

On the Roof

I was seventeen years old and sitting on a flat roof in Massachusetts. When I looked out from the roof, I saw blue sky, an expanse of blue, with ball-shaped cumulus clouds, clouds scattered like billiard balls after a big break, tossed here and there without reason or explanation. I was on the roof of my freshman dorm, a four-story brick building called Parker Hall, about ten days into my first year at Harvard—Harvard College, that is, the undergraduate part of the school, not one of the grad schools scattered through the nearby neighborhoods. Geography-wise, I was about a mile from the banks of the Charles River, in Cambridge, Massachusetts. I was in New England, postal code 02138. Not in the Cambridge that is in England. The Cambridge in America is about three hundred and fifty years old but is still a newbie, not the medieval and monarchical original.

Parker Hall was an all-guys dorm. Ninety guys were assigned to live in the dorm. The dormitory was originally an apartment building that the school had bought to house students about twenty-five years earlier.

Just about all the guys assigned to the dorm lived in three-person suites. After buying the original apartment building, the school's building department had ripped out all the kitchens and made the one-bedroom apartments into three-person suites.

The suites had a living room and two bedrooms. But the force of economics being what it was, a person was assigned to each room, including the living room. So if you wanted, you and your two roommates could decide that two of you would bunk up in one of the bedrooms, keeping the living room free. But just about nobody did that; instead, each group decided on someone to live in the living room, giving each person their own space.

There was a big, four-story entry hall as you came in the front door of the building. And then you had open stairways going up to the fourth floor, with the suites on the upper floors looking out onto the open stories of the entry hall.

Not bad for a converted apartment building. Everyone who lived there just thought of it as their freshman dorm.

And now, there we were on the roof of the building, twenty-four guys assigned to live on the first floor of the dorm. Scattered on the hard, pebble covered roof of the building, we had been invited there to hear a presentation by our new resident advisor, known as an RA.

This RA, a guy named Joe Stella, was a Harvard MBA student in the first year of his master's program. And Stella was very high up in the RA hierarchy. He was the RA not just for one floor, like other RAs, but for the building as a whole. What the RAs were going to advise us on was not clear, but at least we were going to have a lot of advisors. Already, we had learned that there were no more parietals, which was what the college administrators had called the dorm rules relating to how you conducted yourself. After the rolling explosion of the 1960s, the school had decided it would no longer act as anybody's parent while they were at the school. There were no curfews, we had learned, no rules against overnight guests, no dress codes, no rules against opposite-sex guests, no rules against beer or liquor in the rooms.

But an RA was assigned to each floor, just like when the RAs back in the early sixties had been the school's eyes and ears with a ton of rules to enforce. Not like now, when there were hardly any rules at all.

Stella, a tall man, about 6'4", his build lank and rangy. Completing the grown-up picture was a white collared shirt, fine gray wool pants, and shiny, black, lace-up shoes, the kind students wouldn't wear unless they were interviewing or graduating.

Stella had a strong chin like a movie actor and could speak very earnestly. Overall he gave you the message that he was going to impart important institutional knowledge, even though we were just lounging around on the pebbly roof. But thinking about it, where else could he give a big presentation in the dorm? The building was packed with three-person suites, except for a laundry room with washers and dryers and a Coke machine in the basement, but there was not enough room to hold even ten students there, much less a crowd of twenty-four.

Stella was a charismatic guy; you could tell that right away. He was a confident speaker, with an infectious grin that became apparent when he felt like showing it off and he had a big swoop of brown hair over a good part of his forehead.

He was maybe twenty-six years old, but to the freshmen on the roof, he was a font of wisdom and experience, as if he had been on the earth for fifty or sixty years.

A lot of us had already heard the inside word on Stella. His claim to fame was not just that he had made it into the business school after graduating from the college and working at Merrill Lynch in New York for a few years, but that he had also played varsity football, where he made some big plays during a famous game to cap off his senior year. Besides being a varsity footballer, Stella had won some prizes in Latin I had heard.

