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HARVARD

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The student weekly since 1969



CONTENTS

3. Coming Up at the Institute of Politics

by Calvin Frank '28, Rania Jones '27,
and Sara Kumar '27

4. Navigating Israel:

Conversations and Controversy

by Pippa Lee '28

6. Cards That Will Make You

"Pop" With Joy

by Calvin Frank '28

7. Serving With Love

by Wessal Bakry '28

8. The Tragedy of the Comment

by Jonah Karafiol '26

9. A Space for Grief

by Caroline Stohrer '28

10. to love me, to love me not

by anonymous

12. Candy Hearts

by El Richards '26

14. Paris Vous Aime: Feeling

Loved by the City of Love

by Frances Connors '26

15. I Now Pronounce You Debt

Free

by Molly Callaghan '27

16. Thoughts from New Quincy

by Luke Wagner '26

17. The Florecitas

by Layla Chaaraoui '26

18. My WOY's Wicked Smaht

by Rania Jones '27 and Mia Tavares '27

19. I Think I'm Lovestruck

by Hannah Davis '25

Love Poems, Redefined

by Aidan Fitzsimons '25

20. How to be Single on

Valentine's Day

by Anonymous

Six Poems You Shouldn't

Send To Your Brand New

Situationship

by Shameless Shakespeare '27

21. Sports Spotlight: Robert

Hinton

by Mia Wilcox '28

22. Behind the Disc

by Kayla Reifel '26

23. Consider Me Consoled

by Jordan Wasserberger '27

24. Cross Your Heart

by Fred Klein '28

About the *Independent*

As Harvard College's weekly undergraduate newspaper, the *Harvard Independent* provides in-depth, critical coverage of issues and events of interest to the Harvard College community. The *Independent* has no political affiliation, instead offering diverse commentary on news, arts, sports, and student life.

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NEWS

Coming up at the Institute of Politics

A look into the IOP's record-breaking spring application season and what they have in store for the future.

BY KALVIN FRANK '28, RANIA JONES '27, AND SARA KUMAR '27

The Harvard Institute of Politics brought in record-breaking application numbers for the Spring 2025 semester. As of Feb. 10, the IOP received 788 applications across its 16 programs—including nearly 200 first-time submissions. At such a critical juncture in American and global politics, this growth speaks to a rising interest in civic leadership and public service among the Harvard undergraduate student body.

The *Harvard Independent* was joined by IOP President Tenzin Gund-Morrow '26, Vice President Summer Tan '26, Treasurer Kevin Bokoum '26, and Communications Director Lorenzo Ruiz '27 to discuss the specifics of this uptick. After being elected to their new executive board positions in November 2024, the four are optimistic about leading the organization through such an expansive time.



Application Excitement

“These numbers are some of the largest ever for a spring semester that we’ve seen, especially considering that this isn’t an election year that we’re in. This is right *after* an election year,” Ruiz said.

There were “a surprising amount of STEM and pre-med track applicants compared to our usual slate of Gov and Econ,” Tan added.

The Fellows and Study Group program particularly had a great season, receiving 284 applications, the most in the program’s history. “That is just so awesome, especially as we mark a week since the fellows have set foot on Harvard campus. It just shows how excited everyone is to be seeing them,” Tan continued.

The IOP’s CIVICS program, which recruits and trains students to teach civics to elementary school students in the Boston area weekly, also boasted an impactful number of applications. “We were really proud, because there’s a lot of interest in doing civic education right now as education in the civic space becomes more and more contested,” Gund-Morrow said.

The team noted a similar upward trajectory in other IOP programs, including the John F. Kennedy Junior Forum with 192 new applicants, the Policy Program and the Women’s Initiative in Leadership, each with close to 70, and the Harvard Public Opinion Project with 61. The recently established Coalition for the Arts also received the most applications in the coalition’s history.

Looking at past application numbers, the grade distribution across applicants was

particularly compelling. “Usually...a program like that is something you join freshman year and stay in for all four years,” explained Gund-Morrow. This year, however, IOP leadership “were very excited to see that, and there’s a renewed interest.”

In contrast to such projections, the IOP received roughly 400 freshman, 250 sophomore, 100 junior, and 80 senior applicants. The Harvard Political Review specifically saw resurgence in membership for their program, with multiple juniors deciding to comp the journal. Such numbers demonstrate continued student body incentive to engage with domestic and international politics.

“I think one thing is, after an election year, oftentimes, you expect people to be really tired,” Gund-Morrow elaborated.

Surprisingly, the 2024 election seemed to have the opposite effect on the IOP application season.

“I think people that were exhausted with the election cycle were much more excited than they might have otherwise been,” Gund-Morrow said. “[The IOP is] a place to become public servants, and get leadership training, and find community, and reflect on the world around you in a critical way, with a wonderful community of students that are editing your work.”

The IOP shifted its image to mitigate potential disinterest in politics following such an extensive election season. “One thing that we tried to work really hard on is messaging out very early on that our programming has many facets and is not just focused on the election, and it’s not just focused on now thinking about what happened last year but [is] very forward-looking,” reflected Gund-Morrow.

The Global Affairs Program

Since the IOP was founded in 1966, the organization has broadened its scope and political coverage by adding new initiatives. “[The IOP has] added now three or four new programs in just the past few years alone,” said Tan. However all of these programs are unique endeavors for the Institute, the newest Global Affairs Program is especially pertinent in the status quo.

After noticing considerable interest within the existing Coalition for Global Affairs, the IOP decided to form this distinct initiative. “The Global Affairs Program came because a lot of people on campus saw that the IOP spent a lot of time and money focusing on domestic politics,” Gund-Morrow elaborated. “We’re really interested, and amazingly interested, in the world directly around us, and in engaging with Boston, and engaging with voting and registering voters in America, and so we wanted to make sure that those people felt like they had a home at the IOP.”

A highlight of the new program’s plans for the semester includes the implementation of an international voting system, which allows the program to incentivize international Harvard students to vote in major elections occurring outside of the United States. The team shared their excitement for the new initiative: “It’s about really keeping a passionate and politically active

international student community on campus,” added Tan.

The Global Affairs Program had almost 200 applicants, the most ever to a brand new IOP initiative. “Global affairs immediately pulling these types of strong numbers is a really good sign for us,” Tan stated.

Future Steps

With the constantly changing state of politics, the IOP has plans to adapt and change for the future to continue the success they have seen this past year. The IOP has been very extracurricular-based, but in the future, “we’re trying to open up access to more than what you might traditionally think of as public service—for example, our summer stipends,” Tan said. She explained that students can receive funding over the summer for public service they participate in.

Regarding the IOP’s financial plans, Gund-Morrow explained that the IOP will remain an accessible organization to everyone, no matter their economic situation: “Public service is accessible to people of all economic backgrounds.”

The IOP team shared how the organization remains an intellectual institution committed to engaging students from all walks of life on a non-partisan basis, a mission that retains significant importance amidst our current political climate. “You can go to Harvard Democrats, Harvard Republicans to find people that were on either side of what was a huge election, with unprecedented turnout from this campus in particular, which we’re really proud of,” Gund-Morrow said. “But I think what makes the IOP special is not its capability to feed people into partisan politics.”

The IOP strives to cultivate spaces where students, regardless of their political beliefs, can come together to discuss pressing issues and take meaningful action.

“We’re a place that spends a lot of time talking about party politics and elections,” said Ruiz, “but we’re also a place for people who want to get out in the community, to roll up their sleeves and have a direct impact on the ways that we engage with society.”

Even after an election, it’s clear to the Harvard community that the IOP is a place that offers pathways to public service that extend beyond the tired party politics, and it’s that same perspective that’s going to enable the IOP to continue to resonate and to continue to build numbers across Harvard for years to come,” Gund-Morrow said.

KALVIN FRANK '28 (KFRANK@COLLEGE.HARVARD.EDU), RANIA JONES '27 (RJONES@COLLEGE.HARVARD.EDU), AND SARA KUMAR '27 (SJKUMAR@COLLEGE.HARVARD.EDU) ARE LOOKING FORWARD TO THE FUTURE OF THE IOP.

PHOTO COURTESY OF HARVARD INSTITUTE OF POLITICS

Navigating Israel: Conversations and Controversy

A look at on-campus conversations surrounding student-led trips to Israel following Oct. 7.

BY PIPPA LEE '28

After a year-long hiatus, an adapted version of the Harvard College Israel Trek returned, taking 46 undergraduates to the region from Jan. 17 to Jan. 25. Unlike Treks in the past, this trip was the first one to take place during Wintersession and the first one not advertised to the entire College.

The trip has generated significant discourse and debate across campus in previous years. The affiliated student organizations, Harvard Chabad and Harvard Hillel, hail the annual Israel Trek as an opportunity to celebrate Jewish heritage and foster cross-cultural dialogue. Others, such as the Harvard Palestinian Solidarity Committee (PSC), have condemned past annual Israel Treks, arguing that it promotes a one-sided narrative and ignores Palestinian experiences.

Israel Trek 2025 plans to return in March during the College's spring recess, similar to past years. However, the *Harvard Independent* spoke to students participating in the unique Wintersession version to learn more about the trip.

This particular Israel Trek marked a significant shift, as it was exclusively for Jewish students, unlike the usual format of past Spring trips. These changes prompted questions about how the trip was advertised and the accessibility of the application process.

When asked how this winter trip was promoted, senior Robert Fogel '25 commented on the different targeted demographic compared to usual Israel Treks. "It was advertised within the Jewish community. I think there were definitely signs at Hillel. I do think they did get the word out there, just maybe beyond the Jewish community, it wasn't heard so much because that wasn't their target audience," Fogel said.

Others found out about this version of Israel Trek through their peers. "I'm a part of the veteran community," Richard Glazunov '25 said. "So one of the Israeli veterans, Doron, hit me up. We met before, so I told him that I was Jewish, and I guess this winter, they were doing a Trek for Jewish students. So he hit me up and asked me if I was interested. And I said, sure, I'll check it out."

Although he couldn't fully remember its entirety, Glazunov recalled

his process for joining Israel Trek. "There was some sort of application form. And then there was a short interview with one of the leaders, and then they let me know that I would be going on the Trek," Glazunov said.

However, regardless of how students heard about the trip, undergraduates chose to participate for various reasons, ranging from personal connections to Israel to a desire for a deeper cultural and political understanding of the region.

The trip was an opportunity to reconnect with Israel after disrupted plans for some participants.

"I was inspired to join the Israel Trek because I took a gap year in Israel last year, but it was cut short [and] the schedule was changed around because of Oct. 7,"



Ben Hyman '28 said. "I felt like I didn't get as much time in Israel as I wanted, and I thought there was no better way to experience Israel than with a group of kids your age."

For other participants, such as Adrian Maydanich '28, this unique Trek was an opportunity to deepen their understanding of the country's cultural and religious significance.

"We were able to see the Temple Mount, Church of the Holy Sepulchre, and the Western Wall—some of the holiest sites across three different religions—in a single day," he said. "I don't think many people are able to say that. Having the knowledge that I'd be able to share these experiences with my peers, who were all just as passionate as I am about the country, really pushed me to apply."

Glazunov joined the Trek to learn more about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and hear new viewpoints.

"I wanted to learn more about the conflict outside of a purely Western perspective. And this doesn't mean I came into the trip unknowing of probable biases," Glazunov said. "Fortunately, we did get to speak to both Palestinians and Israelis

throughout this trip. But I really came to this trip to gain a non-Western perspective on the conflict."

"I think it's super, super important to understand what people are living through, rather than just reading headlines and listening, looking at Twitter, and all this other stuff. Even on campus, everybody has such polarized opinions," he added.

The trip was packed with visits to historical and cultural landmarks. The students traveled throughout Jerusalem and Tel Aviv and visited memorial sites such as Yad Vashem: The World Holocaust Remembrance Center and the Nova Festival Massacre Site, which commemorates victims of the Oct. 7 attacks. For many students, these visits were emotionally intense.

"Going to the south and seeing the destruction and memorialization of Oct. 7 at Kibbutz Kfar Aza and the Nova Festival Site [was the most meaningful part of the trip]," Maydanich explained. "You really can't understand the extent of the Oct. 7 massacre until you see it firsthand. It's only been a year and a half, so the destruction is still 'raw,' in a sense. All of us on the trip were basically speechless throughout the entire day."

Despite the heaviness of these experiences, he described feeling a reinvigorated connection to his Jewish heritage. "It gave us a renewed sense of pride to be Jews and Zionists who continue to persevere in spite of that destruction and combat the hateful narratives that arose as a result," Maydanich added.

Beyond cultural and historical exploration, the trip also engaged students in political discussions with Israeli leaders, offering insight into the nation's internal divisions and perspectives on the ongoing conflict.

Students on the Trek engaged in a roundtable discussion at the Knesset—Israel's unicameral parliament and house of representatives—followed by a panel with various speakers, including Chair of the Committee on Arab Society Affairs Mansour Abbas, Israeli politician Amit Halevi, and Director for Israel at the Abraham Accords Peace Institute Asher Fredman '06. These sessions provided insight into the complexities of Israeli politics.

"The first day we were there was the day the ceasefire went through, and there was a hostage exchange," Hyman recalled. "And so everyone coming into the trip was extremely excited about that. And I'd say what that day illustrated is that there are different perspectives on that deal."

The trip aimed to expose students to different perspectives on the region. To that end, the itinerary included a visit to a military checkpoint—a barrier erected by the Israeli Defense Forces at the border between Palestinian and Israeli-controlled areas—with a Palestinian tour guide, Rami Nazaal. In previous years, Israel Trek participants had also traveled to the West Bank, but due to security concerns, organizers opted to limit this portion of the trip.

For many students on the trip, one of the most pressing questions was how Palestinians viewed the events of Oct. 7 and their aftermath. Many media outlets and political leaders have said that Palestinians broadly support Hamas and its actions. With limited access to Palestinian perspectives due to the aforementioned safety concerns, Nazaal's tour of the checkpoint and conversation with the group offered an opportunity for the group to hear a nuanced stance.

"A lot of people on campus have an opinion that Israel Trek is this biased indoctrination for the Jewish Israeli perspective; that's not the case; they really do present the sides," Fogel said while discussing the variation of people they heard from.

While this winter trip was considered meaningful and eye-opening for many and did not receive significant backlash, the Israel Trek program is not without controversy. In the months leading up to the 2025 Spring trip, the PSC had voiced their strong disapproval.

