard Tristman. "Some people felt she was appealing. She had areas of what one would call, in a pinch, charm." There was agreement that she was first-rate at running faculty meetings. "She can sum up a half hour of discussion in a minute," says ceramics teacher Jane Ford. She was also accessible; Harriet Lyons, a writer for *Ms.* who profiled the Parkers in 1974, found that most of the people she in-

terviewed said the Parkers had brought a more informal, open atmosphere to the campus. Gail Parker was reserved and cool, yet she was almost recklessly candid about herself. She had led a conventional academic life, with an early marriage, a child, a quiet teaching career, and now, suddenly, here were all these reporters asking her questions. It was almost as if she had been encouraged in a kind of egotism and could not stop talking about herself. She told Harriet Lyons that she wanted to become "queen of the hop on a larger scale." She said: "When I go on the road, I still get the feeling I'm being tested, being looked at with jaundiced eyes. . . . I won't leave until I have them screaming in the aisles. I have certainly been asked questions in public that I should have answered, 'Up yours,' but, instead, I ask these people to enter into my reasons and see how charming and capable I am." Mrs. Parker could be equally candid about others. Says Jane Ford: "She and I could sit together and gossip in what was probably a catty, vicious way, but it was fun. You know, 'So-and-so's a brainless dip.'"

"There were people who liked us from the start and who continued to like us," Gail Parker recalls, "and there were a number who hated us from the beginning. But most were relieved that we weren't as bad as they thought. They thought I was going to be an idiot-child. I remember the first faculty meeting—it was clear that these characters had no notion of parliamentary procedure. I'm not a stickler for it, but they wanted nine motions on the floor at once. Afterward a couple of faculty people came up to me and said, 'Gee, that was really impressive.' I remember having a flush of pure anger. Did they think I couldn't even run a faculty meeting?"

The Parkers worked in adjacent offices in the Barn, an old cow barn that houses administration and some faculty, and wrote gossipy memos to each other and compared notes at the end of the day. (They were hired for \$40,500 a year—\$22,500 for her, \$18,000 for him. When they left they were making \$48,500—\$27,500 and \$21,000 respectively.) The idea was for Tom Parker to tend to the financial details, Gail Parker to the educational ones; he also kept an eye on day-to-day events while she was off giving speeches. For the Parkers, at least, the arrangement worked. "To be here," says Gail Parker, "knowing everything you say is interpreted, reinterpreted, misinterpreted and comes back bearing no resemblance to what you said—it's wonderful to have someone who can say, 'But that isn't what you said.'" Tom Parker's function was never quite clear—the college had never had a vice-president—and he was a bit hurt to find he was treated as a bureaucrat.

"But it was a good two years before I had any negative feelings at all," he says. "I try to think where the warning light could have been, and I guess my favorite example is the watchman's booth. One of the first things that happened after we started was that the director of maintenance came in and said that for twelve hundred dollars they could put a toilet in the watchman's booth. The guy on duty had to walk over to Commons to use the toilet, and while he was there no one was in the booth. I said that sounded fine, but twelve hundred dollars sounded like a lot of money. He



said he could find it in his budget. Naïvely I then took the question to the Student-Faculty Art and Architecture Committee. It occupied the next five meetings. The process was unbelievable. The structure wasn't going to look any different, but they went on for five meetings about it. One faculty member in the sessions was against putting in the toilet because the night man was overweight and needed the exercise.

"At the time I didn't tear my hair and say I was making a terrible mistake. But in retrospect I see it as a good example of how a small, ingrown place can take a plan and play with it like a cat does a chipmunk until it dies."

Don Brown may not have hated the Parkers from the beginning, but he was certainly unimpressed by them. A political science teacher, Brown was dean of faculty the Parkers' first year; he had been acting president the year before, and he was thought to have been disappointed that he was not chosen for the job. (Brown denies this.) He is a bland-looking man, the kind of faculty politician who hangs back and takes the line of least resistance. He visited the Parkers in Cambridge before the fall term began in 1972. "There wasn't any sense of clarity of purpose," he says. "They came in facing an immediately crucial issue: whether the arts building should be built. You could see what this building was going to do to our operating expenses, but they didn't seem terribly interested. They were still in a mood of how had all this happened to them." As the year progressed (the trustees went ahead with the building, which eventually cost \$6,700,000), Gail Parker found Brown increasingly difficult to deal with. He would tell her what was about to happen in a faculty meeting, and it wouldn't. "I didn't know what was going on," says Gail Parker. "A year later a friend who'd had Don Brown as a tutor at Harvard explained it to me. He said, 'Don Brown talks like he's the smartest man in the world. But he's always wrong.'"

Rush Welter was as unimpressed with Gail Parker as Brown was; he was one of the two faculty members who walked off the Presidential Search Committee, and he thought she was a disastrous choice. He spent the night of the party at which the Parkers were introduced walking around in what he describes as high dudgeon, making what he thought was a rather clever joke. "A summa is icumen in," he would say. Welter tells the joke now to show that he wasn't all that cross with Gail Parker *personally*, he had nothing against *her*, she simply didn't seem like a *president*. But for months after the Parkers came to Bennington, Welter was vicious to them. Which was characteristic: Welter is notoriously temperamental. Now fifty-two, he is a tall, lean, boyish-looking man with rambunctious white hair and a pink face that goes bright red when he is angry. "Rush is rigid and puritanical," says one faculty member, "and he could always manage to start at the center of any controversy, end up isolated, and storm out after shouting that everyone but him was corrupt. Like a French leftist, he loves to lose." Welter had walked out of dozens of committees and stopped speaking to dozens of fellow committee members. At the moment, he is not speaking to almost the entire Bennington faculty, very few of whom are speaking to him.

