Getting My Feet Wet
by Liz Goodwin '08

I remember many things from my cousin's wedding—my poofy bridesmaid's dress, the humidity, how pretty the small church looked during the ceremony—but most of all, I remember the guests' advice, bestowed with dwalled urgency, about how to survive in New England. It was the summer before my freshman year of college, and my relatives (from my mother's 100-percent-Texas side of the family) were anxious to help me avoid the pitfalls of living in an arctic, Yankee-filled part of the country, referred to simply as "up there." Many of them were impressed that I was going away to Harvard, but that was not the point. The point was that I was venturing off to a far-away land, where I knew none of my future classmates and was unprepared for the conditions that awaited me.

The night before the wedding, many of us were sprawled about on deck chairs next to the hotel's pool. A distant cousin approached me and sat down.

"Have you heard about the bugs?" I replied that I had not. "They have enormous bugs up there—big as softballs! They fly into your clothes and bite you. Don't ever leave the house without some strong bug spray on." After this advice was dispensed, my cousin leaned back into the deck chair and took a sip of his beer. "You should talk to Bill, though," he added, mentioning a distant relative by marriage to whom I had hardly ever spoken. "He lived up there for a couple of years."

I had no intention of seeking out more terrifying counsel, but, Bill, it turned out, found me anyway. After exhausting the subjects of the size of the wedding party, the quality of the food, and the humidity of the day, Bill turned to my precarious future in Massachusetts.

"I only have one thing to tell you, kid." I waited in suspense, hoping to hear nothing more of enormous insects. "Never—and I mean never—get your feet wet."

I looked at him expectantly, but Bill seemed finished talking.

"Don't get your feet wet? Like when I go swimming?" I asked.

"Don't get your feet wet, period! You have to do. Just don't get them wet," he said. "That's the only way to guarantee your feet will remain dry. Do what you have to do. Just don't get them wet."

The rest of the weekend passed in a blur of photographs, dancing, and feasting. But a vague sense of foreboding accompanied me as I drove home with my parents that Sunday. My anxiety at the prospect of
leaving my hometown and family seized on my relatives' dramatic warnings, even though they would have made me laugh in other circumstances. Neither of my parents detected my unease, which quickly dissipated in the excitement of planning my departure. In a few weeks' time I was packed up and ready to go, the memory of my relatives' warnings long faded. Yet into a small inside pocket of my biggest suitcase, I slipped a precautionary container of bug spray.

Instead of scary insects or frostbite, intimidating peers confronted me at Harvard. At the first party I ever went to as a freshman, an older, immaculately dressed student asked me where I was from. When I answered, “Texas,” he said, “Oh, what a coincidence. My family owns a ranch in Montana.” I didn't see the coincidence, and this comment came to symbolize what I saw as my apartness from the smoother, more sophisticated people who surrounded me.

For most of my first year, I defined myself against Harvard and the people I categorized as a part of Harvard; it was a reassuring way of remembering who I was and reminding myself that I belonged somewhere. In spite of my previous longing to go far away for college, and the fact that I never quite felt like I completely fit in with my hometown, I began to cling to the identity of the girl from Texas. I latched onto this chosen identity because I felt legitimately threatened by people who seemed to share a common language learned in high schools where going to the Ivy League was the norm, instead of the exception. I sensed that if I, too, tried to use this language it would sound false, so I rejected it and cultivated my own. I told myself that I had to get along with “these people” for a few years: adapt, yet not take on, their bizarre customs.

By the end of my freshman year, however, my plan of autonomous survival had become more complicated. I had learned to use stories from my hometown to amuse my peers, and to define a more comfortable spot for myself among them. I told my classmates about the high-school parties we had in empty pastures, or about friends my age who had married or had children, or about an acquaintance’s antiquated (and in Cambridge, even foreign-seeming) prejudices or beliefs. It did not exactly feel treacherous, since I often laughed at those things myself when I lived at home.

But in laughing at the very background that I wanted so desperately to define myself by, I also gained distance from it. I noticed that my slight drawl had disappeared, leaving only the word “y’all” and nothing else. I no longer viewed people who ridiculed less sophisticated and less urban swaths of America as irreconcilably different from me. The “Texas Girl” identity I had chosen no longer fit as snugly, much like the roomy winter coat I bought in a rushed trip to the mall in October. I suppose that, despite being warned, I had gotten my feet wet, and there was no going back.

Having integrated much of my experience in “Yankee-country,” it became difficult to cross over between home and school. Instead of a welcome respite, being back in Texas felt like a strange species of limbo.