Starting in October, posters with the words "Boycott Israel Trek" appeared in dorms and common spaces, along with Instagram posts from the organization stating the same message. A month later, members of the PSC sent messages to students in various upperclassmen houses urging them to reject the trip. They titled their emails: "[PSC] Boycott Israel Trek Office Hours." In the body, they wrote: "Accepted into Israel Trek? Before you pay your deposit, come talk to us. Join us at our third office hours session to learn more about why we ask students to boycott in light of Israel's occupation and ongoing genocide."

To gain further insight into criticisms of the Israel Trek, the *Harvard Independent* interviewed two Palestinian members of the PSC, both of whom requested anonymity.

According to these members, the PSC takes issue with the claim that the Trek provides a balanced perspective.

"Although Israel Trek claims to have Palestinian perspectives, they never go into the West Bank. They never actually see how Palestinians live under occupation," an anonymous female student member said. "And they handpick very specific people who are Palestinians, who speak to the perspective that they want to hear, and the majority of the narratives that they hear are Zionist-Israeli narratives, so there's not a balance there, which is really a loss."



She specifically criticized this recent January Israel Trek for presenting a narrow and selective perspective, recounting a friend's experience on the trip as an example.

"[Her friend who went on the Israel Trek] said they talked to one Palestinian person, specifically who they referred to be the 1%, who basically gave them the narrative as a Palestinian who lives in the West Bank—also, that's a particular perspective as well."

"You're not talking to Palestinians in Gaza," she added.

She further explained that she heard this Palestinian told Trek participants that while they disagreed with the Israeli government's actions, they placed more blame on Hamas for the current state of Palestine.

"I think that that is, again, a super hand picked perspective that told the people on the trip exactly what they wanted to hear, and that's not a full narrative. And people returned thinking that is a full narrative, and that's really a loss," she explained.

She also described aspects of the trip as insensitive and tone-deaf.

"I sat down at Berg next to a girl who's talking about how she went clubbing

in Israel, and that's, to me, super tone deaf. Like, you are going into an apartheid state, and you're viewing it as a vacation, when there are so many Palestinians who don't have the right to return to their actual home."

The other PSC member reiterated the PSC's official statement regarding Israel Trek. "Engaging in Israel Trek is becoming part of a propaganda trip that is legitimizing an apartheid state occupation and now an ongoing genocide," he said.

Conversations regarding the return of the Israel Trek reflect longstanding

tensions on Harvard's campus, exposing the deep divisions in how students, organizations, and the University itself engage with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Ever since the Oct. 7 attacks, there has been a surge in pro-Palestinian protests on Harvard's campus, taking the form of marches, sit-ins,

exhibitions, and a 20-day encampment in front of University Hall.

The University has primarily avoided involvement in the Trek despite mounting pressure to address concerns from both sides.

This debate over the Israel Trek is emblematic of a broader challenge at Harvard: fostering open dialogue on polarizing global issues without alienating members of the institution's diverse community. As calls for greater transparency and inclusivity in campus programming grow louder, the question remains: How can Harvard navigate these complexities while upholding its commitment to academic inquiry, free expression, and diverse perspectives?

For the students who went on Israel Trek, the answer lies in the region itself.

"A lot of people on campus have a distorted perception about Israel. The truth is, you can't know this country until you see it—and that's what we did," Fogel said.

**PIPPA LEE '28
(PIPPALEE@COLLEGE.
HARVARD.EDU) IS THE
ASSOCIATE FORUM EDITOR
FOR THE INDEPENDENT.**

**PHOTOS COURTESY OF
HANNAH DAVIS '25**

Cards That Will Make You “Pop” With Joy

How Love Pop creates magical moments through unique greeting cards.

BY KALVIN FRANK '28

The chill of February lingers in the air, but love is already blooming in Harvard Square. With Valentine’s Day fast approaching, students are scouring the internet and local shops for thoughtful gifts that impress their special someone. Among the series of Yelp reviews and promising storefronts is Love Pop, which offers customers a twist on tradition: specialty cards that unfold into an intricate 3D piece of art.

Founded by Harvard Business School alumni Wombi Rose and John Wise, Love Pop designs cards inspired by the ancient Japanese art style of Kirigami, or “Slice-gami.” This technique transforms paper into magical keepsakes—imagine a special love letter accompanied by a flapping butterfly or a happy birthday note compounded with a favorite flower.

The company netted national attention after its appearance on Shark Tank, where it received investor offers from Kevin O’Leary and Robert Herjavec. After careful deliberation and a bidding war between O’Leary and Herjavec, Rose and Wise accepted O’Leary’s proposition. As of 2023, the business has become one of Shark Tank’s most successful investments.

Love Pop has opened nearly 2,000 locations, including one in Harvard Square, offering its products to local students and Cambridge community members alike. Their Cambridge location is one of their few stand-alone stores, as their products are often found in larger gift

shops. Whether it’s paper bouquets, Harry Potter cards, Valentine’s Day-themed pop-ups, or cards for any occasion, Love Pop Cambridge has it all. The *Harvard Independent* had the opportunity to sit down with an employee at Love Pop to discuss the ins and outs of running such a unique business.

Tyrone Perry, who has worked at Love Pop for one year, is an expert on all things Slice-gami. Perry showed us some of his favorite products as he walked through the store’s various sections. The shop was sorted into multiple sections: seasonal, natural, special occasions, licensed, and more. Products line the store’s shelves: an intricately detailed cherry blossom pop-up tree in the store’s nature section—which Perry referred to as

“our OG” and one of the cards showcased on Shark Tank—and beautiful bouquets enthrall the eye in the store’s pop-up flower section.

Perry also pointed out a pop-up card featuring a moon above a night sky background, created from ideas in Love Pop’s signature suggestion box. The suggestion box, a brown chest that sits by the register for customer recommendations, is a core feature of this burgeoning business. “We love to hear from all the communities in the world so that we can make it more inclusive,” he said.

In addition to the suggestion box, Love Pop offers cards to people with many different backgrounds. Their website features pop-ups catering to LGBTQ+, Christian, Islamic, Jewish, and Hindu communities.

The store offers special sales just in time for Valentine’s Day, including some exclusively for the Harvard community. “You get 10% off your whole order; there is a secret discount for Harvard alum students and faculty, where you get 25% off because of the [Harvard] connection,” Perry said. This secret discount is how they give back to the school community, which helped inspire their business—the two discovered Kirigami on an HBS trip to Vietnam.

Perry shared his thoughts on the supportive corporate climate of the company. “We need more companies like this that can actually boost the endorphins and bring joy to people, especially regarding sustainably sourced items and art,” he said.

A counter on the wall listed the number 60,711,014 (at the time of the interview), tracking the company’s goal of reaching 1 billion “magical moments.” “[The counter] is not tied to the amount of sales we make, because every product that is sold has two magical moments,” Perry said. These moments, Perry explained, happen once when you find it and another when it’s gifted. The journey to a billion magical moments might seem daunting, but with the customer service of employees like Perry, Love Pop is sure to make it.

A short three-minute walk from the Yard brings Harvard students to a world of Slice-gami art. Perry encourages students to visit him at Love Pop, and take advantage of the 25% discount for a unique Valentine’s Day for you and that special someone.

KALVIN FRANK '28 (KFRANK@COLLEGE.HARVARD.EDU) THINKS THE LOVE POP FLOWER BOUQUETS ARE BEAUTIFUL.

GRAPHIC BY ANNEISE FISHER '26



Serving With Love

How first-years are making a difference with the Phillips Brooks House Association.

BY WESSAL BAKRY '28

The Phillips Brooks House Association (PBHA) continues to uphold its legacy as one of Harvard's most enduring pillars of public service. Founded in 1904 as a coalition of six student organizations, PBHA has since evolved into a dynamic, student-led nonprofit with over 1,500 volunteers who operate over 80 social service and social action programs.

These initiatives provide Harvard students with hands-on opportunities to engage in meaningful community service across categories such as education, health, mentoring, and housing.

For first-year students, PBHA offers a unique opportunity to engage with the local community from the start of their Harvard experience, allowing students to dive into projects that resonate with their passions.

Coby Hayes '28 joined PBHA because the organization offered several initiatives that aligned with the types of service he did back home. "It made me feel some form of familiarity coming here onto campus," he shared in an interview with the *Independent*.

Hayes first became involved with the organization through the First-Year Urban Program, a pre-orientation experience focused on service. "I learned a lot about PBHA through my FUP leader, Talia. She's the [former] vice president," he said.

This initial exposure sparked immediate excitement for Hayes. "I knew, pretty much, that PBHA and [the Institute of Politics] were the two big things that I thought I would be interested in doing." Fortunately, Hayes found that he did not have to choose between his interests in government and mentorship—PBHA's extensive collaboration with other campus

organizations allowed him to pursue both.

He is currently involved in CIVICS, a program in partnership with the Harvard Institute of Politics that empowers Boston youth to take an active role in their communities through interactive civics and government

education. Before that, he was part of a similar program, David Walker Scholars, which partners with the Harvard Black Men's Forum to support and mentor young men in Boston.

For Hayes, the most rewarding aspect of his work has been the relationships he has built with the students. "Going to the school and now

they know us—it feels good," he said. "When you're walking up and they're yelling, 'Oh, there's Coby!' it just makes me feel so at home."

Despite not being a Boston native, Hayes feels a strong sense of connection with the city's students. "We're across the country—I'm from Arkansas—but these are kids that are similar to the type I grew up being around," Hayes said. "Being able to go to that same classroom every day, building a good relationship with the kids, and them actually being excited to see you—I think that's something that's fulfilling," he shared.

Another new member, Jacari Dillard '28, shared a similar sentiment. "Being somebody from Birmingham, Ala., it was important to get to know the community that I was in," he said.

Through his PBHA program, ExperiMentors, Dillard helps engage Cambridge Elementary School children in fun, science-based activities. "I think what I love the most is being able to meet the next generation," he said. "Just being able to see their smiles, their excitement, their newfound education was so enlightening."

Dillard explained that joining PBHA was never about fulfilling any sort

of service requirement for him. In fact, he advises against doing so. "[If] someone [were] considering joining, I would tell them: don't do it for the community service aspect. Do it because you are passionate about helping somebody else and also to learn something new," he said.

As Hayes reflected on his work with PBHA, he similarly emphasized the importance of embracing new experiences. "The good part about PBHA is that you will be doing some form of service and you can see the impact of your service taking place immediately," Hayes said. "And seeing tangible efforts—seeing things actually happen—you make actual direct change. I think that's necessary, especially being in the 'Harvard bubble' 24/7, you don't really get that opportunity much."

His words highlight an often-echoed sentiment amongst Harvard students: living in an environment where resources and prestigious opportunities are plentiful, it can be easy to lose sight of the challenges faced outside of the University's gates. "I think we are obviously in a place of privilege...and we don't have to worry about these same things," Hayes said. "It's good to give back, in any form that you can."

For these first-years, PBHA has provided an opportunity for personal growth through forging meaningful connections in a new community. Their work with local schools has allowed Hayes and Dillard to engage in service that is both immediate and impactful. Witnessing firsthand the joy and excitement their service can bring to others, Hayes, Dillard, and others have been reminded that the communities outside these gates need our help—and more importantly, that we are capable of offering it.

WESSAL BAKRY '28
(WESSALBAKRY@COLLEGE.
HARVARD.EDU) WRITES NEWS FOR
THE *INDEPENDENT*.

GRAPHIC BY EL RICHARDS '26



FORUM

The Tragedy of the Comment

HOW DATING APPS TURN DESIRE INTO DEPENDENCY.

BY JONAH KARAFIOL '26

In the age of social media, the mechanism of desire is caught within the machinery of repetition and addiction. Nowhere is this clearer than in online dating, where the exchange of affect is indistinguishable from mass production. The platforms that claim to liberate the subject by granting them access to infinite potential suitors only further entrench their unfreedom. Companies prey on humankind's most fundamental desire—our desire to feel loved—and use it as a means of exploitation.

The Age of Addiction

We have reached the pinnacle of addiction. In 2022, nicotine and weed usage hit all-time highs among Americans ages 19-30; that same year, 35 to 50-year-olds broke records for binge drinking. We abuse the internet, too. In 2023, over half of U.S. teenagers spent over four hours on social media daily. Adolescents who spend more than three hours per day on social media are twice as likely to display symptoms of anxiety and depression, and almost half say it makes them feel worse about their bodies.

This is no accident—social media is designed for addiction. Platforms engineer engagement through the Hook Model, created by behavioral scientist Nir Eyal in his book “Hooked: How to Build Habit-Forming Products.” The model operates in four phases: trigger, action, variable reward, and investment.

Every addiction begins with a stimulus. Social media platforms deploy external triggers through notifications and, more insidiously, internal triggers—the subconscious feelings of boredom, loneliness, and self-doubt that drive individuals back to the platform. Once triggered, the user is led to perform a simple, immediate action—scrolling, liking, commenting. The frictionless design ensures that engagement is effortless, with every action strengthening the habit.

Then, there is the variable reward: the user never knows what their next interaction will bring. Social media would lose its grip if every reel in the endless stream were equally as enjoyable. Finally, investment and the sunk-cost fallacy. Having spent time crafting a profile, engaging with content, and accumulating likes, the user becomes emotionally and psychologically invested. To abandon the platform now would mean forfeiting that investment. Thus, the addiction is self-sustaining: the more one uses, the harder it is to leave.

Social media adds one further dimension to the Hook Model: it enlists its victims among its ranks. The user, despite believing themselves to be consuming, produces content for their peers. The two become inseparable, and every interaction deepens one's addiction while simultaneously fueling that of others. The system sustains itself not by creating content, but by ensuring that its addicts become its labor force. In this way, there is no content beyond its victims. The consumer becomes the commodity.

And yet, no one leaves. The system thrives not because it is loved, but because it is necessary—or at least, it has made itself seem so. To unplug is to risk exclusion, to uninstall is to fall behind. This is the tragedy of the commons, rewritten for the digital age. If every user collectively abandoned the platform, all would be better off—but because no one wants to be the first to leave, everyone stays. The platform extracts value from its users, not by offering something irreplaceable, but by ensuring it feels so.

Social media was the proving ground for this methodology. The dating app is its most insidious realization.

Dating Apps: Social Media Vilified

Dating apps rely on a single premise: humans are terrified of being alone. Everywhere we turn, this fear is confirmed. In 1990, only 29% of adults ages 25 to 54 lived without a romantic partner; today, that figure has risen to 38%. The progression is not incidental but systemic, a byproduct of a world in which intimacy has been subsumed by the market. It comes as no surprise that Gen-Z, the first generation to come of age in the digital world, is the loneliest in history—twice as lonely as their parents and four times as lonely as their grandparents.