Having made and broken so many alliances, Welter was always looking for people to convert to his educational views; he would often befriend newly hired faculty members. Nine years ago, when Richard Tristman came to teach literature at Bennington after being fired by Columbia for giving all his students A's, he and Welter became close. Says Tristman: "After about a year, he said to me, 'Someday you won't be talking to me.' 'What are you talking about?' I said. He said, 'Everyone stops talking to me sooner or later.'" Sure enough, a few months later Tristman and Welter fell out over whether Bennington should give grades—Tristman, having come full circle, was now in favor of them—and had a terrible fight in which Welter turned exceedingly petulant. Tristman, quoting *Coriolanus*, shouted: "Oh, thou boy of tears!" Welter, apparently flustered, turned red and replied, "Thou frump!" Then he stalked off.

Nonetheless, Welter was respected by his colleagues and was frequently elected to committees. He was serious about education and Bennington and was a defiant supporter of faculty rights. "I'd always played the role of telling off presidents," he says. In 1960, Welter was the principal author of the Golden Book, the one-hundred-twelve-page document that advocated increasing the size of the college and introducing "a pluralistic approach to liberal education . . . no one craft or discipline [should become] the only resource a student develops during her four years in college." When the faculty voted the Golden Book down and then president William Fels did not overrule them, Welter took a two-year leave.

"I'm a utopian," he says, "and I believe that principles are retrievable. When I came here the college was deeply committed to progressive principles. The college looked after the whole person, and it had an imaginative sense of the transaction in the classroom. The idea was not to impart information to students who would become replicas of the faculty but to encourage the development of students capable of operating on their own inventively. To teach here was a truly exhilarating experience.

"But the character of the faculty and the students changed. To some extent, Bennington was a school for the leisure class, but it became less and less so and more and more for the children of highly paid professionals. It had been Boston types—now it's a New York clientele. And the faculty had no particular inventiveness toward teaching. Their teaching was practically medieval. We weren't that much different from anyone else. The usual explanation for Bennington's problems is that other schools began teaching arts, but the real problem was that the faculty was losing sight of the concept of teaching as an eliciting rather than a laying it on. Bennington never had curricular expectations, but now it had a new breed of student who wasn't about to answer to anyone. There got to be lit majors who had to be coerced to try something with their hands, or you had art majors who would spend all but an infinitesimal amount of time doing art."

Welter attacked Gail Parker unrelentingly through her first term. He thought her scholarship was shallow. He was furious when she successfully maneuvered an affirmative-action resolution (*Continued on page 142*)



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## The Bennington Affair

(Continued from page 58) on the hiring of women; to him, affirmative action was as evil as loyalty oaths. Eventually, at the urging of Jessie Emmet, the dignified chairman of the board of trustees, Gail Parker asked him to come see her. "It was clear he was the leader of the faculty opposition," she says. "I had to deal with him." Welter began to drop in regularly. "I talked to her for six or seven weeks," he recalls. "We had what she later described to Jessie Emmet as a tutorial. I remember saying to her that she was, in effect, saying yes to everyone, but that there was going to come a time when she would have to say no, and that would be hard. We talked about a number of things. What do you think of X? Do you think it would be a good idea to do Y? I thought she paid attention, but I didn't think she was buying much of it."

Says Gail Parker: "I can remember the day I said to Rush, 'Do you agree with Don Brown?' 'No,' he said, 'I never agree with him.' That was a great day because it indicated I wasn't nuts."

Exactly when Rush Welter and Don Brown became enemies is not clear. Welter says it began while he was on the search committee; Brown says it was later.

"I have a passionate distaste for the way his mind works," Welter says of Brown. "Halfway through the search I said to Jessie Emmet, 'Look, we're going to have to face the question of Don Brown. He would be a disaster.' Jessie communicated to him the impossibility of his hope. I was fairly sure he blamed me. But though I may have said he would be president over my dead body because I think the man is grossly incompetent and self-deluded, the truth was I didn't have to. He had no support."

"I thought the search committee acted in various strange ways," says Brown. "Jessie called one day to tell me I was no longer a candidate. I'd never known that I was. Since the faculty had already voted that the new president should be a woman, I never included myself. The idea of a woman president was in the air. My break with Rush came over a year and a half later, when he started advising Gail on educational policy. We had one particular blowup. I'd been off the Faculty Educational Policies Committee for a term sabbatical. When I came back, he suggested that the decisions they'd made were sacred and shouldn't be explained or reconsidered. I found it humorous, since what we do here is reconsider. I don't know of any issue we've ever closed."

One day Jessie Emmet received a letter from Rush Welter. "I was overcome," she recalls. "Rush had been his most Welterish during the affirmative-action fight, and now he was writing to say how incredibly careful Gail had been to uphold every standard of excellence in applying this program he had been so emphatically against. I wrote

Gail and said, 'I've just had the most extraordinary letter from Rush. You're a genius.'"

As it happened, genius had nothing to do with it. Rush Welter and Gail Parker were infatuated with one another. Says Welter: "On a personal level, I'd never had anyone to talk to. I'd never had anyone trained in any of my fields. I'd never had anyone whose intelligence was available." The two of them continued to disagree in faculty meetings; Welter continued to side with the faculty on most issues. But after a while what had begun as a discreet intellectual flirtation became an affair that was the most-discussed subject on the campus. Welter's Jeep was spotted parked all night in front of the Parkers' home. A student baby-sitter living in and taking care of the Parkers' daughter, Julia, turned out to have a big mouth. The Parkers' kitchen windows had no curtains; morning passersby could look in and see Gail Parker, Tom Parker and Rush Welter breakfasting together. Rush and Gail took long twilight walks. Rush and Gail spent a lot of time talking in her office. Rush and Gail even went off occasionally to stay with Jessie Emmet, who was fond of both of them.

