An alarm sounds at 7:00 am. The sun isn’t up yet, but you haul yourself out of bed and bundle up to trudge through the latest Ithaca snowfall to McGraw Tower, icon of Cornell University. As you climb the 161 steps, you steadily grow warmer with exertion. At the top, you kick off your shoes and place your hands over the levers. The clock ticks down the seconds until suddenly it’s 7:45 and your hands are flying, setting several tons of metal ringing barely twenty feet above your head. The sheer power at your fingertips floods through your body as you pour pure fury into *Firebird Suite*. At the end of your concert, you dawdle a moment to take in the view from the belfry. Ice shrouds Cayuga Lake, and the frosted Arts Quad is like a postcard from 1921. Despite the hour and the cold, there is nowhere you would rather be.

It was a year ago that you first came to the Tower, having transferred in January. Meeting people was hard; the roommate you were supposed to have never came, and most people were already settled into their own cliques. Netflix was a siren song of mindless comfort. A quartercard pressed into your hand proclaimed that if you could read music, climb stairs, and stand on one foot, you could become a Cornell Chimesmaster. *Easy enough*, you think. You attend an info session, figuring that the only thing you have to lose is boredom and a couple episodes of *30 Rock*. The uniqueness of the instrument intrigues you, as do its amazing unity of power and anonymity. You begin practicing, slowly at first, and you learn to stand on one foot while moving your limbs in a way you’ve never had to before. The Alma Mater and Evening Song take shape beneath your hands as you hole yourself up in the Tower for four hours every week. You may not have met anyone new quite yet, but having something – anything – to expel your loneliness is worthwhile.

Four hours per week becomes four hours per day as the competition heats up. You begin to play concerts out loud, sounding at first like you’re accompanying the first awkward steps of a
baby giraffe. To finally have the chance to play out loud is thrilling, even if it is only *Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star*. You descend to campus after your concerts and slip through the crowd, glowing with pride at how well you’re progressing even though no one else you’re passing knows. The Chimes become your sole way to express yourself. All of the boredom, loneliness, and passion that have been building up for months are released every time you ring those bells. Each concert is a cathartic experience, one that hooks you and draws you ever closer, desperate for more.

Your last four concerts come in mid-April. You’ve been practicing for these all this time, and they pass in a haze. You play the most impressive pieces from your repertoire and fumble here and there, but feel strangely serene about your work. As the last note dies at the end of your final concert, you wonder if maybe you should have picked a different final song than *I Want it That Way*. What if you never play again? With a shrug and a smile, you leave McGraw Tower, perhaps for the last time. On the evening of The Decision, you wait up all night for the call. You’re at peace with the fact that they won’t pick you, that you simply weren’t good enough, but you can’t sleep until you hear it from them. At 12:31 am, the phone rings. After a deep breath, you pick up – and all you hear are cheers and someone telling you that you’re a Chimesmaster.

You play the Chimes feverishly for the last few weeks of school. How can you go home now that you’ve found something so wonderful to occupy your spare time? Euphoria courses through your veins at all you’ve accomplished with every note; how can you give that up? As you pack up your car and begin to drive away from campus for the summer, you roll down the window to listen for the tolling bells one last time. Being a Chimesmaster may mean getting up at ungodly hours. It may mean having to play *Here Comes the Sun* when it’s raining because visitors request it, thinking they’re clever. It may mean climbing Libe Slope, only to have to
surmount McGraw Tower as well. But, more than all of that, being a Chimesmaster has given you something to be passionate about in the midst of an extraordinarily bland life. It means representing the university in the most uniquely Cornellian fashion, and being proud to do so.