The famous football game was against Yale, the school's archrival. Harvard was down by quite a bit with just two minutes to go. The Harvard team scored sixteen points in the last two minutes to tie the game. A totally even score and a wild two minutes to cap off the game. The school paper, the *Harvard Crimson*, took it even further, screaming out in a banner-sized headline: "Harvard Beats Yale 29-29." The paper called it a victory, even though it was an even game.

"We had a really good team. There was no way to hold us back at the end," Stella said about the famous game, smiling broadly, white teeth gleaming, at the rooftop crowd. Everyone was spread out around Stella in a geometric form, a half circle broken up by assorted smokestacks and steam vents scattered on the roof.

Like Buddha and his disciples, all of the students found a way to sit or sprawl on the flat roof, an invisible line connecting each of them to Stella's smile.

"What position did you play?" Rusty, one of my two assigned roommates asked. Rusty was a Midwestern guy like me, coming from Indianapolis, just up the road from me in Ohio.

"Wide receiver," Stella said, looking wistful about days come and gone. "I was fast and light back then." Stella broke into another smile and said the line just about everyone must have known was coming. "As opposed to now, post grad. Really heavy and slow."

Everybody on the roof laughed politely at that one. Stella started to tell us more about how it had been back then during the big game.

“At one point, we were down twenty-two to nothing,” Stella said, looking inward as he thought about it, “but we weren’t giving up. Even if we didn’t agree on a lot of things, we had each other’s backs.”

“What didn’t you agree on?” The guy asking the question was on the floor in front of Stella. He had brown hair swooped in a part in front that covered a lot of his forehead.

The guy’s name was Brett, from Manchester, New Hampshire, he had told me when I met him. He played hockey and lacrosse in high school but said he wasn’t going to play in college. Incredibly, despite all the stereotypes he also told me he collected stamps.

Stella glanced over our heads to check out the ball-shaped clouds, then filled us in.

“You have to picture the times we were playing in,” Stella answered cheerfully. “It was 1968—just six years ago- in the heat of the war in Vietnam. Some of the guys were in the Students for a Democratic Society. You know, the SDS. Totally against the war.”

“SDS,” Brett repeated, shaking his head like he didn’t care for the group.

“Yes, they had quite the reputation, SDS,” Stella acknowledged. “At some schools, they even set off bombs to protest the war.”

“Our SDS guys didn’t set off any bombs,” Stella hurried to explain, “but they were definitely set against the whole conflict.”

“How about the rest of the team?” Brett asked Stella.

“We had a couple players on the team,” Stella answered carefully, “that had been over there, served in the war. They were in the battle of Khe San, fighting the North Vietnamese army and the Viet Cong, and then they returned to campus. Those guys still had friends over there fighting.

They felt like it was disloyal not to stick up for their buddies who hadn't come home yet. And they didn't like being called fascists just for doing their duty."

"Weren't there some arguments about that?" said Peter, a preppy-looking guy with bright red pants and a white, button-down shirt. Peter was thin but had a very deep and baritone voice.

"No, not at all," Stella replied. "It didn't affect the team. We all forgot about it whenever we came to practice. And even more so when we were out on the field."

Just about everybody on the roof nodded at that. Guys had come to school from all over, from New York to Texas, Florida to California. Ones with long hair down to their shoulders or short buzz cuts, all forgetting about what was going on in the world, just getting out there to play their sport.

A guy with a button-up, collared shirt, proud face and hair so straight it could have been ironed, had a question that could have been a comment. "So football is the opiate of the people, then?" he asked Stella. There wasn't any confrontation in his voice, a flat and level delivery.

"We just felt like we were playing a football game," Stella replied, remaining calm. "But maybe there's some truth to your comment. I really couldn't say."

Another little hubbub ensued, complete with shaking heads, a few laughs, rolled eyes, and the repetition of "opiate of the people." Stella didn't look upset at the uproar and sat cross-legged in his spot, face very calm. For some reason, the question didn't bother him.

Now a new student spoke up. A student I hadn't seen yet, tall and lean with straight black hair and a thin but chiseled face. This guy apparently decided he had to move things along. "Well, what words of wisdom do you have for us freshmen, just starting out here?"