Why Bennington College of all places should have reacted with as much interest as it did to the affair is a curious question. Part of it undoubtedly had to do with the fact that the presence on campus of both Tom Parker and Welter's wife, Timmy, a former Bennington student who works in the admissions office, made people uncomfortable—and they became even more uncomfortable when both couples stayed married. Part of it, as Gail Parker admits, came about "because Rush had always lectured others on irresponsibility." In addition, the faculty feared that the two of them were off plotting together. "At Bennington you can do it with dogs and no one cares," says Camille Paglia, the feminist. "But there was a feeling that educational policy was being made in the boudoir." (Interestingly, while the faculty saw Welter as a Svengali trying to foist his harebrained educational schemes on a naïve young woman, the students tended to see Gail Parker as the seductress who had taken advantage of Rush Welter's innocence.) There was pure male chauvinism: for years, one of Bennington's male presidents had conducted an adulterous affair with a faculty member and everyone thought it was rather sweet. Most of all, though, there was simple indiscretion.

When I went to Bennington this year, I talked to Welter and Gail Parker and they were almost ingenuous about their relationship. I saw Welter first, and after a long interview we walked out of the Barn toward the parking lot. As we did, a yellow car pulled up and Welter said, "Here's someone you should meet." Gail Parker got out of the car and came up to us. She turned to me. "This is the moment in the Henry James novel where you know everything," she said. Then she



turned to Welter and asked: "Can I borrow some money?"

"I've been hard pressed to figure out why everyone got so uptight," Welter had said earlier. "This faculty has always been reasonably indifferent to anyone's personal behavior, even when it extended to relations between faculty and students. So the notion that this faculty should take umbrage at, pay attention to, or think they had the right to comment on our relationship is not only hypocritical but completely violates the college's standards. I have a formula that you can quote—obviously these are prepared remarks. Gail and I have talked about it. Much to my surprise, I have come to believe that the faculty, because of their privileged position here vis-à-vis students, are not able to understand a non-exploitative relationship. One of the problems here is that faculty members who aren't professionally active or who are bitterly disappointed at being over the hill or excluded can compensate for weakness and needs by living vicariously in, with or through their students. One of the reasons they're so sure I told Gail what to do is because of this." He paused. "Sex and homosexuality are nothing here—people are not just indulgent but sympathetic. But what really bothered me was the vituperative indignation expressed by alumnae in New York—as if they'd never been out of a convent—who, in effect, set out to get Gail because of her and me."

"I think it's like being the minister who's found to be sleeping with some member of the congregation," Gail Parker said two days later. "How dare he get up and lecture us about our moral responsibility and he's doing that on the side?" What's ludicrous is that this happened in a community that prides itself on sexual immorality. They can't understand there might be moral adultery."

In early 1975, one of the student trustees who'd recently been appointed to the board took several of the trustees aside after a meeting to make sure they knew about Rush and Gail. The next day, lawyer Bevis Longstreth, one of the trustees, telephoned Richard Darman, now assistant secretary of commerce and a good friend of the Parkers who had just joined the board. Longstreth said he was calling Darman for advice about whether some action was indicated—if anything was wrong with the Parkers' marriage it might be a problem for the college. Darman assured him that Tom Parker was aware of what was going on, that he could survive its exposure because he was fully mature, and that if Darman came to believe there were grounds for concern he would let Longstreth know. He never mentioned the incident to the Parkers until months later, and then it came up only as a joke about the prurience of the student trustee.

Jessie Emmet had known about the affair for some time. "A lot of other trustees felt the way I did," she says. "I went from being very concerned and upset to deciding that it was the business of the people involved and that

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was that. I have my own morality, and it's lavender-and-old-lace unshakable. Also, I'm quite aware of young people struggling for a new morality. I've reached a point where if what people do is animated by love and respect and kindness, it's okay by me. If a relationship between Gail and Rush and Tom and Timmy was informed by those things, and as far as I could see it was, I could not sit in judgment. But I did speak to Gail as chairman of the board and said that as my mother used to say, 'Manner more than matter.' As president of the college she had a public life. More than that I cannot say."

The twin T-shirt incident occurred in the spring of 1975. That term, Welter and Gail Parker taught together. The Power of Sympathy was a course in nineteenth-century reform movements, and it concluded with the reading of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Blithedale Romance*. This novel takes place in a utopian community based on Brook Farm, and it concerns a dark, libidinous, romantic, feminist heroine named Zenobia, who kills herself after an unhappy love affair; the story is narrated by one Miles Coverdale, Hawthorne's alter ego. The last class of the year, Gail Parker and Welter finished up and then told the students, "There's one more thing." The two of them, in unison, pulled their shirts over their heads and stood before the class in twin T-shirts Gail Parker had bought in Williamstown. Hers read ZENOBIA and his read COVERDALE.

At the beginning of the fall term in 1974, Gail Parker had addressed the faculty, as was presidential custom, and then read them a long section from the Mary McCarthy novel *The Groves of Academe*. The section concerned a faculty meeting at McCarthy's Jocelyn College, where the same people got up and said the same things year after year, and nothing happened. To this day Gail Parker cannot understand why the faculty found the reading condescending and offensive; she thought the section was terribly funny—and it is, of course, which is not the point. The Bennington faculty resembled Jocelyn's almost too perfectly. Each year Fred Wohnus got up to say he had sacrificed his life to the college and unless he got a raise he would not be able to pay his property taxes. Vivian Fine would say, "We just have to love each other." Gunnar Schonbeck would complain that the school had gotten too big. Sidney Tillim would point out that art and politics don't mix. Year after year, meeting after meeting, nothing happened.

Gail Parker came to believe that the reason nothing happened had to do with the intransigence of the faculty; the faculty came to believe it had to do with bad leadership. The case of the two and a half slots, for example, is the one Gail Parker and Rush Welter cite when they describe how they came to lose faith in the faculty; it took the Faculty Educational Policies Committee a year and a half to cut two and a half positions from the teaching staff.