As we came to embody English philosopher Thomas Hobbes's vision of humankind outside society—solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short—we cultivated the conditions that dating apps exploit. Developers added other triggers to remind us that the solution to our condition is a few clicks away. The Hook Model follows with mechanical inevitability: ritual swiping, variable love, and profile investment. The final, cruelest addition is abundance—virtually infinite partners render every choice moot.

History Speaks

For the skeptic reader, history provides an indictment. Tinder launched in September 2012; by October 2014, its users were already spending 90 minutes per day on the app. A decade later, 18 to 30-year-olds' usage fluctuates around 80 minutes per day. This is no sign of equilibrium—it is acceleration disguised as stasis. New dating apps have not expanded the time we spend searching; instead, they have compressed the process itself. Most dating apps now impose daily limits on the number of profiles a user can like, meaning that as total engagement time holds steady, decisions are made faster and with even less consideration.

Swipes have outpaced thought, attraction reduced to a meaningless flick of the thumb. The process was always mechanical—now it has been optimized. It does not slow to accommodate human deliberation; it forces the human to speed up to match the machine. As the system accelerates, the space for individuality collapses.

A conveyor belt of curated identities remains: witty captions and candid photos that

scream of a manufactured sameness. Seasoned Hinge users will recognize the tired “I'll fall for you / if you trip me,” and “First round's on me if / I would never say this.” Users do not select from the infinite possibilities that dating apps claim to hold; all casts are of the same mold.

Strive for Something Real

The system sustains itself through illusions—abundance, choice, and fulfillment. This is a facade—no apps are “designed to be deleted.” Their goal is not to facilitate love but to ensure the search never ends. The average American spends eight months on dating apps before going steady, and only 10% of partnered adults met their spouses online.

Yet, to leave is unthinkable. The apps have made themselves indispensable, not by offering something irreplaceable, but by pretending there is no visible alternative. The social contract of dating has been written; to reject it is to risk exclusion from modern romance.

And so, we stay. We swipe, we match, we ghost, we get ghosted. We refine our profiles, adjust our prompts, and optimize our presentation from the same set of “ready-made cliches.” We are not seeking love; we are performing eligibility, molding ourselves into our most palatable version.

But we do not merely consume—we produce. We are workers. With every like, match, and message, we generate the very content that keeps the system running. Dating apps have no product beyond their users. They require us, not merely as participants, but as laborers—performing the work of self-marketing, feeding the algorithm, and ensuring that no one ever truly finds what they are looking for. We are Tinder's factory workers, Bumble's gig economy, and Hinge's unpaid interns, producing the very conditions of our entrapment. That's their dirty secret: they need us more than we could ever need them.

But what if we stopped? What if we refused the premise that love must be mediated, curated, and commodified? The dating app presents itself as an inevitability—but what it truly fears is our refusal to play the game. The system holds power only so long as we accept its terms. To leave is not to resign oneself to loneliness; it is to reclaim the possibility of connection on terms that are not dictated by swipes and algorithms.

We are employed to our detriment in the manufacturing of misery, inadequacy, and perpetual longing. Our suffering is extended, optimized, and fed back into a few lines of code. Dear reader, turn elsewhere this Valentine's Day. Dare to reject the commodified illusion of connection; strive for something real instead.

JONAH KARAFIOL '26
(MANAGING EDITOR@
HARVARDINDEPENDENT.COM) IS
THE MANAGING EDITOR OF THE
INDEPENDENT.

**GRAPHIC BY MIRANDA CHAO
HWANG '28**

A Space for Grief

Where can we go after loss changes our communities forever?

BY CAROLINE STOHRER '28

You have one message unread.
Text messages have become my new norm for receiving bad news. Fresh off the high of finishing my college applications, I was heading home when my phone buzzed. A seemingly blasé occurrence, I glanced at my iMessage notifications and froze.

Your Opa has just passed away.

My Opa (German for grandpa), who had been a constant presence in my life ever since I could remember, had finally lost his battle with a never-ending host of debilitating conditions.

Nearly a year later, I was heading to breakfast at Annenberg when my phone buzzed again.

Did you see what happened? I can't believe that there might be people we know on there...

Yet again, I was caught off guard. This time, I felt none of the finality that last year's text brought me. Instead, I, along with my teammates, my skating club, and the nation, waited in anxious disarray as more information came throughout the day.

In some ways, the devastation surrounding AE Flight 5342 was nothing like the death of my Opa. My grandfather's health had been declining for many months prior. He had been in and out of the hospital after falling due to atrophying muscles or collapsing due to low insulin each time he returned home. His passing was the finale of many long hours in waiting rooms, worried calls to doctors, and failed efforts to rehabilitate him at home.

What I remember most after reading my parents' message was emptiness. I just couldn't reconcile that my Opa would no longer pull up to my apartment in his red Mitsubishi to drive me to skating practice, talk to me about some esoteric history fact, or even bake me bread for breakfast. Each

member of my family had to face similar realizations and for a while, dinnertime was a quiet affair as we took our own time to process it.

It was also hard for my team to cope. At practice that week, we warmed up in complete silence, a drastic shift from our usual boisterous noise as we rolled

out and stretched. We held hands and buried wet faces into

neighboring shoulders as we tried to focus on our programs.

Grief after the death of a loved one is both a burden and a privilege. To know—as no other creature does—that our existence is finite gives greater depth and meaning to our lives. But in its presence, we also face the challenge of reconciling a hole in our lives that is impossible to fill or replace.

The lobby of the Skating Club of Boston now overflows with an assortment of flowers that remind me of the faces I will never have the chance to see again. Every morning, come rain or shine, I saw these athletes, their parents, and their coaches hard at work. I won't pretend I knew Jinna Han, Spencer Lee, or Maxim Naumov's parents well. Yet they were inextricably connected to me, my teammates, my trainers, and my coaches in the sheer passion we had for skating. Just like with my Opa, it was impossible to imagine them gone so fast and so terribly.

After both of these losses, I was lucky to have both my immediate family and my chosen family—my skating team—to lean on. Alone, each of us would have succumbed to the overwhelming emotion that follows any loss. In those moments, grieving becomes less about isolation and more about solidarity—we found comfort not in being alone with our sadness, but surrounded by others who understood the magnitude of the pain.

Healing for my family has become less about moving on from loss and more about finding new ways to live with it. As

our lives have continued to change, with my graduation and my brother's college applications, my family has focused on caring for my grandmother and managing what my Opa has left behind. In the space where my Opa was, we found new ways to build connections with our family in Germany and find meaning in what it means to be a family.

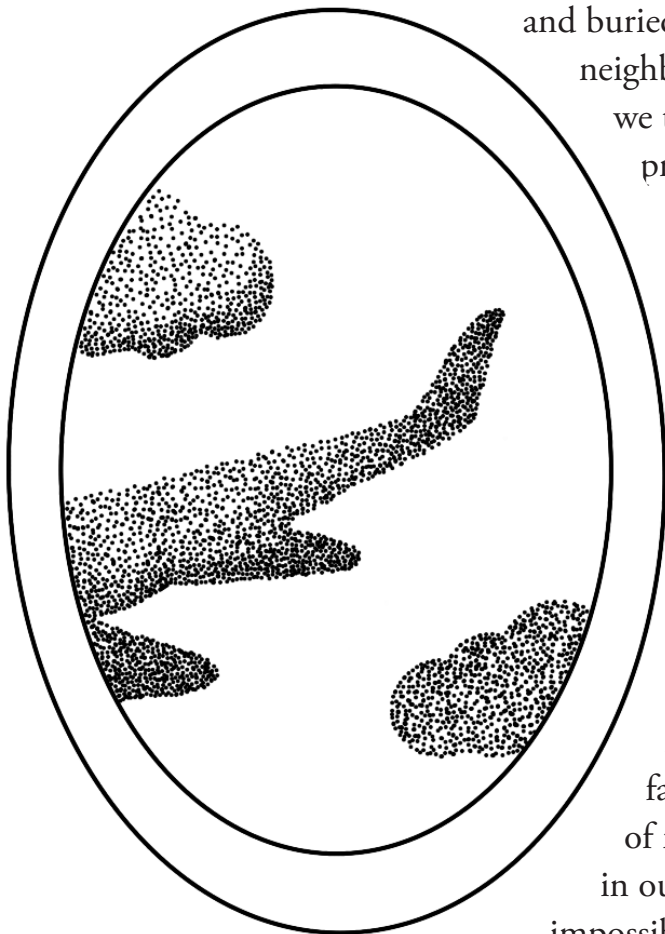
When I first heard about the crash, I was worried about how skaters in other disciplines would handle the loss. Figure skating can be an isolating sport. Many skaters forgo a regular school and social life to pursue their dreams of one day competing abroad and skating at the Olympics. Grueling hours spent in freezing rinks don't always guarantee success or satisfaction. We in the figure skating community know that never-ending toil towards perfection and purpose through our time on the ice.

That shared struggle has only brought us closer in the past week. U.S. Figure Skating and SCOB have been so helpful with their mental health support and their protection of young skaters from the swarm of media that descended in the next few days following the crash. This week, thousands of fans came to SCOB to show us their love of the sport and the skaters who passed.

The day after we heard about the crash, my team returned to SCOB for early morning practice along with the other regulars. All of us are in the midst of our competitive seasons, and we cannot afford even a few days off. Yet, while it was difficult to return during such a somber time, there was something strangely comforting about the constancy of training. At least one thing had not changed: we were still together, working towards the same goal and supporting one another, one day at a time.

CAROLINE STOHRER '28
(CAROLINESTOHRER@COLLEGE.HARVARD.EDU) IS A SYNCHRONIZED SKATER FOR THE HAYDENETTES AND TRAINS MOST DAYS AT THE SKATING CLUB OF BOSTON.

GRAPHIC BY REEVE SYKES '26



to love me, to love me not

reconciling my relationship with love after growing up in a household without it.

by anonymous

Every year when valentine's day rolls around, i find myself questioning my current understanding of love. sure, this holiday is conventionally focused on secret admirers and forever soulmates. however, my upbringing, shaped by trauma rather than tenderness, leaves me wondering if i can recognize, let alone celebrate, such a loaded emotion.

a few weeks ago, when my roommate and i digressed into a lunchtime conversation of our dating prospects, they asked what i was looking for in a relationship. after a long pause, i realized that i don't know what love feels like, let alone how i'd like to receive it.

love has always been a sensitive topic for me. i've always longed to feel that unconditional connection so many of my peers share with their parents, siblings, or even one other person in their life. this past winter break, i often found myself pausing on friends' instagram posts relishing their family time. the smiles, laughter, and tenderness that reverberated from every photograph was absent on my side of the screen as i thought about my upbringing in a household blighted with hatred.

decades of traumatic treatment at the hands of my parents left me thinking i must, for lack of better words, really suck. moreover, if my own parents did not think i was enough, how could a man ever?

as i approach yet another year single, the same questions loom over my head: *is it possible to truly love someone else? and am i even worth loving?*

all that was naturally too heavy to explain to my roommate over salads and grilled chicken. but whenever we romanticize falling hopelessly in love with the noah calhouns or ben barrys of the real world, i am reminded of my fear that such infallible infatuation between people is nothing but fiction.

in his poem, "this be the verse," philip larkin writes, "they fuck you up, your mum and dad." when it comes to my conceptions of romance, these words ring true.

i was already breaking up their nightly fights at age seven. with my legs dangling through the gaps in the stair railings from my second-floor perch, my ears would perk up every time i heard our usual household silence penetrated by sharp tones. while my older sibling would run to their room, slam their door, and sob about our broken lives, i took it upon myself to mediate their disputes.

nine p.m. or one a.m., it didn't matter—i would be there. i stood in the crossfire as they threw glasses of manhattans at each another, whiskey stains left everywhere from the kitchen ceiling to my rapunzel nightgown. i spent countless evenings picking up smashed fruit or shattered dishes before comforting one crying parent as the other packed up their things and

left for a few days before crawling back and pretending nothing had happened. i ended many nights whimpering into my pillow, initially praying they wouldn't get divorced and then begging the universe for just a shred of peace in our fragmented household.

all of this was naturally a rather hopeless foundation for me to garner my own conceptions of love.

now, i cannot just blame my parents for this. larkin also writes, "but they were fucked up in their turn/by fools in old-style hats and coats/who half the time were sappy-stern/and half at one another's throats." forced into an arranged marriage devoid of passion, my mom's parents never taught her how to love, so how could she herself?

but regardless, my parents made me think love was fruitless. furthermore, i quickly learned that my parents mutual loathing would bleed into the care they provided me until i also questioned if i was valuable enough to love.

"i don't know what i did to have god give me a child as worthless as you."

i have never been a stranger to targeted curses or scathing commentary. however, this statement has stuck out the most. for my mother to insinuate that i was essentially nothing, that continues to infringe upon my self-esteem regardless of what else she has piled on top since.

and beyond the pure emotional degradation, there were physical confrontations that magnified my feelings of inadequacy. my senses are tainted by agonizing memories from my parents and my past interactions.

i can still feel her arms on my shoulders, shaking me while screaming in my face, her spit mixing with my tears as they fell onto my trackpad and bled into the cracks of my computer. i can still see the gallon bottles of shampoo and conditioner he swung inches from my face—a symbolic bruise left by the feeling of betrayal because the parent i thought loved me proved to be just as virulent. i can still taste the chlorine of the pool outside our villa in greece that i thought about weighing myself down in, hours after i was yanked away from our dinner table and told i add nothing to family vacations or our household.

such experiences direct me to larkin's concluding lines: "get out as early as you can/ and don't have any kids yourself." his words compel me to ask if i should even try to learn how to love. should i even try to convince myself i am deserving of love?

like many raised in the inherited cycle of suffering, i struggle to conclude that the answer to such questions must be yes. we think no one, ourselves included, could love someone who, as my uncle so plainly puts it, is "fucked up."

we accept that we are no one's but our own and believe it is better this way. but i've come to realize that we cannot survive alone forever nor can we think our beings lack value.

as someone whose favorite movies are rom-coms and who cried in envy watching their roommate ice skate with their siblings in perfect harmony, i know i want a life filled with love eventually. so, ever since arriving at college and getting some much-needed space from the walls that brought me to such an uncertain place, i have slowly opened my mind and heart to this emotion.

i let seemingly little moments stand as big stepping stones in my journey of learning to love.

last week, I put my heart out for the first time. i'd never asked "what are we?" before, partly due to my fear of rejection but primarily because i was afraid of adding someone into my life beyond friendship.

ultimately, the conversation called for more vulnerability and self-reflection than i anticipated. however, i walked away with a deeper understanding of the love i am looking for and what's important to consider before two people can commit to one another. moreover, regardless of what i had hoped the other person would say, i saw this interaction as a sign that i am slowly learning the power in loving another.