Something about this guy made you take another look. He was wearing a yellow, button-down shirt, the buttons at the end of the collars unbuttoned. He wore faded blue jeans with beat-up topsiders sprawled out in front of him on the pebbled roof.

“Good question,” Stella replied his eyes checking out the new student.

Whenever you asked a question or spoke up in a setting like the one on the roof, you knew the question or comment was going to be heard by a lot of people. And you also knew that pretty much all of them would be looking at you when you spoke up.

The guy with the opiate comment had kept his head down when he spoke. But the lanky guy was more than relaxed, devil may care. Like he was a newscaster on TV, and Stella was on his show, not the other way around. He held his head up, calm and collected, like the attention didn't bother him, not even a teeny bit.

“What's your name?” Stella asked the lanky guy,

“Have to start somewhere,” Stella added, breaking into a grin.

“Drew,” the lanky guy said, pushing the black hair back from his eyes, still deadpan with no trace of a smile. “Drew Taylor.”

Stella nodded, then looked around at the group before turning back to Drew. “To answer your question. A good answer would be to decide what you want to do, what your mission is going to be. And then stay with that mission. Don't give up, especially when all the chips are down.”

“Never say never, in other words?” Drew asked coolly, deadpan, like he was the anchor on the evening news.

Stella looked at Drew and smiled. “True, but sometimes there are exceptions—you know, the kind of exceptions that prove the rule.”

“There are, times,” Stella went on, “when you have to give up. When you don't want to stay with the mission or be the guy that's not scared to quit.”

Everybody looked from side to side and started muttering at that one, where was Stella going with this. It appeared like he was totally changing course.

“To illustrate,” Stella explained, spreading out both hands, palms up, “there was the student here a few years ago. He was a freshman just like you.”

“He was lucky just to be here,” Drew, said, looking off at the clouds above Stella’s head.

Stella arched his eyebrows as he glanced over at Drew, then continued his tale.

“You would know this guy’s name, if I told you,” Stella elaborated. “It’s not for me to say exactly who but let me put it this way.”

“This guy was like a big politician’s son, like a senator’s son, a congressman’s son, a mayor’s son, something along that line. You know the type of person...”

The reference and touch of mystery sparked our interest, and the rooftop grew quiet, prior mutterings now suppressed.

“And this guy,” Stella went on brightly, “decides he’s going to jump from this roof, this roof right here, to the dorm right over there. Jump to the one called Hurlburt.”

“*And the guy does it,*” Stella let us know, quickly standing from his seated position. Getting on his feet with a spring, showing some of the agility that had helped him in the fateful game six years before.

“The guy stands right at the edge of Parker Hall, takes a running start, and jumps about eight feet across the gap between the buildings. And this student is jumping what—four stories—about forty feet above the ground.”

“A death-defying leap,” Brett, the guy from New Hampshire commented, keeping his voice level to show that he meant it.

“Was this guy drunk?” A mountainous looking student with massive neck and shoulders asked, a student sitting at the edge of the gathered crowd. This guy was huge, about 6'7", his head topped with a jaunty black beret, the kind you might find on someone from Europe. like from France maybe.

Stella visibly scanned the new guy, his mouth starting to crinkle into the beginning of a grin. If Stella were an assistant coach, he would have been thinking about recruitment right then.

“No,” Stella answered. “Believe it or not, the student making the leap was sober—stone cold sober.”

“Now there are some pretty good drinking games the upperclassmen and grad students can show you. Heck, I’ll show you one if you stop by. But the student making that leap hadn’t drunk a drop.”

Everyone on the roof was eighteen or older. I was about to turn eighteen in a few weeks. The statewide drinking age in Massachusetts, like in a lot of other states, had been reduced to eighteen. The original idea was that if you were old enough to go to Vietnam, you were old enough to drink. Old enough, wise enough, to drink anything—not just special, low-alcohol beer, but fully endowed beer, Colt 45 in cans, and any kind of wine, champagne, or hard liquor—vodka, gin, tequila, you name it.

“And a big rule to follow,” Stella went on, taking in everyone with his eyes, “should be to never drink on a roof. Don’t drink in a place where you could fall.

