

Reflections on My High School Years and Meeting My Best Friend

by Jill Pickett

I anxiously joined the line of girls in the playground, waiting to go in for the first day of school. I was considerably shorter than average. I looked up at the tall girls in front of and behind me, searching their faces for the one I liked best. The one I chose, who turned out to be eight inches taller than I was, looked kind and friendly.

“Hello, my name is Jill. Will you be my best friend?”

“My name is Alison, Ali. Yes, I’ll be your best friend.”

We walked quietly in single file into our three-story red brick building, up the stairs to our classroom and claimed desks next to each other. We were in a class of over 60, divided into two alphabetically. Her last name was Compton and mine was Delefortrie, placing us in the A – K class. As we got to know each other, we discovered that we both selected French rather than German as our foreign language and that we were both placed in the lower math class.

Finding a best friend on the first day helped me to adjust to my new school. I was eleven and had moved to the West Suffolk County Grammar School for Girls, in Bury St. Edmunds, Suffolk. The school required students to pass the 11+, a national exam, and prepared us for teacher training college and university. Ali and I were best friends there for seven years.

We are still best friends.

Neither distance nor changes in family has moved us apart. She has come to the States a number of times, and I see her each time I go to England.

The grammar school teachers were strict. There was no chatting in class and the curriculum was demanding. Ali and I both excelled in English

and French, which we studied to an advanced level. We added Spanish the last two years. Both of us took Latin for two or more years. Charity Vanstone, our tall and imperious Latin teacher, was undeserving of her first name. She threw chalk if she was irritated with a student’s behavior. One time she embarrassed Ali, calling her a “wilted geranium” as she was draped over a radiator against the classroom wall. My parents had a conference with Miss Vanstone after my complaints to them. Perhaps she moderated her behavior a little after that. At least I did not feel she took it out on me, or Ali for that matter.

I appreciated art, and looked forward to art class. This was held in a large airy classroom with wall-to-wall windows on two sides. It stood apart from the main building. The art teacher, Miss Ilka Emory, also embarrassed Ali. We had little respect for Miss Emory who wore dyed black hair with very red roots. She was not very friendly. She snuck outside to smoke. Of course, as pre-teens who knew so much, we were not at all understanding of adults. I might have more empathy for her now, especially while I am self-conscious as I let my hair grow out and the roots are very white.

Regardless, Miss Emory’s personality was not conducive to feelings of empathy. She was critical of our art-

work, often erasing what we had tried so hard to draw. She stood behind Ali, erased the drawing of Ali’s father with a beard and said loudly, “Why do you always draw men with a beard?” Her berating did not accomplish a pleasant atmosphere conducive to creativity.

Week after week leading up to our national exam, the GCE, General Certificate of Education, which we took at age 16, we did still life paintings of geraniums. When the day of the exam came we had a choice in our exam instructions of drawing and painting a geranium or a nasturtium. I was bored with painting geraniums so I chose the nasturtium. Miss Emory, who was invigilating the exam and supposed to remain impartial and quiet, looked over at my work and hissed, “You silly little thing. Why do you think we have been practicing geraniums every week?”

In spite of everything Miss Emory did not destroy my love of art. My mother, a serious amateur painter who exhibited every chance she got, made an appointment to meet Miss Emory. She told her how much I



Ali and Jill, on a high school trip to Stratford Upon Avon

loved art and asked why I had not been invited to join her “special art class” held after school on Wednesdays. Suddenly I was invited and enjoyed the extra art experience.

Upon reflection I think that I had an outstanding education in humanities that prepared me well for teacher training college and later for university. I wish I could say the same for science and mathematics but my brain did not seem to be able to master those subjects. My mathematics was so bad that I was not permitted to take the GCE maths exam. (A failure would have hurt the school’s reputation no doubt.) I had only one year of physics and one of chemistry, both in a seemingly well-equipped lab. But the teaching was unimaginative. For chemistry an experiment was written on the black board. We followed instructions with a partner to complete the experiment, then wrote the experiment and results in our notebooks. In other words, any mystery was removed because we knew the results before we did the experiment. I did like learning about the human body in biology.

Academics were balanced with sport, for which I had no real affinity. We had general physical education once or twice a week all year. In summer we learned to play netball and tennis. In winter, in addition to indoor gymnastics, we walked half a mile or so to the hockey field, carrying our sports clothes to change into when we got there. The walk took us along the main street then up a quiet, tree-lined street to my old private school grounds, where the hockey field must have been rented. I was afraid of being hit with the hard hockey ball. It surprised me that no staff walked with us. We were trusted to walk without supervision, in small groups. After hockey we had to rush back to change for our next class and once or twice got into trouble for being late.



Jill in “Still Life” by Noel Coward. Her Grandpa loved this hairstyle, a Marcel Wave.

One thing I always appreciated about high school in England was the number of subjects we could take, therefore each day could have a different schedule. This enabled us to have many special classes once or twice a week. Those subjects included: art, domestic science including cooking and sewing, geography, drama and music. I loved drama and music, participated in choir and played many roles in plays, sometimes joining the boys’ grammar school. I remember singing in the St. Matthew Passion in our cathedral, joining with choirs from many schools. Our voices sounded impressive in the graceful, lofty building.

In our last two years we mostly concentrated on the subjects we took at an advanced, A level GCE. These were required for college and university. Ali and I both concentrated on English and French.

I became convinced that I might have a future in acting. My English and drama teacher was Mr. Robin Rook. Like all girls schools most of our teachers were female. We loved it when we had male teachers for a change. I was attracted to Mr. Rook because he was tall and male, and I liked his personality, but at the same time I was a little grossed out. He sometimes had white drops of spit in the corners of his mouth and dandruff on his corduroy jacket. He

took an interest in my acting ability, and cast me in a number of plays.

As my last school year came to an end Mr. Rook helped prepare me for auditions. One time he invited me to his home, an impressive large house in the country. My parents drove me. He had a black Great Dane called Caesar, who could put his paws on Mr. Rook’s shoulders when he stood on his hind legs. I felt special to receive individual coaching in his house.

I had my first audition at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts in London.

I felt totally unqualified for the task. Compared with other applicants I was a quiet, country mouse. I received my rejection letter and cancelled other auditions. After that, I lost touch with Mr. Rook. My high school days, with the support of teachers and fellow students, were over and I spent the summer after high school working and trying to figure out where I belonged. After one year in a job as a trainee reporter, where I did not belong, I found my home in elementary education and attended college in London.

While I floundered at the local newspaper, Ali went off to teacher’s training college where she completed one year, then dropped out and took a different path. We continued our friendship as we met the challenges of the choices we had made, lived in different countries and established our intimate relationships. ♦



Jill Pickett grew up near Bury St. Edmunds, Suffolk in England and immigrated to the United States in 1976 where she became

a counseling psychologist and school counselor. She has three children and three grandchildren.

Published by OLLIMemoirs, the publication of memoirists in writers’ workshops given by the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute. All rights reserved by the author. Contact: info@ollimemoirs.org. May, 2019.