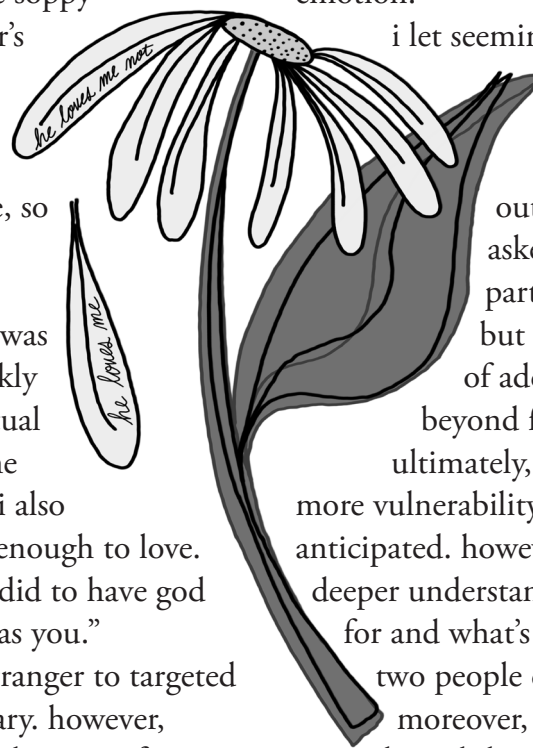
and when thinking about myself, i've made it a mission to enjoy my own company. as timothy keller suggests, to be known is to be loved. how can i expect others to want to "know" and thus appreciate me if i cannot do that for myself? moreover, i've come to recognize that learning self-love naturally requires spending time simply valuing my presence. after months of holding myself accountable to this new habit, solo trader joe's runs and quiet meals alone have slowly transformed from torture to now essential parts of my weekly routine.

while there's still a long way to go for me and my relationship with love, i'm forever learning about how i can offer this emotion to both another and myself. moreover, i have to accept the fact that i don't have all the answers as i navigate this journey since i lack a model for such relationships. my self-guided lessons are fraught with uncertainty and require a certain level of stamina and persistence.

but for now i hold onto hope that one day i'll watch my own children dance through a home built on the love i fought to give and have, knowing that the cycle ended with me.

anonymous found this piece cathartic and hopes it also will be for readers similarly struggling.

graphic by alma russell '26



Tales of a Failed Situationship

Harvard horror stories you can relate to that are better than a rom-com plot.

BY DUMB AND DUMBER

The One with the Ghoster

On a campus with so many students, the world often feels unexpectedly small. It raises the question: is it truly possible to ghost someone? For those who have been the unfortunate victim, you eventually reach the point where you stop waiting for the text back and instead look forward to making awkward eye contact the next time you spot them across the Yard. You know you have won that battle when they make an Irish exit—the very moment you walk into a party.

The One with the Neverending Hookup

There will always be the one that never actually ends. No matter how messy the initial goodbye was, they are still the one you can count on to answer a drunken call or text. The storyline could not be more toxic. You started talking because you met in section fall of freshman year; two months later, they were sneaking into your dorm at one in the morning after their friends thought they had gone home for the night. This goes on for *months* with no labels, no words spoken in the presence of others, and no end in sight. When things finally start to get serious (you actually go out in public together), it seems like you might get into your first Harvard relationship! Sike! Your birthday rolls around, and after one too many drinks, they reveal that they are not “looking for something serious right now” and end it.

Or so you thought, until a drunk text at 12:30 a.m. three weeks later. You think, “No, don’t do this, you respect yourself more than letting this person back into your life.” Seven minutes later, they’re standing at your door, and every emotion you’ve been suppressing for the past seven months comes rushing back. After a fabulous and fleeting night together, you swear it will never happen again—and keep it to yourself, afraid your friends will mock you for speaking to them again.

Fast forward three years, and you are still each other’s hookup buddies senior spring. You may have had another partner in that period, but that was *not* enough to keep their number blocked. You’re not over them and you will never actually get over them. Maybe you’re holding out hope that they might want to have a real talk about their feelings, or maybe you never charge your vibrator.

The One with the Denier

This one comes as a surprise, as it is not someone who denies their feelings for you, but rather one who denies having ever done anything with you. You were seen in public, met each other’s roommates, and they were sleeping over almost every night. When it ended, there was no bad blood, just the unfortunate pit in your stomach that made you overanalyze every interaction. Then, you hear through the grapevine that they are acting as if they never even met you—a harsh reminder that the best companion in bed will always be your weighted blanket.

The One with the Neighbor

As easy and convenient as it is, it is never worth it. But you know this, don’t you? That is why, from the very start, you promised yourself that it would never be anything more than just a friendship. It all started with a knock on the door with an invitation to smoke, but those details will be saved for the Weed Issue. You can imagine the excitement when we open the door to our attractive neighbor standing there. Not only did I think my neighbor was cute, but so did my roommate! Giving even MORE reason for nothing to EVER happen! As good friends do, we decided the best approach was to let the neighbor flirt with both of us and for neither of us to do anything about it. Definitely not a recipe for disaster, right? After all, the

neighbor *has* to choose eventually!

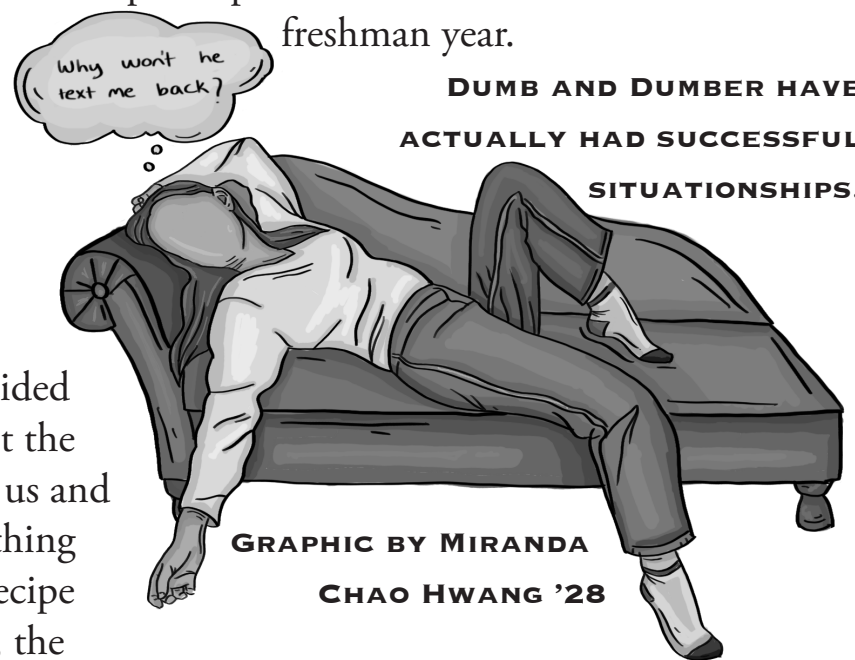
Over time, you and your roommate lose interest (I mean, what did you expect from flirting with roommates? Seriously.) and start focusing your attention on other people. You brush off the flirting, despite secretly enjoying it, and make a point to say, “We shouldn’t do that, that would make it too complicated,” and the classic, “I don’t want to lose you as a friend.” But of course, you get responses like, “It’s not that deep, if we want to, we should, it’d be fun,” and, “No, of *course*, it wouldn’t ruin our friendship, I would NEVER let that happen.” Well, spoiler alert—it did.

Needless to say, “housecest,” and especially “floorcest,” never ends well. Although there may not be all that many fish in the Harvard Sea, there is an entire ocean of Boston that some final clubs seem to flock to—at least for one-off date events. I say take one out of their *Playboy* book and find someone outside of the Harvard bubble. Frankly, it is easier to forget and pretend someone does not exist if you are not being reminded of them at every horrible HUDS meal.

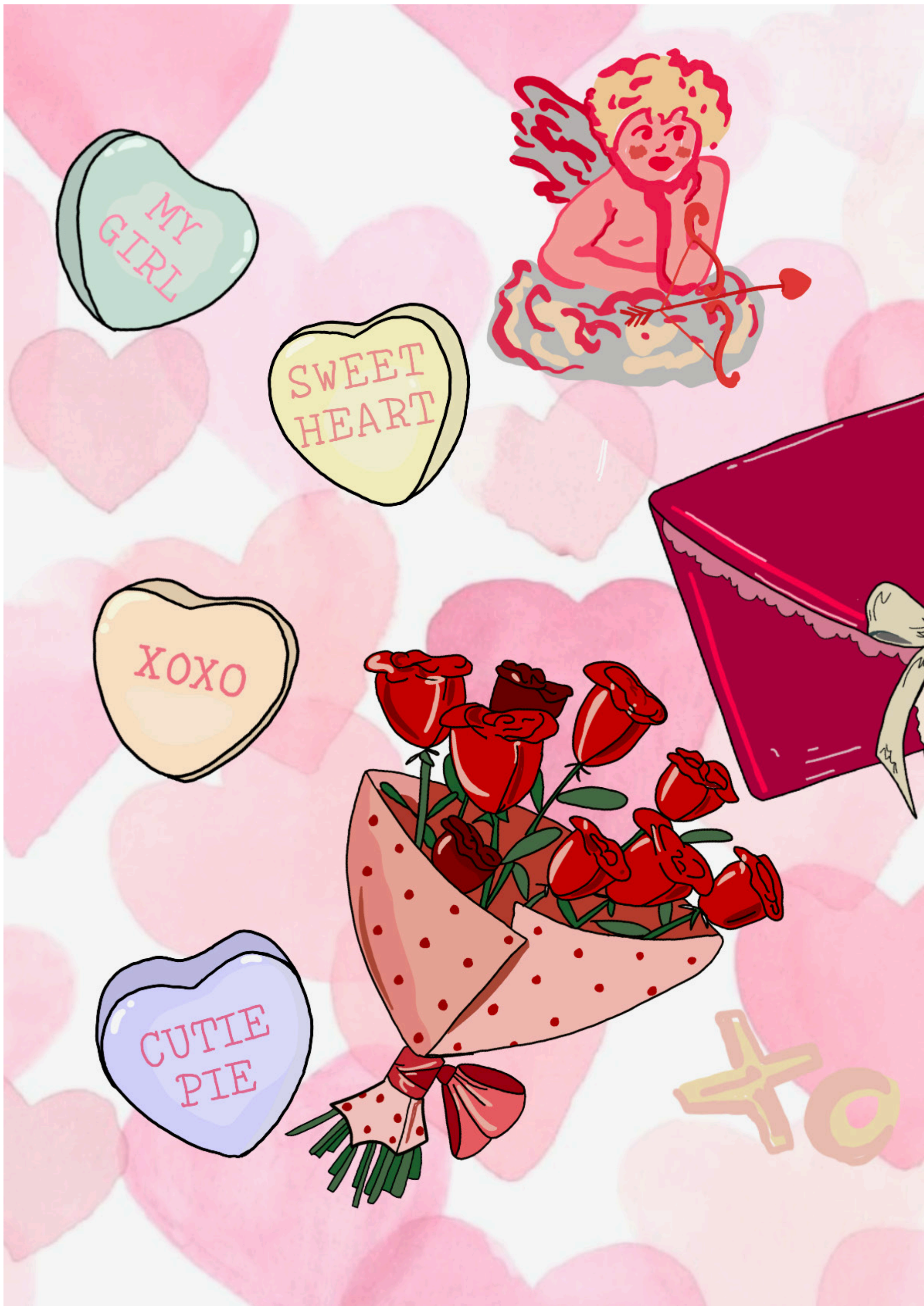
The One with Feelings(???)

Can two people who are attracted to one another ever just be friends? Well, I would argue yes, but time and time again, I am proven wrong by cis-men. Why are you sending me a shirtless selfie from the gym at 10 a.m. on a Wednesday? Do I have to spell it out for you? We are either friends or partners. Friends with benefits is *so* freshman year.

DUMB AND DUMBER HAVE ACTUALLY HAD SUCCESSFUL SITUATIONSHIPS.



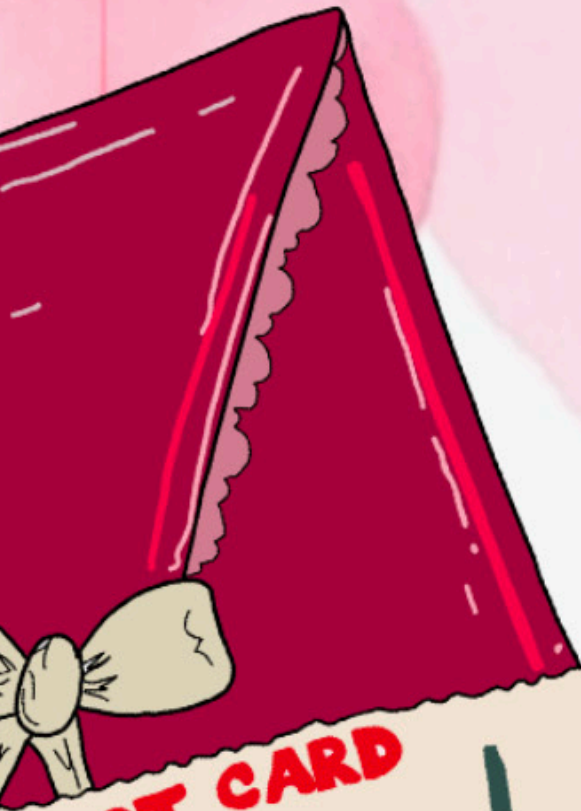
GRAPHIC BY MIRANDA CHAO HWANG '28



xoxo

MY GIRL

HOT STUFF



POST CARD
Love from
your
Valentine
xoxo,
The Indy



LOVE YOU

BE MINE

Paris Vous Aime: Feeling Loved by the City of Love

How an extrovert never feels lonely while soloing abroad.

