

Tiny Tale - Stumbling into the Ivy League

Or How I Didn't Go to that Football School

From Conni Bille

The so-called Tiger Moms and Dads of the 21st Century spend a lot of animal energy grooming cubs to claw their way into the Ivy League, because, of course, admission says as much about the Pride as about the cub. Technically, groups of tigers are called “streaks” or “ambushes” - but the leonine term “pride” is best for humans.

My parents were clueless about college admissions. My Mom had completed only two years of high school when she got a job that earned enough to support her widowed mother in 1933, so she dropped out even though she loved school dearly. My Dad, a policeman, didn't have any friends who'd gone to college. His higher education had come from *Readers Digest*. Though they were delighted by the parade of A's on my report cards, I was never nagged about my schoolwork. Indeed, I could have been a more diligent student. My class rank at high school graduation was in the top 10, not the top 2. Yet I won a full scholarship to the University of Pennsylvania. How did that happen?

My parents provided everything they could on a patrolman's salary: eyeglasses, braces for my teeth, a treasured encyclopedia, books, piano lessons, bus fare to get to Manhattan to the NY Public Library, MoMA and the Art Students League, a few dollars every week for theater tickets to Off-Broadway shows or Broadway box office leftovers. My father worked an extra job and my mother had a part-time coaching gig. They never mentioned their many little sacrifices, but I tried to thank them as I could by learning to play Chopin, winning art prizes and having a poem published in an anthology when I was 12. I was a babysitter and I did the laundry and dishes every night. But unlike Tiger parents, mine were hands-off. I was never asked to show my homework or scolded if I did not practice piano every day.

In the fall of my high school senior year, I applied to four colleges: Barnard, at Columbia University just across the river; Bennington in Vermont and Bard in New York, both considered good places for artsy students; and Douglass the women's college of Rutgers, an affordable “fallback.” I was thinking that I would major in History of Art. I when I even chose to be an Art major entered high school, to avoid the Latin requirement for Academic majors. The Art major allowed me to study two modern languages which would be needed in the field of Art History. Besides, as a Catholic I already could recite and translate the entire Latin Mass. The high school plan was entirely my own idea, as was my college application plan in the fall of 1963.

That fall, my father was helping Fred Shermond paint his house. Fred who was well-to-do, wanted to pay, but Dad would not take money from his friend, so Fred made him an offer he could not refuse: college counseling for me. Fred's only child, Charmaine, was happily enrolled at Pepperdine College in California. Charmaine had not had a very happy time in high school and her parents had been very worried about her success in college, so they took her to a private counselor who suggested Pepperdine, and to their vast relief, she was doing well. Fred was so enthusiastic about the process that he offered to send me as a gift to my Dad. How could Dad refuse that?

So one Saturday in December, Dad drove me down to Princeton, about 90 minutes away, and we met with a man in a tweedy woolen jacket. The first thing he did was put me in a room alone to take a three-hour battery of tests, like the SATs. I did not mind but I could think of more fun ways to spend a Saturday. Then Dad and I went out to lunch and returned for the counseling session.

The man in tweed seemed a bit puzzled. I think he was more accustomed to seeing teenagers whose parents' ambitions were greater than their children's. He proceeded to ask me about what I had studied in school and what I did outside of school and what interested me and what I thought I might like to study in college. So I told him about my studies in art - being allowed to go to adult evening art classes and publishing a poem at age 12, attending the children's class at the People's Art Center of the Museum of Modern Art, then for four years studying on Saturdays at the Art Students League of New York. I told him about my passion for reading and writing and theater, and how I loved foreign languages and had spent a summer in an "immersion" French language program. "But" I said, "if I wanted to be an artist, I would just stay in New York and paint. I want to study literature and history and languages too. So I think I would like to major in History of Art."