A party at a friend’s house during Christmas break only underscored my in-between state. Because almost everyone there attended a major state college or was still living in our hometown, the guests were all intimately involved in each other’s lives, as if high school had never ended. At this party, relationships strengthened or weakened, subtle hierarchies formed and reformed, and a few people’s semester-long romantic hopes were realized or dashed. Everyone else seemed so inextricably connected to each other in webs of familial, romantic, or social involvement, yet I felt completely apart—like an out-of-towner who has wandered into a party by mistake. A few friends
asked me how Harvard was going and then stood silently in front of me, out of things to say. My best friend was with me, which made the experience less isolating, but I could not shake the feeling that my past, instead of waiting patiently for my return, had swept on ahead of me, heedlessly, and that I would never catch up.

This sense of in-between-ness, of not quite fitting in anywhere, is, of course, the stuff of growing up, canonized in coming-of-age literature and discussed by young people everywhere. Yet my own experience felt immensely personal and uniquely troubling, as most of my close friends, both in Texas and at Harvard, did not feel the same disconnect between their hometown lives and their lives at college. I had achieved an uneasy truce between two worlds, but I longed for something more definite and more comfortable. I wanted a home.

When my mom called last October to tell me my grandfather had died, I was printing out my Portuguese paper in Lamont Library. I sat down in the stairwell, clutching my cell phone, and listened to her news. He had been very sick for several months, and I had thought I was prepared for his death, but sadness washed over me anyway, submerging my desire to go to class or turn in my paper. I bought a plane ticket to the funeral a few hours later, and left my Harvard worries—my thesis proposal, classes, duties at the Crimson—in Cambridge.

Some of the same people who had attended my cousin's wedding three years earlier were at the funeral, which was a big event despite my grandfather's desire for a small graveside service. His female cousins cooked pounds and pounds of peach cobbler, and a group of Comanches, whom my grandfather befriended decades ago, chanted and beat drums by his grave. A military honor guard laid a flag over his casket for his service in the Second World War. As the former editor of the local newspaper, he had known a wide variety of people, as was evident in the diversity of the crowd. While I remembered him as quiet and shy, preferring to be out with his cows rather than participating in rowdy family discussions, many of the people at the funeral remembered him as an inspiring boss with a sly sense of humor, or as the "midnight cowboy" because of the odd hours he spent in his pastures.

I could not help but absorb the scene hungrily, appreciating its strangeness and narrative value as I never would have done had I not gone away and adapted to a different world. Although deeply moved by the service, a part of me was observing instead of participating, caught up by the same watchful feeling that accompanies me everywhere as a partial outsider, half-adapted to two very different environments.

As people were heading to their cars to drive over to the reception, a squat lady dressed all in black, with long, gray hair, approached me.

"Are you the granddaughter that goes to Harvard?" she asked. "I hear you are writing a book about his life and how wonderful a person he was. I'm so happy you're writing that book."

I was startled by her words, and shocked that this rumor was making its way through the crowd. Yet as she went on to describe how she met my grandfather (when he wrote an article about her getting snowed in with her 13 collies), I found myself taking mental notes, wondering to myself at the world's strangeness, at the sheer vastness of experience that one human life is granted in 80 years. During his life, my grandfather had been many different people to those who knew him, yet they loved him more—not less—for his versatility. It really would make a good book, I thought. She left, and I stood there alone for a little while before walking quickly to catch up to my family, and to drive home.

Berta Greenwald Ledecky Undergraduate Fellow
Liz Goodwin '08 is not exactly writing her grandfather's biography, but is, at least, finished with her senior thesis.

SPORTS

Leap, Arch, and Tuck

Raising the bar

crimus, Altius, Fortius—that's the Olympic motto: faster, higher, stronger. Altius is Becky Christensen's specialty. The junior high jumper, who hails from the small town of Celina, Texas, north of Dallas, won the Heptagonal Championships, took second at the ECACs, and finished fourth at the 2008 NCAA indoor track and field championships this spring. For her finish in the top eight nationally, she was named an all-American indoors, one of only three Crimson women high jumpers ever to earn that honor. At the meet, Christensen missed twice at 1.80 meters before clearing the bar on her third and final try. When the bar was raised to 1.83 meters, or six feet, she cleared it on her first jump, tying her personal best, set outdoors last year against Yale. Christensen has always jumped better outdoors, so her performance thus far bodes well for the upcoming season and her ultimate goal: a trip to the Olympic trials, which she could clinch with a jump of 1.85 meters.

Christensen says she first tried the high jump in elementary school, during a "track and field day when you could pick any event." She discovered that she was "pretty okay at it." (When asked, she acknowledges that she won, yes, "but there were only seven people in the class.")

In high school she got serious about her interest. In the Texas state championships, she placed third as a freshman in her division, then second as a sophomore, and finally won first in her junior and senior years. "I'm not sure how Harvard found me," she says, but former field-events