

IT WAS A SPIRITED class of 59 girls.

We had worn pink-and-white shirtwaist seersucker uniforms, studied AP History and French, ridden horses or played field hockey, and been bred for success.

Now, decades after graduating from National Cathedral School, more than half my class was gathered at a reunion under a spacious white tent. The delicious scent of dogwood stirred my memories: those walks to the athletic field or over to St. Albans, the boys' school; the dreaded "Please see me" notes—bearing my name—that the dean of students tacked to the bulletin board when my grades fell below a B–.

My friend Randie was laughing as she recalled that same dean scolding her after a term paper fell short. "Cathedral girls don't make mistakes," the dean had informed her.

The reunion was on the grounds of the Washington Cathedral. Outside the tent, the cathedral tower was still in scaffolding three years after the 2011 earthquake that shook apart the carved stones in its cone-shaped pinnacles. Cherry blossoms were finally opening, delayed by one of the hardest winters in memory.

Cathedral has turned out daughters of the prominent and privileged, and a few others, since 1900. My friends' fathers were members of Congress, foreign dignitaries, cabinet members, presidents. My own dad was a scientist at the Department of Energy.

Like all girls, we misbehaved—but at Cathedral a girl suspended for smoking pot might be the daughter of the vice president. Most of us continued school in the Ivy League or at one of the Seven Sisters, followed by grad school or careers.

It was *The Best of Everything*. But everything started to change.

The summer we graduated, President Nixon resigned. A few years earlier, Washington—one of the most segregated cities in America—had burned during three days of rioting after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. We watched black smoke rise from the center of the city, from the Cathedral's own bell tower.

That racy idea of "women's lib" had made my heart beat faster, though most of our mothers stayed home, and we were cloistered in our uniforms (knee length—there was a ruler check) on the Cathedral Close. The time a group of us attended a Vietnam War protest, we were picked up in a limo by one of the dads, fresh from testifying before the Senate Watergate Committee.

We were expected to be perfect in a world that appeared to be falling apart.

I don't remember talking a lot with Lucy during school, but seeing her now, I realized what pain and anger she must have felt back then, behind the thick girl-glasses of the time, almost identical to my own horn-rims. She was probably the smartest girl in our class, which said a lot.

This was the first time she had returned for a reunion. None of us had seen her since we graduated. Now, attractive and warm, with the same shoulder-length hair, she told me she never went to Yale, as had been announced. Instead, soon after we graduated, she went to work on a construction crew pouring asphalt, lived out of her car, came out as a lesbian and changed her name.

I was thinking about something Diana, a children's-book author whose father had served in Nixon's cabinet, had asked a few of us: "So how do you define success these days?"

"Just being able to forgive people," said one woman. "Letting go of anger," said another. "Giving up the struggle for perfection," said a third.

In college, those same women had made Phi Beta Kappa. Later on, they headed to the C-suite or elective office. My friend Amy, who for years was seated next to me in class, alphabetically, now lived 3,000 miles away. Her name appeared on the masthead of a major daily newspaper. To me it seemed she had hardly changed. I could still see her skinny legs in the regulation oxfords. At the reunion she just kept asking, "Was all that worry really necessary?"

We are grayer versions of those hopeful yearbook photos. Most of us took the path we seemed to be on from the start. We are White House advisers; we run nonprofits and small businesses. We are journalists, lawyers, doctors. Some of us are grandmothers; some, like me, are still the parents of preteens (twins, a boy and a girl). The "mean girls" (the movie by that name was based on life at Cathedral, though changed to a fictitious public high school) were still, well, telling everyone else what to do. But it was clear that the thing our high school had never taught us was the certainty of imperfection.

A day or so after the reunion, Randie texted me, "I was close to tears as we spoke about what matters most to us now, about being present and being kind, experiencing less fear of failure and less preoccupation with externally defined success."

A new family recently moved in next door to us in my small town outside New York City. I had heard they were from Washington. The mother and I quickly discovered we had both graduated from Cathedral. Now our children would be at the same elementary school. "What year were you?" she asked me. "Class of '74," I said. There was a pause. "Was that the year you were born?" I joked.

It was.

Later on I thought, Her education has only begun.

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CHASING PERFECTION

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