Says Rush Welter: "The amount of hassle, the hoopla, the behavior of the F.E.P.C. over this, demonstrated to me that this was an impossible situation. It created absolute despair in Gail's mind and mine about the possibility of a faculty-elected committee doing anything. I'd always believed I didn't care if the faculty was right or wrong; the faculty governed. But I could hardly think of a time when I didn't think Gail's handling of an issue and her solutions were better than those of the self-appointed spokesmen for the college." Welter had gone over to the other side. "The faculty has refused to govern itself," he would say in meetings. He would mutter vague threats in the Barn coffee room: "If the faculty won't go along, we'll just have to see what will happen to the faculty." The faculty believed he had entered into a conspiracy with Gail Parker—and he had; even a paranoid faculty has enemies—and that became even more disturbing after the Futures Committee began.

In January, 1975, Jessie Emmet called Gail Parker to her apartment before the January board meeting and gave her some instructions. "Gail had become an excellent caretaker," Mrs. Emmet says. "Peace had been restored. At commencement in 1974, I'd made a special attempt to talk to faculty, and I must have talked to twenty of them, and they couldn't have been more pleased at the way everything was going. But it was time for the college to take a good look at itself. Bennington was coasting on its reputation. Also, it was quite plain that the financial projections pointed to disaster—not today, not tomorrow, but in ten years' time. We had to get the arts building paid for, and we had to get an endowment. In order to get that money, we had to have a clear idea of why we wanted it. Also, it appeared quite evident that higher education in this country had reached a point where individual departments in a college were in such control that education had become too specialized. Someone had to make an effort to get back to general education. Bennington had lost sight of that, particularly having hired so many run-of-the-mill Ph.D.'s whose minds worked that way. Then there was tenure, and that was beginning to strangle everybody."

Bennington does not have a classic tenure system; it has something called presumptive tenure: a faculty member whose contract is renewed after five years is *presumed* to have tenure. The odd result of this is that unlike other colleges, where tenure is granted only when there is a death or vacancy in a tenured slot, Bennington has no quota on tenured positions. By 1980, it seemed possible that eighty percent of the faculty would be tenured.

"I'd been tactfully trying to get Gail to think about these things," Jessie Emmet went on, "but not much had happened. If you're going to be president of a small college that has a chance to survive, you've got to do something. You can't just be a care-

taker. So we decided that we couldn't just suggest this to Gail, we'd have to tell her. Three of us called her in, and we gave it to her. We said, you don't have to worry anymore about peace at the college. Now is the time for you to be president and not a caretaker. Well, she sat there and said she had to think about it. I think she was stunned. The next day she said she'd do it."

"I concurred on the whole," Gail Parker says of that meeting. "But I said to them, 'I still have some remnants of goodwill. I'm going to have to cash in my chips to do this. It may be the last thing I'm ever able to do at Bennington College.'"

In March, 1975, Gail Parker announced the formation of the Futures Committee. She appointed thirteen people to it—some outside experts, some trustees and three faculty members. If the faculty were surprised that they were not to elect their own representatives, they were even more stunned to hear her choices: two were part-time teachers who had never been terribly involved in Bennington and the third was Rush Welter.

Two months later, Bennington suffered its annual spring crisis. Bill Dixon, a teacher of black music, was denied tenure by the Faculty Personnel Committee. Black music had been a controversial subject at Bennington; a year before, the music division had refused to have anything to do with it. Gail Parker had solved the problem by persuading the faculty to make black music a division on its own. (This solution was seen by Gail Parker's supporters as a tribute to her ability to make peace and by her detractors as a sign of her willingness to make peace at any price.) Dixon was a flamboyant black militant, and his followers, led by his student girl friend, organized a sit-in, painted a sign on one of the buildings protesting the F.P.C. action, and then stole the bust of John Dewey and said they would not return it unless Dixon were rehired.

"For three years," says Gail Parker, "I had been attacked for being soft on black music. I had been told I should have rooted them out. All the people who criticized Bill Dixon set the stage for a big community stink, and then when it happened not one of them was there. They said, in effect, 'We are the review committee—you talk to the rabble.' Having heard for three years that Bill Dixon was Satan, I was now hearing that he was God's gift to rich white people at Bennington College. It was the worst possible position for me to be in psychologically. People would come to see me in my office, and I could not tell anyone what my own inclinations were—I couldn't seem to encourage anyone. I could barely nod. I had to sit there with my face perfectly stiff. It made me feel what a terrible job it was. It made me aware of the ways I had to deny I was a person. Sitting there saying, mmhmm, mmhmm, mmhmm. It was like being a shrink. If I'd wanted to be a shrink I would have gone to Harvard Medical School. It made me realize how much damage I



was doing to myself.

"One night," she went on, "Rush came to spend the night, as he often did. Tom was already in bed. I began to cry. I'm a very repressed Midwestern Wasp, and I often don't know how I feel until something like this happens. I screamed and cried. I said that I wanted to quit. Rush said that I couldn't quit, that I had to stick it out. Rush went to bed and I woke up Tom and cried some more. He said, 'Look, if you feel that way, we'll quit. We'll get out.'"

"The whole thing made me realize how close to the edge I was. It made me realize I couldn't sit there with my face straight and let them pee on me morning, noon and night."