But the student we were talking about hadn’t been drinking at all. And the thing is, before doing something like that is you have to stop your mind on the spot, freeze that mischief mind, and just don’t do it.

“Don’t be the fearless guy. Give up before you even think about trying it,” Stella said, for some reason grinning at all of us. “That’s the exception that proves the rule, in other words. Don’t give up, except when you shouldn’t start in the first place.”

Still standing up on the roof, in his white shirt and gray wool pants, you could see the businessman in Stella. Maybe he’d be a big executive someday. He could show you the different sides of the same coin and make it damn entertaining. The crowd up there, underneath the blue sky and ball-shaped clouds, was captivated. But Stella wasn’t done with his story.

“Now this guy,” Stella continued, sitting back down on the pebbles covering the flat roof, “who jumped between the two buildings, I’m not going to say the student’s name, but when he first applied to the school, guess what he does?”

“He tells the school he’s a track and field guy—a long jumper,” Drew said, using a level voice like he wasn’t trying to be funny, but of course we all know he was.

“No,” Stella says, smiling amiably as he shook his head. “Get this.”

“Now you guys,” Stella explained “you all write out the answers to three or four essay questions on your application. And it’s not easy, right? Hard to pick your topics and then you have to sweat over what you’re going to say. A lot of stress because you want to get into the school.”

Just about everybody on the roof nodded at that. We had all gone through it, about nine months before.

“But this particular student,” Stella goes on, increasing the tempo of his voice, “he doesn’t bother with any of the essay questions on the application to get into the school. He just signs his name. Jr. maybe, or the third, let’s say. Everybody knows his dad’s name, I won’t say who, but you’d probably know it as well. He just writes his name in big, cursive script and turns in his application.”

“And he gets in?” Brett asked in an incredulous tone.

“Yes,” Stella responds, jovial. “He gets in. Just signs his name in big letters across the page, doesn’t bother to write even one of the four essays, and they let him in.”

“Well you knew he got in,” Stella concluded, “or else he wouldn’t be jumping forty feet off the ground, off this roof right here.”

The group descended into amiable chaos at that line, yeah rights and gees and duhs sounding out over the smoke-stacked roof.

Stella looked around contentedly, satisfied with the chaos he had wrought. Then Stella got serious.

“So here’s the thing,” Stella went on, after waiting for everyone to quiet down.

“There’s a whole lot of smart people here. Also famous people, and famous people’s kids here. Some of the other RAs are Rhodes scholars. They got full scholarships after college to go to Oxford in England. And they can tell you how they won, so maybe you could do it too.”

“Other RAs,” Stella continued, “were Marshall scholars or Truman scholars. Truman scholarships are for students interested in public service. Different people can tell you how to apply for one of those. You have math whizzes, music prodigies, people who write operas in their dorm rooms.”

“And a lot of this,” Stella went on, “is over my head. I’m just a student at the B-school, a guy who was supposed to catch the ball in a couple of games. There’ll be a lot of people to ask questions of, about whatever you want to know.”

“Even pre-med questions?” a student named Sam asked. Sam lived a few rooms down from me. His long, sun-bleached hair was parted like a surfer from out West and he had already told me he was from California.

“Not from me,” Stella answered brightly. “I don’t know a carbon molecule from H₂O.”

“But there will be plenty of other people,” Stella went on, “to tell you whatever it is you want to know. So what can I show you, what can I tell you? What can I give you to make your time better here at school?”

A new voice spoke up out of the crowd. “Where to buy a decent TV?” a student asked in a slow, Southwestern drawl. He was from Oklahoma, Brett had told me.

Stella looked at the new student and shook his head. “Well, you’re on your own for that one,” Stella said, channeling the mood of the little crowd.

Why would anyone need a TV on campus anyway? You had to wonder. The Watergate hearings were over. Gerald Ford was president, and he was a bit soporific, a decent guy pushed above his pay grade, not to mention the fact that he had gone to Yale.

American soldiers weren’t in Vietnam anymore, although they were in Navy boats offshore and at the big embassy in Saigon and America was still funding the South Vietnamese. So there wasn’t much Vietnam on the nightly news, like there had been when the boys were still over there. In 1969, there were over half a million American soldiers in Vietnam.

