I wore the wrong shoes to my first day of work this summer. I don’t know what inspired me to choose the pointy black pair with elastic straps that dug into my ankles—I think I liked the idea of wearing them to an “office.” But by the end of the day, when my employers at the Washington, D.C., bureau of a New York tabloid sent me to the Capitol to get credentials, I regretted my decision.

It was burning hot. One of the other reporters met me on the desert-like pavement outside, and together we walked up the Hill to the entrance. By the time he’d escorted me through security and down the first corridor, he was eyeing me strangely.

“Is something wrong with your foot?” he asked.

“No,” I said, although the pain was excruciating.

“You look like you’re limping.”

“...I think I have blisters,” I said. “They really hurt.”

He smiled. “Yeah. You have to have comfortable shoes in this business. We’ll get you a cab back.”

It turned out to be a prophetic beginning. After years of building up my confidence in college, I never knew how unprepared I’d feel—not just practically but emotionally—for a few weeks in the “real” world. With graduation creeping into view, the summer internship felt like it was taking on a whole new significance. It was the end of the trial runs, the chances to drift and experiment. At last it was time to brush away the haze surrounding my goals and identity.

“So, what brings you to Washington?” the reporter asked me once we were in the cab. “You a political junkie?”

“No,” I said. “I mean, I could be. I just thought it would be interesting to, you know, write about politics.”

The smile crept back onto his face. “Write about politics?” he sighed. “Well, it’s more like making sausages, what we do here. I’m sure you’ve heard that.”

I repeated the comment to my friends. It made me sound jaded and world-weary, in step with a newfound cynicism that we’d all adopted during the past few weeks. This summer we sized up our offices, our acquaintances, and our routines with a rigorous skepticism, marveling at how much work it all took, groaning as the smooth veneer surrounding adult life peeled away before our eyes.

Which path, if any, was worth all that effort?

“You’re overanalyzing it,” my mom said on the phone. “Remember, this is life—not some kind of test or preparation. Try to enjoy yourself.”

I didn’t fully believe her. My boss took me out to lunch that week. We sat in the big dining room of a club downtown, and he told me stories from his impressive career: he’d started out younger than I was in the army communications corps. Then he’d been a White House correspondent for decades.

“Did you always know that was what you wanted to do?” I asked, poking for a streak of laziness or confusion that might facilitate our bonding.

“Yes,” he said, smiling dreamily. “For some reason I always knew it was exactly what I wanted. I never had any doubts.”
Then he asked, “So, why is it that you want to be a political reporter?”

“Well…” I stalled, the peppy, false response I’d concocted crumbling on my lips. I didn’t want to be a political reporter, I thought. I didn’t want to be like him, or Tom Brokaw, or anyone I’d seen. “I’m not really sure,” I said. “I guess I don’t know what I want.” He nodded, seeming unsurprised. As we got up to leave, he told me that I’d be going directly to a news event that afternoon. That’s when I realized I’d forgotten my brand new press pass. “It must be in the office,” I stammered.

We took the bus back. I could tell, as we watched the cars float by in silence, that he was not impressed. “You’re going to have to get with the program if you want to be a reporter,” he said after a few minutes. I nodded, feeling a burning sensation creep up the back of my neck. Somewhere beneath the swirling uncertainties, a new suspicion was forming for my employers, the point of this internship might not be about me at all.

At the office, I found plenty of clues but no single answer. I spent a lot of time with the more seasoned reporters. I liked these guys: they bantered endlessly with one another between phone calls and referred to famous politicians by their nicknames. “Listen,” said “Bill” one day, stopping me at his desk, “You’ve got to be your own boss in this business. Follow your instincts—know what I mean?” I nodded, sizing him up. He had one leg crossed over the other, and for some reason he was wearing knee-high army boots. “Is that Bill giving you advice?” somebody shouted. “Don’t listen to a word he says!”

I liked the days when “Steve,” my neighbor from down the hall, would flop down on the couch next to my desk. He chatted with everyone—security guards, cameramen, government flaks—and all his conversations crackled with genuine enthusiasm. He liked to reminisce about the days when he was my age, working as a stringer for a wire agency in western Massachusetts. “Man,” he said, leaning back on the couch and looking up at the ceiling, “those were crazy times.” I nodded, signaling that I knew what he meant—sort of. “If you’d told me I was going to end up here, I never would’ve believed you,” he said, laughing. It was strange seeing a middle-aged person express such lack of certainty. He spoke with frank wonderment about his life, and it lent him a restlessness, almost an incompleteness, that seemed to me deeply youthful. “Take your time,” he said, patting the arm of my chair. “There’s a heck of a lot you have to experience.”

Soon enough my first big experience was before me: I was to cover a press conference by Hillary Clinton. “Take good notes,” one of the reporters warned. “Hillary always makes the news.” I got there early, avoiding eye contact with the cameramen lest they recognize me as an imposter. When Hil arrived at the podium, flanked by aides and members of a concerned-parents association, I began scribbling, trying to set down every word. She read a brief statement announcing that she was proposing a new law to restrict sales of a pornographic video game. “We have to keep these games out of the hands of our children,” she said in a strong, clear voice. “It’s no wonder that many parents today feel they are fighting the battle against this overwhelming culture with their hands tied behind their backs.” She was shorter than I’d imagined. As she extended her arm, beckoning one of the speakers to the microphone, she seemed like a mother herself.