*To the extent that Black Mountain is known today it is as the site of a now defunct experimental community located in the foothills of North Carolina, the forerunner and exemplar of much that is currently considered innovative in art, education and life-style. . . . At its best, Black Mountain showed the possibilities of a disparate group of individuals committing themselves to a common enterprise, resilient enough to absorb the conflicts entailed, brave enough, now and then, to be transformed by its accompanying energies. At its worst, the community consisted of little more than a group of squabbling prima donnas—many professional, others in training. Black Mountain proved a bitter experience for some, a confirmation of Emerson's view that "we descend to meet"—that close human association compounds rather than obliterates the drive toward power, aggression and cruelty. —An excerpt from *Black Mountain*, by Martin Duberman, which Gail Parker read to the faculty in September, 1975, and which made them even angrier than the Mary McCarthy excerpt.*

The Futures Committee met several times in the spring and summer of 1975. The outside experts rarely came, the trustees attended intermittently, one faculty member took offense and quit. Meanwhile, Jessie Emmet retired from the board and dropped from an active role on the committee. Merrell Hambleton, fifty-four, who replaced her as board chairman, was a nervous Bennington graduate who was one of a clique on the Bennington board known as The Ladies. The board, like many others, is composed of successful men who have busy careers and wealthy women who have very little else to do. Not surprisingly, the ladies do most of the work, but they tend to rely on the men, particularly Andrew Heiskell, for guidance. Mrs. Hambleton's closest friend on the board is Lila Nields, a white-haired woman who Heiskell describes as "the mildest person I know. She is incapable of being rude or impassioned or forceful." Mrs. Nields is unfailingly good-humored, drinks milk and sits up so straight at the edge of her seat that it was once suggested that she was the kind of person who thought you caught venereal disease from the back of a chair.

The Futures Committee report was originally due in October, but it was postponed a month. In the fall, Gail Parker set to work drafting it, and she again reminded the trustees that there was bound to be a terrific battle when it was issued. The faculty for its part became increasingly nervous. When the Futures Committee had been announced, both Gail Parker and Jessie Emmet had said publicly that its function would be to present alternatives to be debated by the community, but now the community heard that one of those alternatives was to cut twelve positions from the faculty. Rein van der Linde, the new dean of faculty, had been invited to a Futures Committee meeting and had come out horrified. "I'm against cuts," he says now. "To cut from the faculty is an impossible task unless you want to let Bennington as we know it go down the drain, and I love the way Bennington is." Van der Linde, a mathematics teacher, is an extremely mild man whom Gail Parker chose as dean because she could not work with Don Brown, who was a finalist for the job. But the two men were good friends. Van der Linde kept Brown posted, and in the meantime he drafted a memo to the Futures Committee recommending that instead of cutting faculty the college should curtail the health service and eliminate scholarships.

In October, Merrell Hambleton took her first stand—and made her first blunder—as board chairman. She announced that the board was instituting a program called Bennington Summers, a sort of arts summer school; it would be administered by someone named Omar Lerman; and it would offer a jazz workshop. The faculty was incredulous. This had been done without consulting them; they had never heard of Omar Lerman; *this was not the way we do things at Bennington*. The Bennington faculty was suddenly alerted to the possibility that the board might not be as committed to participatory democracy as it had always said it was. Bill Dixon (who had been granted tenure after all) and his white assistant, Stephen Horenstein, hit the roof at the notion of a jazz workshop administered by "honkie sellouts." Meanwhile, a rumor began to circulate that the trustees planned to move on the recommendations of the Futures Committee in January; this would give the faculty a bare month to debate them before Christmas vacation and the non-resident term began. In mid-November, a week before the report was due, Rein van der Linde called the F.E.P.C. members to his office and urged them to sign and circulate to their colleagues a letter to the trustees drafted by Don Brown and two other teachers; sixty-seven of seventy-two signed. It protested the secrecy and lateness of the report—"Our trust and confidence in [the] Bennington way of deliberation has been abused"—and said it hoped the board would allow plenty of time for campus discussion.

The faculty letter was exactly what Gail Parker and Rush Welter had ex-

pected. This group of hopeless children hadn't even seen the report, and already they were objecting. If they were given a chance to debate it, they would debate it to death. "They have an ability to unite against any proposal," says Gail Parker. "They rally beautifully to vote no." Adds Welter: "This is supposed to be participatory democracy, but it's participatory negation." If democracy would not work, they would try autocracy. On November 18, as she rode the train to New York for the trustees' meeting that afternoon, Gail Parker drafted a resolution for the board to issue. And that resolution set the scene for everything that followed: it said that the trustees endorsed the report, thought its "thrust and balance" were "sound," and that they would institute a five-year financial plan based on the report in January. The community was welcome to present its views on the report, but nothing in the resolution hinted that the trustees would pay any attention to them.

Jessie Emmet attended the board meeting as a former member, and she was surprised at the proposed resolution. "I'd always thought there would be discussion by the faculty," she says. "Then, if the report went the way of the Golden Book, the trustees would have to take it over. But I'd always felt there would be discussion. I was disturbed." Richard Darman, Gail Parker's friend on the board, was even more disturbed; he thought a statement of that sort was a gigantic tactical error. The board should not seem to be endorsing the report at that time; it must give the faculty at least the illusion that due process was being observed; the important thing was to divide the faculty by giving them a chance to debate the report, not to unite them against it. Darman believed there was nothing wrong with democracy; the mistake was to think of democracy as a naïve, idealized process that did not include political maneuvering. But Darman was out-argued. Rush Welter relates his reaction: "I said that for ten or twelve years, starting with the Golden Book, the faculty had swept every important proposal for change under the rug. The trustees would be throwing away the work of the committee and prospects for significant change if they did not indicate they expected to be taken seriously." This line was then taken up by two other trustees—Lisle Carter, chancellor of Atlanta University, and Francis Keppel, former U.S. Commissioner of Education. Both said that the board must stand tall against the faculty. Keppel, who was attending his first Bennington board meeting, had spent four years as a trustee of the City University of New York. "When I read the report, it didn't look that explosive," he said recently. "I didn't understand the place well enough."