BY FRANCES CONNORS '26



don't seek out alone time. I don't actively avoid it—though my packed G-Cal might suggest otherwise—I simply prefer company. I'm an extrovert, so being surrounded by people, any number, energizes me. At Harvard, this means countless lunches, dinners, club meetings, and working in social spaces where I can always have people around me. Applied Math appealed to me because of its collaborative nature—I'd much rather do problem sets with friends than sit alone in my room writing essays and doing readings. When I walk through the streets of Cambridge, I never have AirPods in so I can easily strike up a conversation with anyone I run into. I like that at Harvard, I'm surrounded by friends, acquaintances, and classmates—I never feel alone.

Constant good company is harder to come by while abroad. I wouldn't say I feel lonely here en soi, but I've definitely had to develop a different way of finding that warm and fuzzy feeling of belonging that I effortlessly found at Harvard.

Paris isn't always known for being welcoming. You might have heard the stereotype that Parisians are unfriendly and irritable. But in my experience, that's one of the biggest misconceptions about the French. Yes, the occasional waiter has snapped at me during a lunch rush, but these interactions are the exception, not the rule.

One of my favorite parts of French culture is the friendliness I receive from complete strangers. It's customary here to say *bonjour* or *bonsoir* as soon as you enter any establishment, and forgetting to do so is considered rude. I once had a waiter correct her coworker who spoke to me and my friends in English so that we could practice our French instead. Admittedly

daily interactions still bring a sense of connection between me and the city. No matter where I go, I'll never fail to find someone to say *bonjour* to. With each friendly exchange, it feels like Paris wants me to be here.

Besides greetings from shopkeepers and kindness from waiters, I have also had some delightful encounters with Parisians who are off the clock. One stand-out moment happened on a Friday night train into the city. I was sitting on one half of a two-seater metro seat facing another two-seater on my way to meet friends. Suddenly a gaggle of four girls waltzed in and took the surrounding seats and one across the aisle. One of them had turned an umbrella into a microphone and held it up to everyone's face like a news interview to hear their opinions on Metro Line 9.

I was laughing along with them when, suddenly, the umbrella was in my face, and it was my turn to weigh in. My two years of Harvard French hadn't exactly prepared me to critique a metro line, but, fortunately, my response was unimportant since the girls were far more interested in my foreign accent. We made all the proper introductions and exchanged Instagrams as the doors were closing at their stop. Later that night, they invited me out with them, and although my previous plans did not allow it, it felt good to know that friends could be made anywhere in Paris.

Third spaces—places people spend time outside of work and home like parks and cafés—are the secret ingredient that allow these kinds of organic encounters to flourish here. The beauty of third spaces in Paris is that they spill out onto the street, rather than being confined by four walls. Because of the strong smoking

culture here, every café and restaurant has plenty of outdoor seating, and even in forty-degree weather, I always see terraces filled with people. This effect is what makes Paris feel alive. When I stroll down a street lined with bustling restaurants, I feel invigorated because I see so many people who are all a part of this broader Parisian community with me.

One night in the vibrant Latin Quarter, my friends and I walked into a bar with a soccer match on—or should I say a “football” match. Despite having no previous allegiance to Mbappe or the French team, I found myself cheering along with the whooping thirty-year-olds at every goal and groaning when two goals got taken away because of off-side calls. I was a part of the *fraternité* in a way I never could have been if I had just watched the match at home.

Everywhere I go, I am reminded that this city is alive and filled with people who want to enjoy life, whether it is through watching a soccer match or lingering over lunch with friends. *Love Actually* says it best, “If you look for it, I've got a sneaky feeling you'll find that love actually is all around.”

Since arriving in Paris, I've been playing this quote on repeat in my mind. Nowhere does this feel better embodied than in Paris. When I see couples cuddling in the park or a parent walking their child home from school, I'm reminded that this city radiates love, and its epithet rings true. While I still don't actively seek out alone time in Paris, when it does naturally arise, I never truly feel alone because love is everywhere. It exists in the interactions I both have and observe and the potential connections I can make. Even without a person in sight, I always know that *Paris m'aime*.

FRANCES CONNORS '26
(MARYFRANCESCONNORS@COLLEGE.
HARVARD.EDU) WOULD CONSIDER
HERSELF A HOPELESS ROMANTIC.

GRAPHIC BY SOPHIA RASCOFF '27



I Now Pronounce You Debt Free

Why you should ditch the cheap chocolate and get married this Valentine's Day.

BY MOLLY CALLAGHAN '27

Like many members of Gen Z, I've come to question the institution of marriage. Once seen as a lifelong commitment, it now feels more like a fragile contract—nearly 50% of marriages in the United States end in divorce. Add the traditions rooted in misogyny, the cost of throwing a wedding in this economy, and the potential emotional or financial damages arising from a complicated divorce seems like an outdated label with a high propensity to fail.

Instead of marriage, it seems simpler to stick to long-term relationships that ostensibly offer all the same emotional and romantic fulfillment without the legal strings attached. However, such stipulations can actually provide security for future financial and legal rights. Recently, I was surprised to discover that one of the most significant fiscal benefits of marriage comes even before earning a salary—through significantly improved aid packages at university.

So, if there were ever a time for me to get married, it would be during college. And, in my opinion, if there were ever a perfect person to marry, it's my best friend.

The Financial Aid Loophole

You may ask how a ring on your finger could affect your academic career. I would say it doesn't, but college financial aid officers would tell you otherwise.

As a married student, Harvard's Financial Aid office assesses you and your spouse's income and assets, disregarding your parents' finances. This is because both the College Scholarship Service Profile (CSS profile) and the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) classify married students as financially independent, so parental income or tax forms are not required. Since they are only considering you and your spouse's income, if you and your spouse earn under \$85,000, then you will pay \$0 to attend the College. Additionally, if you and your spouse have high-paying summer internships, you will still only pay no more than 10% of your annual income provided you make less than a combined \$85,000 to \$150,000. And for those of you quant, finance folk who make more than that working part-time, marry someone in the arts. And if you're still making too much, I simply have no sympathy for you or your bank account.

The Legality of Marrying Your Friend

Admittedly, saving up to \$300,000 by marrying your friends sounds too good to be true and feels instinctively fraudulent. However, much to my surprise, there is no legal requirement for a marriage to be romantic. In fact, it is legal to benefit from free tuition provided it is not solely for financial reasons. So open your mind and

expand your perspective to discover how to skirt this requirement.

Do you and your friend share life responsibilities, like taking turns cleaning the dorm bathroom or getting groceries at Trader Joe's? Does your friend provide you with emotional support—whether it's about your terrible drunk texts, your campus crush, or, for you pre-meds, the terrifying first A-? Does your friend always remember your birthday and buy you gifts? If yes, that sounds like a life partner to me. Thus, wanting to make that official through a marriage is perfectly legal and acceptable.

If you're thinking, *Yes, but so does my college partner*, do not—I repeat, do not—marry them. I promise you that if you and your college partner are truly meant to be, you can get married after your first platonic marriage and subsequent divorce. But statistics say your relationship won't last, and divorce could become difficult if your partner refuses to an amicable uncontested divorce because the break up wasn't mutual or they simply want to make your life difficult.

Lastly, the legality of your marriage is most likely to be scrutinized by federal agencies, not Harvard's financial aid team. Unfortunately, for my fellow international students, this means U.S. Immigration Services may demand proof that your marriage isn't solely for a green card or American citizenship. Given you already have an F1 visa, you can just choose to not apply for citizenship or a green card and avoid any risk of scrutiny.

But in the case that you want to apply for either of these documents, your marriage is still not a crime, provided you demonstrate that you want a serious partnership with your friend irrespective of it being romantic. You should also be prepared to prove its legitimacy. It's also worth noting that you are only eligible to apply for citizenship after five years of marriage, by which point you've likely already divorced—either because post-grad life pulled you apart or because the tuition benefits have long since run dry. For the most risk-averse, though, you can fully avoid any suspicion by marrying a fellow international.

The Exit Strategy: Senior Year Divorce

All good things must come to an end, and that's the beauty of the plan—once your final financial aid package is secured, you can amicably part ways. A clean-cut senior year divorce, timed just after tuition is covered, ensures you maximize the benefits. And the best part? You get to throw a divorce party with all your friends.

Unfortunately, like all good parties, there is a mess to clean up afterward, and filing for divorce can be administratively inconvenient and costly. Massachusetts law requires you to legally file for divorce, even if you part on friendly terms. A prenup can speed up the process, and

as long as you avoid acquiring shared assets or debts (which is highly recommended), it should be relatively simple. Still, legal fees for filing a divorce, attorney costs, and prenup drafting typically range from \$2,000–\$6,000, so be sure to account for this to ensure your savings still outweigh tuition expenses.

Of course, you could decide to stay married. But once both of you start earning salaries, filing joint taxes may create unnecessary tension in your friendship. And, not to speculate, but explaining a platonic spouse to future partners could become complicated if you're no longer living close to each other or receiving tuition benefits.

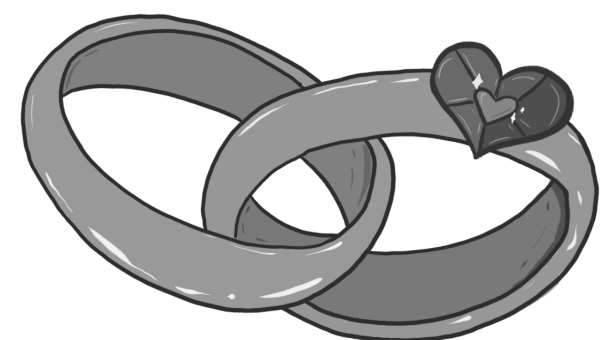
Not staying married will make you a twenty-something divorcee, but on the bright side, the word divorcee sounds chic and you've already saved yourself \$300,000 in tuition alongside the priceless gift of an actually interesting Hinge prompt.

Is This Just a Theory?

I offered to pay for the marriage certificate of seven different duos and even proposed to five of my own friends in the interest of science. The results? One friend—who shall remain unnamed—has a wedding planned and a chapel booked with her gay best friend for early this summer. The rest immediately dismissed the idea, despite its clear financial benefits and the fact that platonic spousal status could align with the relationship they already share with their best friends. Regardless of logic, the institution of marriage appears to still hold a symbolic or emotional value for many. It feels strange, even inappropriate, to marry a friend, despite the fact it might make practical sense. However, if you can think about marriage as a contract for platonic love, partnership, financial stability, shared experience, and emotional support, then it might not be a bad idea to turn this year's Galentine's into a proposal.

MOLLY CALLAGHAN '27 (MOLLYCALLAGHAN@COLLEGE.HARVARD.EDU) WROTE THIS ARTICLE IN RESPONSE TO HARVARD INDEPENDENT PRESIDENT KATIE MERRIAM '26 REFUSING HER MARRIAGE PROPOSAL.

GRAPHIC BY CLARA LAKE '27



Thoughts From New Quincy

How the erosion of social structures is leaving men behind.

BY LUKE WAGNER '26

We have entered a loneliness epidemic. Humans are wired for connection, yet modern life has left many men more isolated than ever. Yet, while loneliness has increasingly been recognized as a public health emergency for all, men face unique challenges—they are less likely to seek emotional support and, as of 2022, are at a higher risk of suicide than ever before. Male social detachment is more than just an emotional burden—it erodes the relationships that fuel success in work, school, and community life.

Few thinkers offer a better framework for understanding this crisis than Émile Durkheim. In “Suicide” (1897), Durkheim examined how varying levels of social integration and regulation influence mental health and well-being, arguing that suicide is not purely an individual act but often a reflection of broader societal conditions. He categorized suicide into four types: egoistic suicide, caused by a lack of social ties; altruistic suicide, resulting from excessive integration into a group; anomic suicide, occurring when social norms break down; and fatalistic suicide, caused by excessive societal control.

Men today experience higher suicide rates partly because of a lack of strong social ties and rapidly changing social norms. Anomic suicide, or anomie, refers to a state of normlessness, where rapid social change, economic instability, or the erosion of institutions leaves individuals feeling disconnected and adrift. The resulting sense of isolation and uncertainty contributes to rising mental health crises, including higher rates of depression and suicide, particularly among men. Historically, men’s identities were tied to roles embedded in stable institutions like churches or local organizations, which provided both economic stability and social connection. As these structures have eroded or moved online, many men today lack clear pathways to personal connection.

The erosion of stable, organized groups has had dire consequences. The CDC noted that men account for nearly 80% of all American suicides, with unmarried and socially isolated men among the most vulnerable. Moreover, according to the NIH, the age-adjusted suicide rate in the United States increased by 35.2% from 2000 to 2018. Between 2020 and 2021, the suicide rates for males aged 15-24 “significantly increased.” These statistics support Durkheim’s analysis, highlighting how the absence of communal bonds leads to alienation and, ultimately, self-destructive behavior.

One of the most significant contributors to the male loneliness crisis is the decline of traditional religious institutions. Durkheim found that Catholics had lower suicide rates than Protestants, which he attributed to the more communal, tightly integrated structure of Catholicism compared to the more individualistic nature of Protestantism.

Recently in the U.S., religious participation has plummeted and local community engagement has declined. In 1972, only about 5% of Americans identified as religiously unaffiliated; by 2022, that number had risen

to 29%. Over the same period, the percentage of observing Christians in the U.S. fell from roughly 90% to 57%.

Since 1991, the number of men who have not attended church outside of a special service has risen by 13%. As of the summer of 2023, the Pew Research Center found that around 64% of religiously unaffiliated people are men. Before the world moved digital, men often found solidarity in religious groups where camaraderie, support, and purpose were readily available. As male religious participation has declined, friendships have become less structured and more dependent on individual initiative—a skill that many men struggle to develop.

Education, or lack thereof, has also played a crucial role in fueling this crisis. Men are enrolling in and completing higher education at declining rates, leading to decreased economic opportunities and long-term career instability. The Pew Research Center found that the percentage of young men who have completed high school and are now seeking a college degree is down from 47% in 2011 to 39% in 2022. Men without college degrees go on to earn less than men with college degrees and are unemployed at a higher rate. Ultimately, this series of causes and effects contribute to increased male loneliness and subsequent mental harm.

As men’s education rates continue to decline, marriage rates have also plummeted. Over the past 50 years, the American marriage rate has fallen by approximately 50%. While many factors contribute to this decline, one key shift is that women—now earning college degrees at higher rates than men—are less financially dependent on marriage. Durkheim argued that marriage provided a crucial stabilizing force, particularly for men, by reinforcing social bonds and emotional support. The NIH noted that since 1970 “men derive[d] greater health benefits from marriage than women [did].” The American Survey Center also noted that “men who get married and have kids are happier than other men.” With fewer men marrying, many lack the built-in social integration that marriage once provided, leaving them at higher risk of loneliness and depression.