A few hours later, I sat at my desk staring at an empty Word document and trying to recall what had happened. Slowly, despairingly, I crafted a first, elaborate sentence. It looked like my English papers from the previous year: Senator Hillary Clinton announced that she will propose legislation to prevent….” I stopped. What was the point? I stared at the sentence, the letters losing their shape, hearing my editor’s words: “Keep it tight. Always go for the stronger, snappier phrase.” I sighed, bit-
ities still seemed infinite, and there still seemed to be many ways to squander all these advantages. But something had changed. Instead of imagining a big, black void after graduation, I now envisioned something along the lines of what I already knew: a routine, a familiar neighborhood, a daily task, and a set of relationships. Life would continue to be as real as it had ever been. And I now knew I could create one.

In August, when the news slowed to a trickle and most people left for vacation, I spent hours sifting through the files on my computer. One day I came across a document labeled “Diary.” It had been written by my predecessor, described to me as a bright-eyed girl from Texas. To paraphrase:

Day 7. Got in before everyone else AGAIN. Read the papers. Went over to the Senate building to do research for that story. Found a few things, nothing really good. What makes something newsworthy anyway? Came back to office. Read more papers.

Amazing. Her experience seemed exactly like mine, down to the procrastination.

Day 10. Steve took me to my first White House press conference. It was awesome! There I was, surrounded by some of the most powerful people in the world...left my cell phone at the White House. Called around to try and find it, but no dice.

I had done that, too! I could have written that entry. In fact, I could have written the entire thing. I read on, watching the mood swings, the daily triumphs and disappointments that perfectly mirrored my own. When things were going well, she was full of boundless optimism. “Bob said I did a ‘good job’ on my story today. Score!” When things were slow, she, too, had plenty of time for soul-searching, plowing through whole paragraphs trying to piece together her place in the world.

Day 27. I am going to stop being so hard on myself. That is my new goal.

That seemed like a nice goal for the summer. But from the words themselves I could tell she was only half-serious. I knew these waves of self-doubt, how they came often and without warning, and were perhaps a way for us to fend off one of the biggest realizations of the summer: that people are under no obligation to appreciate you. I saw how, as the entries proceeded, her fits of worry gave way to a smart, practical optimism. She sounded tougher and less panicky by the end of her sojourn. More adult.

One warm night in August, the reporters took me to a baseball game with a “source” from the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee. We sat high in the stands sipping beer from plastic cups, watching the speck-like players move under white lights. Soon the banter started flying, and it quickly gave way to gossip. Politics—with its rivalries, betrayals, victims, and villains—seemed even more fascinating than high school, and every bit as brutal. Everyone had a story. They’d watched people’s fortunes rise and fall, and had experienced major reversals themselves. They’d all made close friends and sour enemies. I listened intently. After a while, the attention shifted back to me.

“Hey. Why’s the kid so quiet?” one of them asked.

“She’s drunk.”

“No. I’m not,” I said.

“She’s just listening,” said the source sympathetically, offering his cup for a toast.

“Hey kid, you gonna write a tell-all book about this when you get back?”

They laughed, and I shook my head, trying to fade into the background. The days when I thought I’d launch full speed into the world, aimed like a missile at my destiny, were over. Now I was content to listen.

Elizabeth S. Widdicombe ’06 is one of the magazine’s Berta Greenwald Ledecky Undergraduate Fellows.

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**Broadway in His Blood**

Ask Michael Mitnick ’06 what kind of singing voice he has and he replies, “A bad one.” Inquire about his piano-playing skill and he remains dismissive, quickly noting, “My sister is a lot better than I am.” Mitnick will admit to being “much more of a composer than a pianist,” though even there he claims that his sister, Jenny, is his superior.

For the second-best composer in the family, Mitnick has done all right. He has written or co-written the score, lyrics, and book for four musical comedies that have been produced during his undergraduate years, including one Hasty Pudding Theatricals show. In the summer after his sophomore year, his musical Snapshots had two off-Broadway performances in New York with cast members from the Broadway show Bombay Dreams. He coauthored the script for the film Winning Caroline, a musical that was chosen as best comedy at the 2004 Ivy League Film Festival. And that “bad” baritone singing voice joins tenors and basses in the Krokdiloes, Harvard’s oldest and best-known a cappella group; this summer, Mitnick and the Kroks performed in more than a dozen countries on a six-continent tour that literally went around the world in 80 days.

A witty young man, Mitnick loves musical comedy “a bushel and a peck.” Even as a young shoot he knew what he wanted to do; at age eight, after listening to Guys and Dolls, he tried to write new lyrics to Frank Loesser’s music. “I found that very difficult to do,” he says, chuckling. But he didn’t give up his ambitions: at Fox Chapel Area High School outside Pittsburgh, Mitnick wrote his first musical, The Race, about a political campaign in a small town. “Now I cringe when I hear it,” he says, but when he and his classmates mounted the show, they raised $1,500 for charity from the receipts; he recalls that first production as “one of the best memories of my life.”

“There really is no place to go [for college] if you want to learn to write musicals,” Mitnick says, but Harvard’s track record in educating so many creators in that field appealed to him. He is well-versed in Broadway history (the Gershwins, Sondheim, and Loesser are members of his personal pantheon), and he singles out Dinah Washington’s recording of “If I Were a Bell” from Guys and Dolls as “explosively good”). He readily reels off the names of Harvard-trained giants like Leonard Bernstein ’39, D.Mus. ’67 (music for On the Town, Candide, West Side Story), Alan Jay Lerner ’40 (lyrics for My Fair Lady, Camelot), established creators like John