Alvin Feinman began to lose his temper that day. Feinman, a poet and literature teacher, is a gentle, bear-like man with a deep voice that is often barely audible. Like everyone else at



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journed and reconvened for teaching faculty only. The motion passed, and Gail Parker, Rush Welter, Merrell Hambleton, Lila Nields and the rest of the committee left the room.

It was an extraordinary moment. Most of the faculty had come into the meeting angry and tense but with very little notion of what ought to be done. They did not like the report. They did not believe its financial projections. They suspected that the recommendation for cuts was intended to get rid of teachers Gail Parker and Welter did not like. But it had never occurred to anyone that the faculty could, in effect, refuse to discuss the report at all. It was unthinkable. Said Richard Tristman: "I remember thinking, maybe the assassination of Julius Caesar took this form—that someone might have said, 'Let's get Caesar in and tell him what we think of him,' and someone else might have said, 'Well, there are other things we could do. We could kill him.' Alvin stood up and said, 'There are other things we could do.'"

Rein van der Linde conducted the debate that followed. It was fairly civil, up to a point. Don Brown, taking a middle course, suggested that Merrell Hambleton and Lila Nields be asked back to explain the report. Debate on this went on so long, however, that it eventually became evident that the women were probably not standing outside the door waiting for the invitation. Then Camille Paglia stood up to speak, and she became the first teacher to introduce the question of Gail Parker's personality. "My mother sends me clippings about her," Miss Paglia said. "She's in Kansas City. She's in Baltimore. How much longer must we put up with these shallow, superficial nothings who are ruling us?" There was an outburst of applause; the faculty had always resented the amount of traveling and speaking Gail Parker did; it also resented her lecture fees.

At the end of the day, the faculty passed a vote of no confidence in Gail Parker; a statement issued the next day further charged that the board had presented the faculty with a fait accompli; the faculty would engage in dialogue only if the trustees revoked their resolution endorsing the Futures report. Henceforth, the faculty said, the trustees could communicate with them through Rein van der Linde.

The ousted group had meanwhile reconvened at Gail Parker's house. Lila Nields drank some milk and sat wringing her hands. Everyone else had a drink. Merrell Hambleton was shocked, and she kept asking whether Alvin Feinman always behaved like that. Rush Welter comforted her: now that you've seen how badly the faculty behaved, he said, you can see you've done the right thing. All of them expected the faculty to agree eventually to discuss the report; in the meantime the trustees would have to be brave and not back down. Merrell Hambleton and Lila Nields said they would be brave and would not back down.

One of the things that still puzzles the

Bennington trustees is where all the bad feeling came from. Why didn't they know how the community felt about the Parkers until November 19? Why didn't anyone tell them? What the trustees fail to grasp is that before November 19, the bad feeling was balanced by a residue of good feeling. What Gail Parker managed to do was convert the ambivalence into one-dimensional hostility. Everything came pouring out; no incident was too petty to omit. She was aloof. She didn't go to all the concerts and plays. She served bad lasagna. She served unfrozen Sara Lee banana cake. She was caustic about Bennington. She viewed her job as a stepping-stone to other things. She didn't wear a bra. She watched television. She didn't understand art. She was a Harvard snob. She was a vicious gossip.

Camille Paglia complained that it was all very well for Gail to tell the faculty wives not to bring hors d'oeuvres to the cocktail party, but it was very stingy of her then to serve only celery and olives and carrot sticks. Don Brown's wife, Rae, herself a teaching assistant, met Richard Tristman's wife, Dorothy, in the supermarket and said she'd stopped going to faculty meetings because of Gail Parker's voice. (Gail Parker does have a very expressive way of hitting words sarcastically. "I don't have a *vision*," she would say, and it was as if she were saying, "I don't have a vision and anyone who does is a fool.") "There was a toleration to Gail before," says Don Brown, "a feeling that whatever you'd gone through with her had been an isolated incident. People began to compare notes, and they'd say, 'Oh, she did that sort of thing to you, too?'"

Some of the complaints were obviously unfair. Says John Gardner, the novelist who taught at Bennington: "I've never been to a college where the president was expected to go to all the concerts and plays. The plays here are terribly, terribly embarrassing—insult theater of the worst kind. The littlest state university can do better. Gail could tell good from bad, and that's a heresy at Bennington." And some of the complaints were not only justified but came from a violent clash between Gail Parker's style and Bennington's. She was ironic, Bennington was earnest; she was witty and sardonic and sarcastic, Bennington was sincere.

"It was a massive rejection phenomenon," says Richard Tristman. "She was alien tissue, and she was being sloughed."

For the next month, the trustees and faculty participated in a fascinating dance. The faculty refused to meet with Gail Parker, and the trustees refused to meet without her. Meetings would be arranged, and at the last minute the trustees would arrive with the president; the faculty would leave. The trustees would then meet informally with the faculty. The Parkers and Rush Welter would prime them for meetings, and Merrell Hambleton and Lila Nields and a handful of the other ladies would go forth vowing to be brave. The faculty would then meet with these ob-

viously nervous women and see immediately that underneath the bravado was sheer terror. The ladies would then check back with the Parkers, who would urge them to be brave. They would vow to be brave.

"But we went in with the report," Lila Nields said to the Parkers at one point, "and they didn't like it."

"But we knew they wouldn't like it, Lila."

"Oh, that's right," said Mrs. Nields. "I forgot."

"It was like playing football with people who don't remember the plays you've agreed on," says Gail Parker. Adds Tom Parker: "They would come here trying to be brave, and the next day they'd be wanting to give Alvin Feinman a back rub. Part of it had to do with not having run anything before. They didn't understand that you're always worried you've made a mistake. No one makes a tough decision and walks away from it."