Here at school, you might want to watch an occasional *All in the Family* or *Mash* or *Monday Night Football* with Howard Cosell, but generally, you would have better things to do with your time.

“Nothing to tell you about getting a TV,” Stella concluded, blowing past the Oklahoma guy’s question.

“And” Stella went on, looking over the rest of the little crowd, “there will be plenty of time for serious questions. How to navigate this place, figure out what’s what at the school, pick your classes, choose your major. No way I could help you with all those questions. So instead, I’ll finish up by showing you something else. If you stop by later, at my place up on the third floor, I’d be happy to show you some pretty good drinking games. But that’s not it, either.”

Behind Stella’s head, the ball-shaped clouds were piling up, gray newly visible on their undersides, clouds starting to crowd out the blue of the sky.

“Now,” Stella said with a flourish after peering up to check out the sky, “what I can tell you up here, after your first week or so of school...”

Stella’s shiny black business shoes were stuck out in front of him, as he paused to make sure everybody was looking his way.

“What I can tell you is how to make a perfect martini, the king of drinks.”

There wasn’t a lot of noise on the roof after that one, a few hmms and ahs but also a few glassed-over eyes. Some of these freshmen, you had to remind yourself, had done nothing but study to get here.

“Seriously, this drink,” Stella went on after a pause, “will cap off a difficult week, provide an award for a job well done, and attract high-class, sophisticated women. What else could you ask for, from me?”

“And keep this in mind. Other guys will be pouring warm beer in Styrofoam cups,” Stella added enthusiastically, “and you will be attracting the classy women like magnets, pouring your martinis. Showing you’ve been around and you know what’s going on.”

The crowd on the roof warmed up to the idea, yeahs and rights creating a revived hubbub all around the head RA.

“Gin, vermouth, and ice,” Stella elaborated, beaming as he recited the magic ingredients.

“So you’re saying that’s it—that’s all we need?” Brett asked.

“Yes, that’s true. But what you need now is to master the portions. Get it down so you’ll never forget,” Stella responded.

“Two to one for just a regular martini,” Stella elaborated, in a serious tone. “Three to one for moderately dry (putting special emphasis on the word *moderately*). Four to one for dry.”

“Remember this,” Stella advised, “the first number is always gin, the second is vermouth.”

Everyone nodded at that, although no one whipped out a pen or anything. What Stella was saying was intriguing but most of the crowd was still waiting for a punchline.

Stella looked around and slowly made eye contact with about eight or nine of us.

“But the perfect martini, this you’ll want to remember, is extra-dry. Five to one,” Stella announced like he was stating the be-all, end-all formula. “Five to one is extra-dry, the perfect martini, the ultimate drink.

Some hardballers will tell you that to make a very dry martini, just take out the vermouth, ‘introduce it’ to the gin, and then only pour the gin.”

Stella paused to let that sink in and then shook his head. The crowd on the roof remained silent. We were all waiting for an audible – which way to go on that one.

“But then,” Stella pointed out, giving us a big clue, “all you really have is gin.”

“So you want five to one,” Stella concluded, holding up his right hand to show five fingers, and then his left hand to show one. “And you can tell everyone it’s the perfect extra-dry martini. Noone, no one at all, will be able to question you.”

“How do you actually make it, though?” Brett asked.

“Good question,” Stella responded. “I almost left that part out.”

“So you can pour it in a shaker and shake it. Use a metal shaker. Who’s seen one of those?”

“We all have,” Brett replied. “James Bond.”

“Exactly. Shaken not stirred is the Bond way,” Stella replied, nodding and grinning at the crowd. “Or you can forget about that and put the mix over ice and stir it.”

“Just stir it,” Stella said. “Stir it just right, don’t stir it too hard, and the ladies will be happy. Then everybody’s happy.”

Stella beamed, looking from one freshman to the next. Everybody on the roof started out smiling but then started to crack up, laughing and shaking their heads, cracking up like guys will do sometimes in a group, just as the first raindrops started to fall.