In addition to structural shifts, technology has played a major role in male loneliness. According to Gallup, teens are spending an average of 4.8 hours a day on social media, with 48% of male teens spending more than four hours a day. While digital communication allows for connection across the globe, it often serves as an inadequate substitute rather than a positive supplement for real-life social interaction. UC Davis Health shows that excessive social media use increases feelings of loneliness, anxiety, and depression. While these platforms can create a sense of community, they lack the depth and emotional reciprocity of in-person relationships.

Research has shown that men today report having fewer close friends than ever before. Over the last thirty years, the number of men who reported having six or more close friends has halved. Since 1990, the number of men who reported

having zero close friends has increased fivefold.

Moreover, the rise of digital entertainment—video games, streaming services, and online forums—has further discouraged in-person socialization. Many men retreat into digital spaces that offer temporary distractions but fail to provide lasting connections.

One of the most damaging aspects of social media is its fostering of social comparison. Men scrolling through Instagram or TikTok are constantly bombarded with carefully curated videos of success, wealth, and happiness—often leading to feelings of inadequacy or isolation. Unlike previous generations, where male friendships were built through real-life activities, today’s digital age encourages a more detached, performative form of interaction.

The loneliest men left without strong social institutions, support systems, or close friendships turn to the internet not just for entertainment, but for identity and belonging. Men absent-mindedly engage in short-form content on Instagram. What begins as harmless scrolling can quickly spiral into a radicalizing feedback loop, where isolated men are drawn toward radicalizing influencers.

These influencers validate alienated men’s frustrations, offering easy explanations for complex problems. They promise that by adopting their worldview—often steeped in misogyny or rigid gender roles—men can reclaim their lost status. The more time these men spend in these digital echo chambers, the more they become disconnected from reality, adopting increasingly extreme views.

Male loneliness is not simply a personal failing—it is the result of deep structural shifts that have left many lonely men without clear pathways to connection. The erosion of traditional social institutions, the decline of educational and economic stability, and the rise of digital isolation have all contributed to this crisis. If Durkheim was right, and human well-being depends on social integration, then the solution lies in rebuilding the connections that modern society has eroded.

If we are serious about addressing this crisis, we must rebuild the social structures that Durkheim argued are essential for stability and belonging. Durkheim saw occupational groups as a means to counteract the fragmentation of modern society—associations where individuals share a common goal or purpose. Today, this could be educational programs, mentorship networks, or professional organizations that provide men with stability and shared identity. If society fails to address the fragmenting society, male loneliness will continue to be a growing public health concern. The challenge ahead is not just about countering individual male loneliness,

but rather about ensuring systemic issues are tackled in the face of policy or intervention.



LUKE WAGNER '26
(LUKEWAGNER@COLLEGE.
HARVARD.EDU) IS THE VICE
PRESIDENT OF THE HARVARD
INDEPENDENT.

**GRAPHIC BY CHRISTIE
BECKLEY '27**

ARTS

The Florecitas

How two Harvard juniors are spreading love and culture through floral creations.

BY LAYLA CHAARAOUI '26

For Lizbeth Ibarra '26 and Kathy Villanueva '26, flowers are more than just beautiful—they're a way to express affection and connection. "I see it as an act of love and self-care. Flowers always signify an embrace," Villanueva said. The *Independent* spoke to the duo, known as the "Florecitas," about their decision to share their passion for bouquet-making with the Harvard community just in time for Valentine's Day.

Their journey began last semester when a friend who had recently graduated reached out to Ibarra, asking her to create a "big, dramatic red rose bouquet for his girlfriend." Ibarra and Villanueva, blockmates who shared the same passion for flowers and bouquets, teamed up to bring the vision to life. That experience sparked something in both of them—they realized how much they enjoyed sharing their passion for flowers and creating something special for others.

Flowers have always been a part of the Florecitas' lives. Growing up in Mexico, the two were immersed in the tradition of crafting bouquets for family or friends, often picking up tips and skills from those around them. "My mom actually is the one who inspired me to start creating more bouquets of flowers because she really loves making them," Villanueva said.

"Both of our communities back home have pretty dramatic and big, colorful bouquets," Ibarra added. "We had previously talked about: 'What if we start telling more people that we make bouquets and ask if they want us to make them for any special occasions?'"

Their name is rooted in their heritage as well: 'flor' and 'flores' means 'flower' and 'flowers' in Spanish. "Florecitas, we felt, was a really cute and dainty name," Ibarra explained. They chose the name to honor their Spanish-speaking and Latina roots while also reflecting their desire to share their passion with everyone. Recognizing a gap in the market, they wanted to bring their unique style to campus, offering something for all to enjoy.

"We hadn't really seen many flower bouquet shops around the area that sell

big, really cute bouquets like the ones we've seen back home," Villanueva said. "I haven't seen these types of mixed bouquets or custom bouquets around the area, so I'm excited to bring them to Harvard."

The Florecitas recently created an Instagram page, [@florecitasharvard], where students can message the account to inquire about an order. "[Students will] either send us a picture that they found on our Instagram or other info that they've seen online, but most people actually don't have an idea of what they want," Ibarra said.

The pair then collaborates with the customer to design a bouquet that meets their vision. "Because a lot of our primary customers have been men, I think a lot of them don't really know what they want to buy for whoever they're buying a bouquet for," Ibarra said. "We've definitely been really helpful in that process, doing a lot of back-and-forth communication ... helping negotiate and talk out what they want."

The Florecitas also relish the chance to demonstrate their creativity when filling an order. "We offer people the opportunity to let us freestyle, which I think tends to be really fun. And we'll just ask them a couple questions about, 'What kind of colors do you think this person likes?' 'What are their favorite seasons?' 'What are some things that describe them?' And that helps us really customize the bouquet for that person," Ibarra added.

"I just love working with flowers. I always have flowers in my room, so just being able to share that with other people, I'm very excited," Villanueva exclaimed.

The Florecitas source their flowers and materials from local vendors, which is a challenging feat at times and necessitates planning in advance. For Valentine's Day, they've thought ahead, already ordering and removing the thorns from 400 roses. Despite the time-consuming work, the Florecitas say their time making the bouquets is worth it: "I'm excited to see people get their flowers delivered and their reactions. I think some of them don't even know they'll have these really pretty flowers delivered to them. That's so cute," Villanueva said.

They hope their business—and the



sentiment behind flowers and bouquets—will resonate beyond just Valentine's Day. "I've just, for years, liked getting flowers from my friends, and I like to give my friends flowers, just because it's something I think people don't typically think about buying for themselves. It's nice when someone else thinks about you," Ibarra said.

"My parents have made it a habit of getting flowers throughout the semester, so I constantly have them around me. I see it as a way for my parents to show affection and love, even if they're far away," Villanueva explained. "I usually get myself flowers when I've had a hard test or a rough week or day. It's just a moment where I bring peace to myself and show myself affection."

Whether it's for a friend's performance or a personal treat, the Florecitas are excited about the opportunities to grow their craft. "I think it's felt really fun and nice to see how many people are super intrigued by what we're doing and also super interested," Ibarra said. "By making more bouquets, we're going to get better."

She finished with a hopeful sentiment: "I think this little idea we have of engaging with the power of community will encourage people to show their friends and other people more love and appreciation because your friends deserve flowers, too."

LAYLA CHAARAOUI'S '26 (LAYLACHAARAOUI@COLLEGE.HARVARD.EDU) FAVORITE FLOWER IS A SUNFLOWER.

PHOTO COURTESY OF KATHY VILLANUEVA '26

My WOY's Wicked Smaht

Hasty Pudding Theatricals honors actress Cynthia Erivo with their 2025 Woman of the Year award and performs their 176th show on opening night.

BY RANIA JONES '27 & MIA TAVARES '27

May Art always fill your caps
This, which the Hasty Pudding Theatricals' 75th Woman of the Year, actress and vocalist Cynthia Erivo signed in the Pudding honoree guestbook, rings true to the Hasty Pudding's motto, Concordia Discors (discordant harmony or organized chaos), christening a day full of joy, love, and laughter.

On Wednesday, Feb. 5, 2025, the Hasty Pudding Theatricals (HPT) honored Emmy, Tony, Grammy-winning, and 2x Oscar nominee Cynthia Erivo with their iconic Woman of the Year award. During the day-long event, Erivo participated in a celebratory roast led by HPT Producers Willow Woodward '26 and Daisy Nussbaum '26, held a press conference, and attended the opening night of the Hasty Pudding Theatricals' 176th production, "101 Damnations."

The Hasty Pudding Theatricals, the oldest theater company in the United States, is an avant-garde arena for fearless, disruptive comedy. Established in 1951, the Woman of the Year Award is the Hasty Pudding Theatricals' oldest honor and is awarded annually to performers who have made enduring contributions to the world of entertainment.

Cynthia Erivo is best known for her critically acclaimed role as Elphaba in Universal Pictures' "Wicked: Part One." Beyond "Wicked," Erivo is disciplined, formidable, and the kind of performer who does not just inhabit a role but bends it to her will. Other notable performances of hers include Harriet Tubman in "Harriet," Holly Gibney in "The Outsider," the Fairy with Turquoise Hair in "Pinocchio," Darlene Sweet in "Bad Times at El Royale," and Celie Harris in Broadway's *The Color Purple*.

Her day began with a parade at 2 p.m. down Massachusetts Avenue. The street was packed with enthusiastic fans organized into a chaotic but respectful frenzy. Erivo spent most of her time waving and soaking in the adoration from her perch on the back of a Bentley convertible. The rest of the procession included the Blue Man Group, Miss Massachusetts, student performance groups of all ages, and several HPT cast, tech staff, and business staff members. The crowd nibbled on free cannolis from Uncle Joey's Cannolis and cheered along as Erivo participated in the customary kickline with the HPT cast on the steps of Farkas Hall.

Once inside the building, the fun continued. "Looks like someone might need to hold Cynthia's hand—or finger—during this roast," joked Nussbaum that night. "That said, we promise not to be as mean as the wizard. By the end, she'll be the one who's truly popular with the crowd."

Before Erivo could fly off with her Pudding Pot—the award given to honorees—"roast" presenters Woodward and Nussbaum made her work through a series of tasks. The first activity involved several comedy sketches where the producers joked that to comply with Erivo's PR team, they had to outsource

"comedians" to deliver the roast. Company members Danny Dennenberg '26, Chris Rivers '25, and Will Jevon '26 delivered impressions and sets pretending to be comedians.

Next, the producers asked Erivo to paint a depiction of the "holding space" meme, referring to a wonderfully bizarre interview where Erivo and her Wicked co-star Ariana Grande engaged in a confusing conversation after a reporter asked about "holding space." Commending her effort, the producers then gave Erivo an award—a man named Oscar, dressed like the award, played by company member Kavi Gasper '27. Erivo's final and most anticipated task was a riff-off challenge against two members of the show's cast, Caitlin Beirne '25 and Gabrielle Greene '27. While the cast members put up a good front, Erivo took the cake.

Proving herself as the Wicked Witch of the West, the producers, joined by the Blue Man Group, bestowed a faux blue pot to Erivo. After the blue pot had been returned backstage, the presenters then declared that Erivo had finally earned her place as the recipient of the prestigious golden Hasty Pudding Pot. She was awarded this trophy by the writers of HPT 176 Rodmehr Basidj '26 and Jackson Coombs '26, who kissed either side of her cheek.

Following the roast, Erivo was led into another room for the press conference where she was accompanied by costumed Hasty Pudding members Avery Hansberg '25, Jane Josefowicz '25, and HPT Press and Publicity Manager Chaelon Simpson '26. Sat in the center holding her brand new golden pudding pot, Erivo spoke about the importance of receiving an award from such a storied theatrical organization.

"It means a great deal, actually, because theater doesn't really leave you. The craft that you learn, the work that you are put through, the stamina that you have to build ... so to still be awarded for the things that I've done on stage means a great deal because it means that it's still shining through," Erivo said. "It's quite nice."

With respect to the roast, she came in completely unaware of what to expect. "I wanted to be surprised. I wanted to come to this with fresh eyes and to just experience it in the moment," Erivo said.

The evening concluded with the opening night of HPT's 176th production, "101 Damnations." The show centers around the "goody-two-shoes" Claire Ickle-Error, played by Gabrielle Greene '27, who was mistakenly condemned to hell. The show began with an exceptionally well-choreographed ensemble dance number reminiscent of the Pudding's iconic kicklines. While the plot was relatively

straightforward and the characters clearly developed, the show was brought to life by the numerous jokes and puns riddled throughout the script. The cast had brilliant comedic timing. In true Pudding fashion, there were multiple jobs at both Ivy League schools like Yale and Cornell and colleges in the Boston area like Wellesley. The crowd was responsive, cheering along and guffawing with laughter at sexual innuendos and frequent political commentaries.

Even though the storyline centered around Greene's character Claire, every character had their moment. In an interview with the *Harvard Independent*, Greene explained, "Claire is an interesting character to play, just because, being the protagonist, a lot of my role in the show is keeping the story grounded narratively... And I think it's a selfless role, and that a lot of the times, it's stepping back and making space for someone else to have their moment, or someone else to have their joke, which I really enjoy."

The script gave each character their own journey and each cast member had an opportunity to solo in a song. Each side plot came wonderfully together into a cohesive storyline that had the audience empathizing with the characters and cheering them on as they tried to escape Hell. Greene also spoke about her experience being a part of a tight-knit ensemble. "Everyone has their own individual strengths, and I think the Pudding is really good at showcasing that."

One of Greene's strengths is that she's a vocal powerhouse. In an exciting moment during one of her several solos, Greene chose to incorporate a rendition of Erivo's iconic "Wicked" riff. It was something that had been planned by the company since they learned Erivo would

be awarded WOY and be in attendance for opening night. According to Greene, "On Wednesday night, I just looked down dead center at her and did it... I was so nervous, but I think it turned out well."

The riff, along with the rest of the show, was a major success,

and the cast received a well-deserved standing ovation after the culmination of their traditional kickline that incorporated matching group costumes and some impressively high kicks.

"101 Damnations" is currently running at Farkas Hall from Feb. 7 to March 9, with special performances in New York City on March 14 and 15 and Bermuda on March 19, 20, and 21. If Cynthia Erivo loved "101 Damnations," you will too—don't miss out!