But the trustees had made a mistake. The resolution Gail Parker had drafted for them was a disastrous mistake. And every attempt they made to soften and reinterpret it only confirmed the faculty in its resolve.

Meanwhile, the students of Bennington began to draft position papers attacking the Futures report; these and dozens of impassioned faculty galleys arrived at the offices and homes of the trustees. Don Brown coordinated students and faculty and assigned teachers to write various galleys. Still, the trustees persisted in believing the faculty would eventually give in. On December 2, a delegation of the deans and five students was given ten minutes to speak at a board meeting in New York; the Parkers got five hours. To make matters worse, Lila Nields, who was conducting the meeting because Mrs. Hambleton was home in bed recuperating from an attack of diverticulitis, forgot to bring the papers the students and faculty had sent ahead for the trustees to read.

The next day, the trustees declared their confidence in Gail Parker and pulled back a bit by postponing the January deadline until debate had taken place on the report. They also issued a long statement Gail Parker made to the trustees. "I know now," she said, "why so many of those accused of witchcraft in the eighteenth century were moved to confess. Once charged with indecent manipulation it is almost impossible not to feel that engaging someone in conversation is somehow subversive behavior. . . . My purpose [is] simply to warn you not to underestimate the strength of the negative feelings about me and to encourage you to be willing to consider the possibility that in order to discuss and implement any substantial portion of the Futures report you may of necessity have to do without me." The faculty countered by reaffirming its vote of no confidence.

Every Friday night, there was a crisis in the Parker household; whatever had been agreed upon during the week would come unglued. The Parkers continued to believe they had chosen



the right strategy: if the board held firm, the faculty would give in. But the faculty showed no sign of buckling, and when the trustees continued to try to placate them, the Parkers felt betrayed. After all, Gail Parker was only doing what Jessie Emmet told her to; didn't the board have an obligation to back her up? One Friday night, Tom Parker turned to Lila Nields. "She and Merrell were here," Parker recalls, "and they were saying, 'We're going to be brave, we're not going to back down,' the same talk that went on every other day. I said to Lila, 'There may come a

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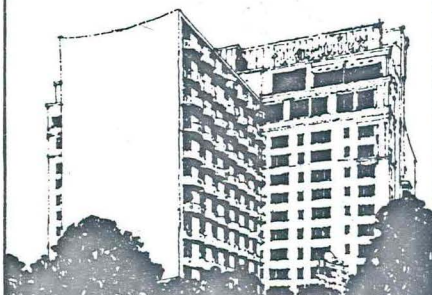
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time in the next few months when you come to us and say, "We like you very much, but for the good of the college you should resign." When that time comes, I'm not resigning.' She couldn't understand what I meant. What I meant was that I had a pretty good idea of what was going to happen, and I was protecting my contract."

The dance went on between the faculty and trustees. Gail Parker kept to herself. It was puzzling. "No one was dying to push the Parkers out," says Anne Schlabach, a philosophy teacher. "If she'd come to any of us and asked us to come over and discuss it, if she'd made a conciliatory move. . . ." Says Camille Paglia: "No doubt if it weren't for Rush she could have handled it better. If she'd called people in. But she and Welter were in a life-and-death struggle with the faculty, and she stonewalled."

After a month of hostilities, the board met again in New York and made a conciliatory move. It declared its confidence in Gail Parker, but it appointed a committee of trustees to look into the allegations against her. At Gail Parker's suggestion, the committee was authorized to review the Parkers' contracts, which were due to expire in a year and a half. Francis Keppel was appointed head of the committee. "At that meeting," says Gail Parker, "after the Keppel committee was appointed, I said, 'Go up there. Listen to them tell you Gail Parker sleeps with Rush Welter, and then I want you to decide what you think.' Later I heard Frank Keppel had been upset about that. What I was saying was that people were using a certain innuendo about what was going on—they should listen to it and then decide. That was regarded as coarse by Frank Keppel."

Frank Keppel is a straitlaced man; in fact, Joe Iseman, who served on the Keppel committee, affectionately describes him as "tight-assed." He ran his committee in total secrecy; he and the three members spent thirty-seven and a half hours at Bennington and in New York hearing witnesses. They saw the Parkers for four hours. Don Brown testified and said he hoped personalities could be left out of all this; the problem, he said, was bad management. Camille Paglia testified and told them educational policy was being made in the boudoir. Richard Tristman told them she was alien tissue and she was being sloughed.

Rush Welter testified, too; he also brought a long testimonial statement about Gail Parker's term as president. At the tail end of Welter's testimony—each witness was given a half hour—Wilhelmina Eaton, an alumna who was on the committee, asked him a question. "Tell me, Rush," she said, "how do you see yourself in relation to the Parkers from now on?"

"I had thirty seconds to answer," says Welter. "I wasn't going to walk out on a bombshell. So I went to see them in New York to answer the question there. I talked at some length. I told them I had a National Endowment research grant and I didn't have to be

around for the next year and a half. My intention was to separate my personal intentions from the college's. They weren't very responsive, and I can see now that should have been a clue. I could have given them an answer when they first asked. I could have said, 'I'll do what Gail wants me to do.' It was true."

Debbie Teller, chairman of the Student Educational Policies Committee, also testified in New York and was asked about Gail Parker and Rush Welter: "They asked me if it was well-known on campus. I said, 'Everything's well-known on this campus. You know if a dog's impounded. You know if a car's towed. The junk we all know. We know everything except the really important stuff the trustees keep secret.'"