He gave a thoughtful response and recommended two schools with strong History of Art programs that I had not considered, the University of Tennessee and the University of Pennsylvania. I was to request the application forms and then complete them as soon as possible. OK. I left wondering why I had spent a whole Saturday just to get recommendations to attend two State schools - one in the middle of godforsaken Tennessee and the other a big football school in the middle of godforsaken Pennsylvania. I had even turned down an invitation to join the cheerleading squad at my high school because it interfered with my piano practice. Those schools did not seem right for me. But, hey, Fred Shermond had paid \$100 for that advice so I went along with the program.

In the olden times, before the Internet, the world ran on snail mail, not email, though the snails were a lot speedier than they are today. Applications could not be downloaded. Transcripts could not be scanned. It took time to send a request for an application, time for schools to send the applications in response, time to complete the application, time to request records from the high school, time to ask teachers to write recommendations, time to request copies of SAT scores be sent to the schools, time to request the FAFSA financial forms be sent to the institutions and time to arrange interviews and campus visits..

By the time I received the applications my high school was on winter break for the holidays. An admissions officer at Tennessee wrote me a really heart-warming three-page personal letter urging me to come there. It frankly scared me. I never completed their application., I learned when I received Penn's application, that Jan 1st was its deadline, much earlier than other schools, and I could not expect that recommendations could be done before New Year's Eve. but my school told me to send in the application anyway. So I assembled the documents in the first week of January, still wondering why I should go to a school most famous for its football team, and convinced that they would reject me because my application was late. But I now knew it was in a city and not in the middle of nowhere.

Penn wrote back and scheduled me for an on-campus interview. By that time I had learned that Penn State and the University of Pennsylvania were separate and very different institutions. A few weeks later I appeared on-campus feeling a bit sheepish and open to

learning about this venerable institution. At the sit-down interview the admissions officer did not give me any reason to think I was a strong candidate. After all, I was only 10th in my class of 385 or so, and by then I had learned that the average Penn incoming student SAT scores were as good as mine. “We get a lot of candidates with your credentials,” the interviewer said. I felt like chopped liver as Shirley Homer, my honorary Jewish mother, would say.

Shortly after that rousing encouragement, a student dressed as a billboard for a White Anglo-Saxon Protestant prep school - Madras jacket and penny loafers - politely led me and my parents on a campus tour. I suspected my guide came from a frat house that revolved around beer and scoring with girls. I vaguely remember he led us through wood-paneled Houston Hall and the garish interior of Irvine Auditorium, but the University Museum was all I needed to see. I loved every bit of it and began to wish I were a stronger candidate.

Back in the day, all college acceptances came by mail on the same day: April 15. Rejection or wait-list letters would come in thin business envelopes; acceptances would come in thick ones. When I opened the mailbox I found a big, envelope thicker than all the rest. It was from Penn and I had been awarded a four-year full scholarship along with substantial support for room and board. The other offers paled in comparison. Most hurtful was that Barnard had put me on the wait list because I lived within commuting distance and had requested on-campus residence. No way was I going to live at home! Penn would be the least expensive choice by far and I felt really happy that I could immerse myself in Penn’s University Museum without being burden on my parents and going into debt. I had no idea how I had surfaced from the tub of chopped liver.

It took more than 20 years for me to realize why Penn had been so generous. In 1989 I was purchasing guidebooks for my own son to use in his college selection process and, as I took one from the shelf at Borders bookstore, the title suddenly struck me: Lovejoy’s College Guide. Frank Lovejoy! That was the name of my college counselor! I suddenly understood that Penn must have received a recommendation letter (unbeknownst to me) from the most prestigious college counselor in America, the one who wrote “reviews” of all the institutions of higher learning in the United States, his being the ONLY college guide in 1963. I guess Penn did not want to disagree with HIM.

So I thank my Mom for her support, Dad for his sacrifices and Fred Shermond for his generosity. Especially, I thank Frank Lovejoy for his endorsement; I choose to believe he really meant it and that Penn thought I deserved it.

So that is how I stumbled into Penn.

P.S. I am convinced that Charmaine Shermond was so happy with her college choice mostly because Frank Lovejoy recommended a college 3,000 miles away from her overbearing parents. I knew Charmaine. Frank Lovejoy was a wise college counselor.