RANIA JONES '27 (RJONES@COLLEGE.HARVARD.EDU) AND MIA TAVARES '27 (MIATAVARES@COLLEGE.HARVARD.EDU) CAN OFTEN BE FOUND PRACTICING THEIR DEFYING GRAVITY RIFFS IN THEIR COMMON ROOM.



I Think I'm Lovestruck

Lovestruck Books opens shop in Harvard Square, combining a bookstore, cafe, boutique, and wine bar.

BY HANNAH DAVIS '25

Tucked in a semi-basement unit in a retail building on Brattle Street awaits a romance book lover's paradise. Lovestruck Books opened at the beginning of January, offering a bookstore, boutique, and cafe in one.

Romance is more than a Valentine's Day specialty here; the store captures the heart of the holiday year-round. An archway of pink, red, indigo, and white flowers lines the patio ceiling entrance. Inside, tables feature cutesy shelves with illustrations of female role models, from Chappell Roan to Ruth Bader Ginsburg, and the cursive word "Lover" on them. Some tables include seasonal Valentine's Day items, such as Valentine's Day gift bags and red and pink decor. Other items, such as the "Spa Day" and "Coffee & A Book" scented candles and artisanal cocktail sets and chocolate, seem characteristic of the store's year-round romantic style and shop offerings.

A George Howell Coffee shop sits inside the store, with small coffee tables for working or chatting. However, my favorite spot is in the front right corner—a lounge area featuring three cozy chairs, a couch, several pillows, and outlets to power a writing session. The lack of customer Wi-Fi encourages patrons to use the communal spaces to read or chat rather than spend hours on their computers.

The music changes depending on the day, featuring popular artists such as Taylor Swift, Noah Kahan, and even some Toto jams. While not always the best background music for a reading session, the music cultivates a whimsical, welcoming vibe.

Lovestruck Books encapsulates the third place theory—a place outside of home and work to meet people, socialize, and build community. Beyond its typical bookstore and coffee shop operations, Lovestruck hosts book clubs, wine tastings, and release parties.

In an email interview with the *Independent*, owner Rachel Kanter shared that her inspiration for Lovestruck was rooted in these ideas. "I had my second

child in March of 2020 and the incredible isolation of pandemic and postpartum led me to envision a kind of third place (outside of work and home) where I could connect with other people casually over shared interests."

"[I] wanted to provide a platform and convening space for other groups and organizations looking for a place to gather. The specific combination of bookstore and cafe and boutique and wine bar was just the manifestation of all my favorite things in one place," she continued.

Lovestruck Books is capitalizing on the rapidly



expanding market for the romance genre. From 2020 to 2023, romance print book sales nearly doubled to 39 million copies. Social media supported the genre's popularity, with the #BookTok trend on Instagram Reels and TikTok showcasing top romance novels.

Though the 'romantasy' genre has been around for a few years, it first gained popularity in 2023. Goodreads added the genre to the 2023 Goodreads Choice Awards, awarding "Best Romantasy" to Rebecca Yarros for her best-selling novel "Fourth Wing." Lovestruck built on this online momentum and hosted a book release party for "Onyx Storm," the third installment of the "Fourth Wing" series. The bookstore even dedicated an entire end of a bookshelf to displaying the new novel.

Kanter emphasized the importance of a romance-focused bookstore in Harvard Square,

in particular. "People in academia or challenging professional environments need escapism from their daily grind, and often, they find it in romance novels," she said.

In addition to honoring romantic love in its book supply and theme, Lovestruck promotes self-love. Tucked into a glass bookshelf by the lounge, labeled "18+", Lovestruck sells vibrators, sex-themed card games, lube, and BDSM sex toys. Candles and chocolates for sale adorn the bookshelves. Curated trinket tables with blankets, jewelry, sweet treats, tote bags, and mugs line the front of the shop.

Each day I entered Lovestruck, I saw different types of clientele: two older women catching up in the lounge area; young female students working at coffee tables and sipping specialty tea; a group of students reading books while curled on the couch; Cambridge locals and Harvard friend groups all perusing the book aisles.

"We've seen an incredibly diverse clientele ranging from college students to professors to writers to tourists, but the unifying force among everyone is a shared love of books and a desire for a respite from daily life," Kanter said. "The event attendees are similar, although we have a large fan base willing to drive in from far distances, including out of state, in order to see their favorite writers in person."

Regardless of your relationship status this Valentine's Day, Lovestruck Books continues to celebrate love and romance in all forms. Whether you visit Lovestruck Books for a Valentine's Day gift or come around another time to curl up with a romance novel, the shop is here to stay.

HANNAH DAVIS '25 (HANNAHDAVIS@COLLEGE.HARVARD.EDU) WROTE THIS ARTICLE FROM A CHAIR IN LOVETRUCK BOOKS.

PHOTO COURTESY OF REAGAN BYRNE

Love Poems, Redefined

Three poems that stretch the definition of "love poem."

BY AIDAN FITZSIMONS '25

you stir and i respond (*for a puppy*)

you stir, and i respond...
to press upon you tenderly my love,
to bless life and growth like breath on fire,
to wash my hands over you
with so exactly the pressure of god,
as i would want the hands of creation
to wash over me, and put me to sleep...
you stir, and i respond...

temporary art on a wall at burning man

undust your grief
flecks of the living
settle this stretched
rhythm, this love
lingering; still
as i wet my lips
once again



autocatalytic (*for a baby*)

autocatalytic my love
for sleeping you spread
across my chest
ember of flickering
prosody, your breath
continuous with mine

AIDAN FITZSIMONS '25 (AIDAN_FITZSIMONS@COLLEGE.HARVARD.EDU) THINKS ALL POEMS ARE LOVE POEMS.

GRAPHIC BY CARA CRONIN '28

How to be Single on Valentine's Day

An original self-help writing piece.

BY ANONYMOUS

So, you're disappointed about spending Valentine's Day alone. Maybe you're used to buying yourself chocolate, or maybe this is the first time in a long time you don't have a Valentine. Either way, you're dreading that inevitable pit in your stomach that will accompany seeing the countless affectionate Instagram posts and boys walking in Harvard Square with flowers. Maybe you're a hopeless romantic. Maybe you just suffer from chronic horniness. Or even worse, maybe you've got a little bit of both—like me.

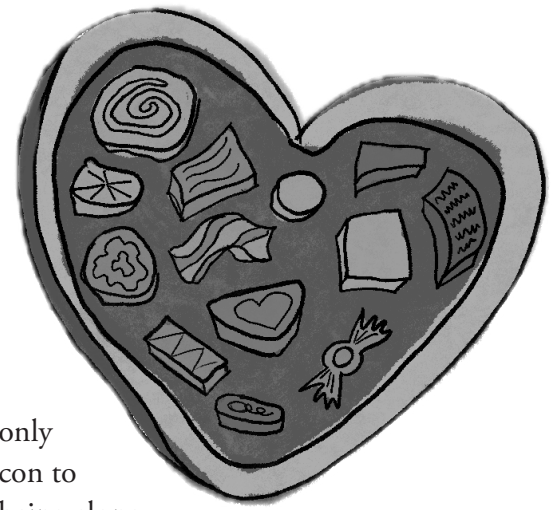
Well, I am here to tell you what you are and aren't going to do on this single Valentine's Day. I know you might be feeling depressed and want nothing more than to impersonate depressed Bella in *The Twilight Saga: New Moon* when Edward unexpectedly leaves her, sitting still in your chair and moping as you watch the seasons change outside your window. Although you might not have any classes to dramatically skip on Friday, sitting around feeling miserable about your romantic status is never going to be beneficial. Edward ditched Bella, and instead of going out and having revenge sex, she sulked for months. Don't be Bella.

What was that? You have no one to get

freaky with on this Valentine's Day? Okay fine, some might say it's inappropriate to introduce yourself to your Datamatches with, "Tryna fuq??" However, don't let a little bump in the road stop you from freeing yourself of the mid-class daydream blue balls. It is the holiday of love, and there is nothing more important than loving yourself. So, call up Toscano and make reservations for you and your rose toy.

Although you might be feeling like a loner, you must transform into the sexiest version of yourself on Valentine's Day. Get up, shower, blow out your hair, put some makeup on, and blast David Guetta's (feat. Akon) "Sexy Bitch." Take a hot selfie and let everyone know that you're feeling grateful to not be stuck in a lame relationship.

You're in luck—this Valentine's Day falls on a Friday. No need to buy overpriced CVS candy; HUDS is graciously allowing you to stuff your arteries with as much fried shit (or so we thought?) as possible! Why would you want to be Lady and the Tramping some bolognese or stressing about the havoc that brownie a la mode you just shared with your date is going to wreak havoc on your bowel when instead, you can be peacefully shoving a HUDS BBQ bacon burger into your mouth. The



only con to being alone this year is that no one can give you the Heimlich when you start choking on your mozzarella sticks (totally worth it though).

This single Valentine's Day, make it your goal to thirst trap, eat delicious food, and dance in your room like no one is watching (no one is watching). Log into Google Slides and rank all the potential suitors who, if they're lucky enough, could be your Valentine next year. Remember that if no one matches your freak, don't settle. And don't forget...the rose toy is one click away.

WRITTEN ANONYMOUSLY FOR THE HARVARD INDEPENDENT.

GRAPHIC BY CHRISTIE BECKLEY '27

Six Poems You Should Never Send Your Situationship

These poems are semi-crowdsourced, fully vetted, and once or twice tested.

BY SHAMELESS SHAKESPEARE '27

1. *lustly limerick*

It's been too long since you've made me cum,
It's not your fault Zoloff's making me numb.

Still, though, a girl has needs
And I don't like to plead
So I think we should have a threesome.

2. *half a sonnet apology*

Shakespeare's sonnets fall short of describing
The pounding in my naughty bits when I gaze at you
Your sultry eyes sing, I can't stop thinking
About everything I want to do

Forty-five seconds was far too short
It's just because I loved so much about your body
Next time we together cavort
I swear my weiner will behave less shoddy

3. *just a haiku*

Happy Valentine's!
Open relationship, please?
Also, I have crabs.

4. *acrostic love poem*

It's been only one week since we met, but

Last night I couldn't stop thinking about the
Overwhelming feelings of love and lust that I have for you.
Very, very, very strong feelings. And a wet dream or two.
Every minute of every day (since last Monday)

Your face, your body, your laughter dance across my mind.
Obsessed is the only word I can use to describe how possessive I feel.
Until I see you next, adieu, my beautiful princess.

5. *candid couplets*

The night we met was such good fun
I felt so alive, it's clear you're the one.

But the long night took a toll on my holes
So maybe it's time that we switch our roles

I don't want to sound like I'm begging
But I need to ask—how do you feel about pegging?



6. *biblical beseechment*

Set me as a seal upon your heart,
As a seal upon your arm,
For love is strong as death,
Jealousy is fierce as the grave.
Its flashes are flashes of fire, the very flame of the Lord.
Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it.
Song of Songs 8:6-7 (ESV)

...u still up?

THIS ANONYMOUS AUTHOR HAS DEFINITELY NEVER HAD A SITUATIONSHIP (AND THUS NO ONE TO SEND CREATIVE POETRY TO).

GRAPHIC BY ANGIE LI '28

SPORTS

Sports Spotlight: Robert Hinton

First-year guard's journey to Harvard Crimson men's basketball and beyond.

BY MIA WILCOX '28

On Feb. 3, standout first-year guard Robert Hinton '28 was awarded his sixth Ivy League Rookie of the Week honor of the season. His achievement came just days after a career-high 28-point performance in a win against Columbia. An aspiring lawyer and NBA player, Hinton has been an integral addition to the Harvard Crimson men's basketball team. This latest achievement is just another milestone in his accomplished basketball career.

Hinton has been playing basketball since he was four years old. "A big reason why I love basketball is because I have an older brother ... He's always been a huge role model for me, and we've been playing it since I can remember," he said. "I always looked up to him." His brother Adam Hinton is a junior guard for Cornell.

The night after defeating Columbia, the Hinton brothers faced off on opposing teams for the first time in their careers. The game marked a defining moment for the family. Both Robert and Adam played strong games scoring eight and four points respectively. Despite Cornell beating Harvard 75-60, Robert expressed nothing but excitement to play against his brother: "Being suited up in different jerseys, playing against each other, that was an unreal feeling. Thinking after the game, the fact that I played against my brother in college basketball, and we're both on our respective Ivy League teams... It was a dream come true," he said.

The Hinton brothers played together for a year at Harvard Westlake High School. They also played together on the Chinese Taipei men's basketball team at the William Jones Cup International Tournament two years in a row. Two years ago, the Chinese Taipei Basketball



Federation reached out to the brothers after discovering their Taiwanese citizenship. "We have the top players in all of Taiwan that are professional players, and we play against a bunch of other countries with their top guys. So it's been a great experience," Robert Hinton explained. "The games are always packed out, so there's thousands of people and there's a lot of support from the fans." In addition to the fan support, Robert also recalled the after-game press conferences as a highlight of his experience on the team. Robert won a silver medal at the 2024 William Jones Cup.

Following his notable performance with the Chinese Taipei team, Robert and his brother signed a groundbreaking international NIL contract with Nike in September. "I think for almost every athlete, regardless of sport, the dream is to become a Nike athlete," Robert said.

NIL deals have only recently become available to collegiate athletes. They enable high-achieving athletes to harness their personal brands, allowing them to gain important recognition through advertising campaigns. "I think it's extra affirmation of how good of a basketball player you are," Robert added. Robert and Adam have appeared in ad campaigns across Asia since signing their deals with Nike.

"Before we got into Ivy League play, it was a little bit rocky, but our team's so young, so we're just getting

used to things," Robert said. The team has secured seven wins out of twenty games, with two of those victories coming in the past month against Columbia and Brown. "Now during Ivy League play, I feel like we've been growing a lot and getting used to things, and we've been playing pretty well," he added.

Looking to the future, Robert has many aspirations both in the classroom and on the court. He is pursuing a degree in Sociology with a secondary in East Asian studies and plans to attend law school after graduating. "[One goal] would be definitely trying to play in the NBA," he explained.

Robert has had several opportunities to play in front of NBA scouts, hoping these will eventually open doors to a professional basketball career. He also emphasized the importance of balance and time management as both a high-achieving student and a collegiate athlete: "I decide when I have to be studying and when I'm going to be in the gym or taking care of my body off the court," he said. He plans to remain equally dedicated to his academic and athletic pursuits.