On January 22, the Keppel committee brought its report to the board meeting. There were numbered copies signed out to each trustee. Most of the trustees read it in total disbelief. The Keppel committee advocated that the Parkers be put on a leave of absence until their contract expired. It stated that the Futures report and the substantive issues it had raised had nothing to do with the crisis: "We found that there had been an overall loss of confidence throughout the Bennington community. We do not believe it desirable to go into extensive detail as to the reasons for the breakdown of trust. Suffice it to say that we regard its principal components as mischance and misunderstanding, insecurity, intransigence, personal animosity and jealousy, poor judgment, tactlessness, lack of follow-through, and differing life and speech styles, capacities and perceptions." The report said that the board was to blame for giving the Parkers conflicting instructions and for setting up controversial programs like Bennington Summers and leaving the Parkers to take the blame; the Parkers, the report said, were without legal fault. But they had lost the ability to carry out their duties and should be replaced.

Merrell Hambleton finished reading the report and threw it across the table. "Won't the faculty have a celebration when they read this," she said, and burst into tears.

Then Frank Keppel said he had something to add. The committee had not wanted to include it in the report, he said, but he thought the trustees ought to know about a terrible extraneous set of facts—and he told them about Gail Parker and Rush Welter.

"The committee was extraordinarily sanctimonious," says Richard Darman, "to the point of high comedy. What was at stake was serious in personal terms for Gail and Tom and in terms of the future of a potentially innovative segment of higher education. What was not at stake was the history of the world and the future of education in America. They had a manner appropriate to the Nuremberg trials combined with a high-school student council. 'You sent us there, and we, being great citizens of the world, have to tell you there's a serious problem—the community wants her removed.' We already knew that. It

didn't seem to me to be sufficient grounds for removing her."

The trustees met all day Thursday and part of Friday. Friday night Merrell Hambleton went to Bennington with the college's lawyer, Paul Wickes, and called the Parkers to say they were coming over.

"They came over," says Tom Parker, "and none of us had any drinks, which was so bizarre I knew something was wrong. Merrell then began to read aloud from the report. Finally I said, 'Look, Paul, why don't you give us a summation—wouldn't that be easier?'" So Wickes gave them a summation.

Says Gail Parker: "Merrell sat there and kept saying, 'It's just unbelievable. I cannot believe it. I can hardly tell you.' We spent our time shoring her up. 'Merrell, it's fine,' we said. 'It's much better for us, don't you see?' What bothered us, of course, was that the report didn't talk about any of the issues. It came up with the insight that there was a mess up here and everyone was angry. It was a popularity poll. If that was the level, we were well out of it."

"I called that night," Rush Welter says, "and I talked briefly to Gail and got the impression things were worse than I thought. I called again sometime later. Gail is a very elusive person, and it's typical that when she was in trouble I was the last one to know. I said, 'For Christ's sake, what's happening?' Ultimately she put Tom on the phone, who told me. Fundamentally, he was more shaken than she. It's hard enough being a faculty wife. He really didn't have any role or access to friends."

Gail Parker: "What Keppel said at the meeting made Tom madder than hell. It was as if he were the real hapless victim as opposed to getting credit for being the hero. He knew exactly what was happening. He's very fond of Rush. He has qualms about it, and we've talked about them, but when I said to him at one point, 'I'm so sorry for getting you into this mess,' he's the one who said, 'Do not apologize for doing something that was appropriate and right.' Then he gets thought of as the hapless victim."

Tom Parker: "I wasn't angry at all about any of this. But I get angry when I hear that Frank Keppel was at a cocktail party and said to a friend of mine, 'You don't really know what went on. It was a lurid and scandalous situation.' Keppel denies he said it, but I believe my friend."

On January 29, 1976, Gail and Tom Parker resigned as president and vice-president of Bennington College. Tom Parker negotiated a settlement in the neighborhood of \$110,000, including the use of their house at Bennington until July, 1976. Newspapers reporting the story said she had been forced to resign because of her stand on tenure. The Parkers gave an interview to the Bennington *Banner*: "We're eminently employable. This is not the culmination but the beginning of our careers."

Rush Welter took a leave of absence from Bennington. "I'm unreconstructed," he said in June. "If I had it to do



over again I would do the same things. There might be minute details, but if I regret the outcome I don't regret the attempt made or my part in it. I guess if I made any mistake it was in opposing her in the first place."

Joe Iseman, a member of the Keppel committee, became acting president of Bennington for the spring term.

Don Brown became dean of faculty for 1976-77.

Tom Parker was hired by an educational-fund-raising company in Chicago, and he and his wife and daughter moved there at the end of July. Gail Parker planned to free-lance for a year.

She was still bitter when I saw her, and she still felt she had done the right thing. She was angry that people at Bennington did not recognize how much pressure she had been under from the trustees; she seemed to have no notion that she was as responsible for a decision she carried out as the people who ordered her to do so. And she was still surprised at how many people still do not understand. There, of course, she is right. Some people do not understand how she could have been so stupid and insensitive. Others do not understand how the trustees could have let her down. And no one understands that it all worked out exactly the way Gail Parker wanted it to.

"People tend to overestimate the pressures from Rush and to underestimate the pressures from Tom," Gail Parker said at one point. "You have to understand the difference between the two men. The night I cried during the fight over Bill Dixon, Tom said, 'You want to quit—we'll get out.' He's very protective. 'If these sons of bitches are bothering you, sweetheart, we'll get out.' Meanwhile, Rush was saying, 'Stick it out—you can't quit.' I'm very glad I had both of them—and I must admit I did it both of their ways. I said this to Tom: 'If I do this in the way I want to, I can have my principles and make it my exit line.' There was a way to honor this absolute conviction that criticisms needed to be uttered, changes had to be made for the place to be excellent, not mediocre—that could be combined with an almost frantic urge to get out."

What happened last year at Bennington College was not an assassination but a suicide.

In June, 1976, the Presidential Search Committee offered the presidency of Bennington to Willard F. Enteman, provost of Union College. He turned it down. #

## THE POET

"A page is no place for a poem," he said, laying down his pen to write a sonnet with his tongue on her astonished skin.

—LEANNE PONDER

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