Playing against Adam was "a dream come true" for Robert. He will have the chance to relive this dream as the team prepares for their second game against Cornell on Feb. 14 where the brothers will meet on the court again.

MIA WILCOX '28 (MWILCOX@COLLEGE.HARVARD.EDU) PLAYED B-TEAM BASKETBALL FOR HER MIDDLE SCHOOL.

PHOTO COURTESY OF ROBERT HINTON '28

Behind the Disc

Harvard's men's ultimate frisbee teams offer a unique blend of competition, camaraderie, and community.

BY KAYLA REIFEL '26

Few sports have a reputation for being as inclusive and fun as ultimate frisbee. From elementary school gym classes to competitive leagues, the sport is loved and played worldwide. Harvard's robust men's ultimate frisbee program serves as a low-stress, supportive space for students to build community, stay active, and have fun. Whether players are seeking high-level competition or a more laid-back experience, the program offers a space for everyone.

The culture of ultimate frisbee and the structure of the teams encourage everyone to get involved. "And then, if you want to have a bit more stakes attached to it, [and] have players on the team that expect more from you, there's Red Line," Warfel explained.

Warfel chose Harvard in part for its ultimate frisbee team. "When I was looking at colleges, I was trying to find a school with a [frisbee] team with a good community around it," Warfel said. He started playing ultimate frisbee in high

school as a laid-back alternative to soccer, which he played for 14 years.

Warfel served as the social chair of Bred Line for two years and continues to help organize community-building and social events as a Red Line player. He praised the strong community of men's ultimate frisbee and shared multiple

ways the team bonds. From Bred Line's "sniping challenge," where players sneakily capture photos of each other when they spot other team members around campus to playing video games and hanging out in each other's rooms, the friendships made at practice extend into daily life.

Ultimate frisbee provides not only respite from the stress of school but also a continual source of accountability. "It's an escape. It is a great way to stay active... say you're not going to the gym as much as you would like—having a group of guys that expect you to be there kind of forces you to be a better version of yourself, which I really, really am thankful for," Warfel said.

"[Frisbee] does serve as a break from my other school commitments. I think that's a big reason why I play frisbee—there's a therapeutic element to it... It definitely forces you to be present in the moment and what you're doing," Max Surprenant '26, one of Red Line's three team captains alongside Collin Lief '26 and Julian Li '25, said. "It's nice to have a physical break from a lot of the stressful mental activities," he elaborated.

"I made some very close friends with people who were in grades above me, and it was a good connection to upperclassmen, who served as a great example for...how to navigate and balance your time and find time for activities that make you happy, like frisbee," Surprenant said, reflecting on the strong team community during his first year.

For Surprenant, the defining appeal of being part of a club sport, especially a club sport like Red Line, is that it serves as an organic and welcoming space to contribute to and exist in. "I think the biggest appeal for a club sport, and especially a club sport like Red Line, is that you learn to appreciate the pockets of culture that depend on students and that are created very organically."

"There's not a lot of personal incentive to commit to a team like Red Line. It doesn't necessarily contribute to a career, it's not a major resume point, and so you have to evaluate why you want to give a large chunk of your time each week to a team like that," Surprenant said.

The men's ultimate frisbee team works closely with Quasar, Harvard's women's ultimate frisbee team. The two teams have a strong relationship, joining for mixers, practices, and travel. Overall, the sport goes beyond being merely an extracurricular activity—it is a spirited avenue for community building. It creates a unique space in which commitment isn't driven by personal accolades or career benefits, but by the shared experience of contributing to a supportive, self-shaped culture.

"I think I realized early on that it was a culture in which the more I gave, the more I got out of it," Surprenant explained. "You have a lot of freedom to influence the culture and build the environment and atmosphere that you want to be in, and once you've created that, there's a real feeling of support behind you and a place that you look forward to being on campus with people that you really care for."

KAYLA REIFEL '26 (KAYLAREIFEL@COLLEGE.HARVARD.EDU) WAS ONCE ON A COMPETITIVE ULTIMATE FRISBEE TEAM FOR A SINGLE WEEK.

PHOTO COURTESY OF MAX SURPRENANT '26



The bifurcated structure of men's ultimate frisbee is one of its most significant strengths. The program consists of two teams—Red Line, the more competitive A team, and Bred Line, the more relaxed B team. Red Line holds tryouts every fall, whereas Bred Line does not require tryouts to join and does not cut players. Red Line practices two to three times per week and competes in out-of-state tournaments during the spring, their official competition season. Tournaments are weekend-long events, so players typically take flights and stay in hotels together.

Current Red Line member Harry Warfel '26 played on Bred Line for his first two years of college before making the jump to Red Line in his third year. He expressed to the *Independent* how the structure encourages everyone to get involved. "It's nice to be given the opportunity where if you don't have any experience, you just kind of want to hang out, meet some new people, [and] play a fun sport with other people who are also like-minded, Bred Line's there for you," Warfel said.

Consider Me Consoled

Men's varsity hockey roars back in the Beanpot Consolation Round.

BY JORDAN WASSERBERGER '27

Last week, #6 Boston University crushed the #42 Harvard Men's Hockey team 7-1 in the first round of the Beanpot. On Monday, BU became this year's tournament champions. It was an embarrassing performance by Harvard—no way to sugarcoat it. Walking into TD Garden Monday night, I expected a similarly catastrophic result against defending Beanpot Champion, #32 Northeastern, for the consolation match. Instead, I, and everyone in the media room, were fist-pumping and cheering when the final horn rang. Harvard had won.

Things were looking dicey in the first period. Northeastern took the lead quickly thanks to an early goal, and it seemed like we were in for yet another brutal showing. The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result; this night threatened to leave every Harvard fan questioning their sanity. To their credit, Harvard never lost faith. A power play goal from Mick Thompson '28 equalized the contest late in the first period. This was the first of four power play goals for Harvard last Monday. After his goal Monday night, Thompson has eight goals and nine assists in 23 appearances this season, a promising start for hopefully a stellar Harvard career.

After that, it was all Crimson. Six ridiculous penalties from the Huskies led to three power-play goals, including two absolute lasers from Mason Langenbrunner '26. This is Langenbrunner's best season with no signs of slowing down; he only recorded one point in 34 games his freshman year and five points in 32 games his sophomore year. So far in the 2024-2025 season, Langenbrunner has five goals and three assists in 23 games. As a New Yorker, I hate

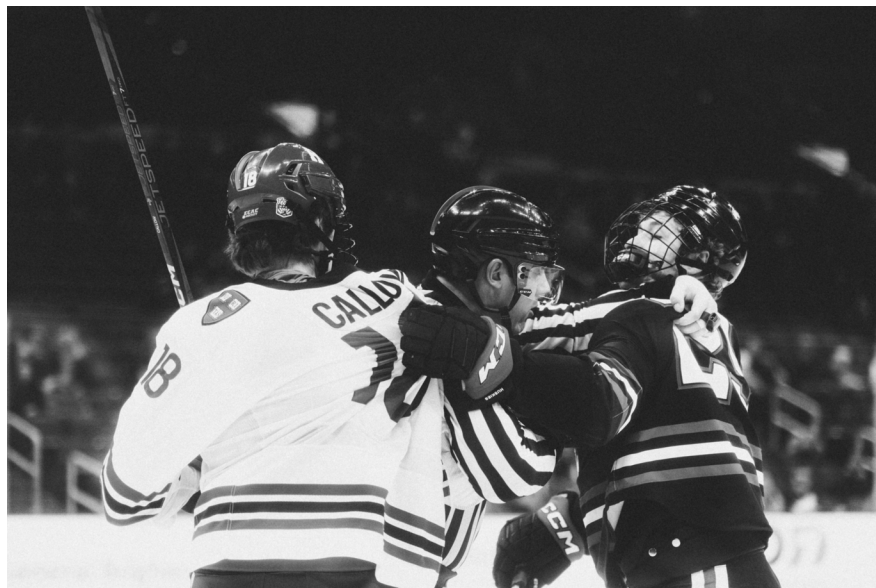
that he's going to the Bruins, but we should all be proud to see a Crimson player take this kind of jump.

When I say that these penalties from Northeastern were ridiculous, I don't mean they were bad calls by the referees. They were 100% the right calls. It is ridiculous that a college team would, at best, play this undisciplined and, at worst, this blatantly vicious. I love that hockey is a physical sport—as a Rangers fan, I got to watch Jacob Trouba demolish people for four years and cheered every time. That's the NHL though. There is no excuse for cross-checking to the face in the NCAA.

Northeastern was hooking and tripping players so aggressively that they were crashing into their own goalie. Firing the puck blindly and hitting the head of a linesman, while an accident, should never happen. There are a lot of conversations in the hockey world around tightening the game up and making it safer; this could range from implementing mandatory wrist and neck guards to full-face shields instead of cages and more. An easy way to help that process is for players to hold themselves accountable, walking the line between tough and reckless.

Harvard's victory would not have been possible without Joe Miller '26 and Michael Callow '27, who each recorded two assists each in the game. They each assisted on a different set of goals, so the two of them contributed to 100% of the team's offense. Undeniably, Miller had a standout performance; he was on the ice for at least three of Harvard's goals as part of the power play unit.

The defense deserves their



flowers as well. Harvard had a particularly impressive penalty kill that nullified all three of Northeastern's power plays throughout the game; Harvard held them to just four shots with the man advantage. In total, goaltender Ben Charette '28 faced 26 shots, the fourth lowest of the season. I would've liked to have seen a bit more blocking from Harvard, but it was certainly better than last week's performance.

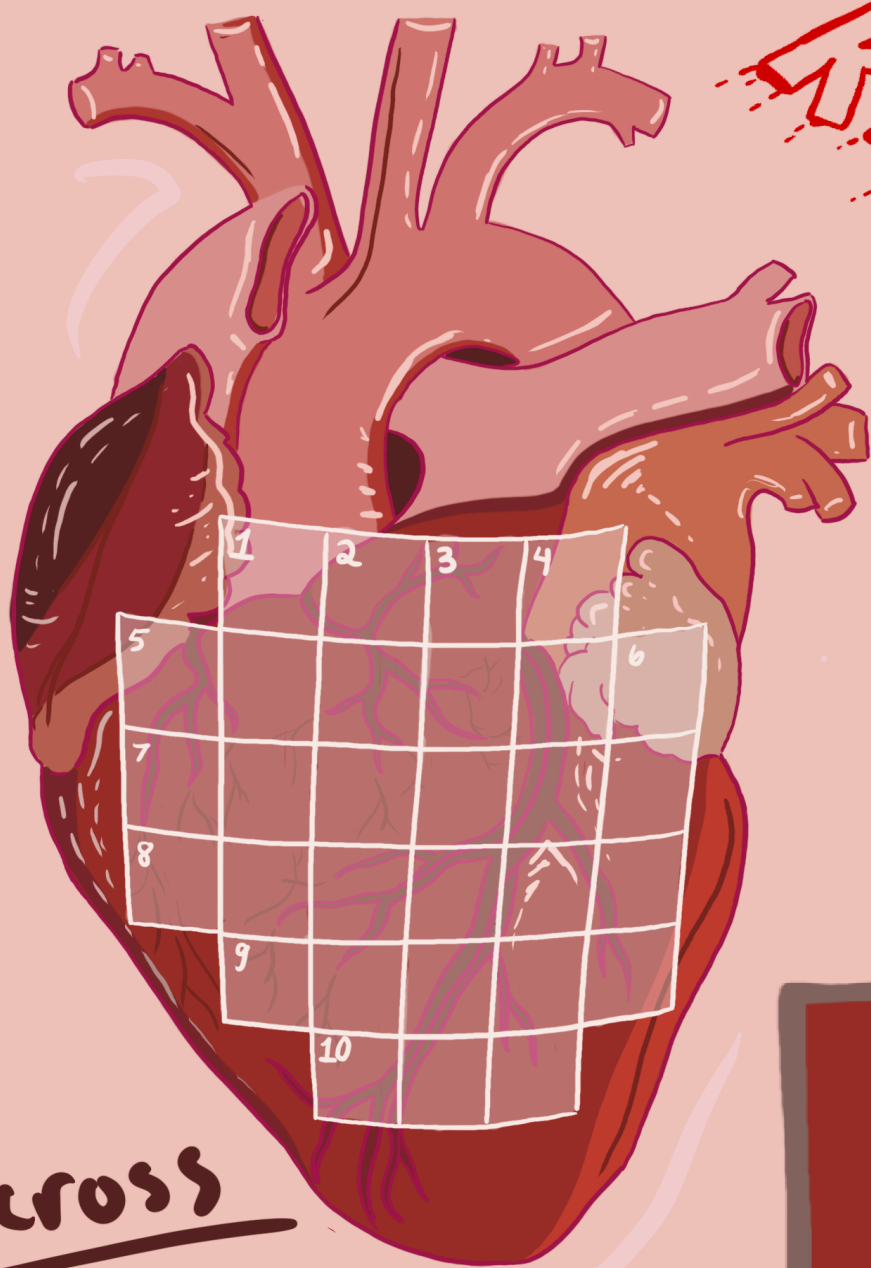
Ultimately, that is the story of this game. Harvard had negligible 5-on-5 play but were bailed out by a killer power play and an undisciplined Northeastern team. Had they been a little more tempered, this might have turned out differently. Harvard will need to improve their 5-on-5 offense as they enter into playoff territory, but for now, everyone on the ice should feel good about how the tournament wrapped up. This year's Beanpot showed how to lose a hockey game, and how to win one. Let's hope Harvard takes lessons from both, and we see a lot more games played like Monday night.

**JORDAN WASSERBERGER '27
(JWASSERBERGER@COLLEGE.HARVARD.EDU) WILL JUMP INTO THE CHARLES IMMEDIATELY IF HE GETS ALL THESE RIGHT.**

PHOTO COURTESY OF JORDAN WASSERBERGER '27

OPINIONS OF FORUM PIECES BELONG ONLY TO THE WRITER
AND DO NOT REFLECT THE VALUES OF THE *INDEPENDENT*

Crossword by Fred Klein '28
Design by Clara Lake '27



This would KILL Shakespeare

Down

1. Girl, you ____ my heart (rizz)
2. Lit at good first date
3. Equally close to me
4. Compare means of two groups
5. Gave my crush LoveMe-____ (enzyme)
6. Common way to end a cigar

Across

1. Doo Doo
5. I want ____ of your love
7. Shakespeare's dirty texts
8. Born first
9. To delight
10. Places for heart attacks



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