

Recollections may vary

When the invite to the school reunion dropped on the floor it would normally fill Sue with a sense of horror. Over the years multiple invites had arrived. Various anniversaries 5 year, 10 year etc. and this one was to celebrate all the schoolgirls turning 50. How the invites continued to find her when she had moved house twice was a mystery. The difference this year was that Sue's normal apprehension was replaced by a determination to go.

Sue's school had been an all-girl secondary modern and her memories of it were not pleasant. She recalled so many years of low level bullying and high level sarcasm. So why would anyone want to be reminded of 6 years of hell was beyond her. She had stayed in touch with just one person – Rosamunde Wall. Why is it your fellow pupils, albeit decades later, are still described by their first and second name?

Sue's grades at school had been as good as anyone else's but University had not been for her; instead she set her sights on opening a small restaurant. She had worked hard to establish it with so many challenges. She had overcome them all. Even covid had not derailed her will to succeed. Her second marriage was also a success so perhaps now was the time to go to her first reunion; maybe to show everyone she did have what it took to make it.

The one person she really didn't want to meet up with was Sandra Cross – her nemesis. Over the years memories of Sandra had exaggerated in Sue's mind. She envisaged Sandra now in a high powered job, wearing smart suits, strutting, around in high heels barking out orders.

At school, it had seemed to Sue that wherever she went Sandra was there too. Ever present. In the maths class the rivalry was the most apparent. For some deluded reason the teacher had seated the girls based on their level of ability. So, the top of the class was in the back row in the right hand corner, the second best next to her and so on until the poor soul at the bottom of the class was sitting directly in front of the teacher. A tangible view of perceived failure. The two girls would constantly swap top position after each exam or test.

Art class was not much better. Painting seemed to come naturally to Sandra and she always contrived to sit next to Sue. In Sue's mind this was to show off her skills and show she was the best.

Sue had taken a long time to decide what to wear to the reunion. She needed an outfit that said 'I've made it – I'm a success'. She settled on a sleeveless navy lightweight dress with matching jacket. She had softened the look with a jaeger silk scarf around her neck.

Then the moment came at the reunion when Sue was face to face with Sandra.

Sandra was not wearing a suit but a soft pastel dress from Laura Ashley and comfortable flat shoes.

Sandra rushed over with open arms and gave Sue a massive hug. 'I can't believe you are here. I'm so happy to see you Sue I really wish we had kept in touch I've missed our friendship. Tell me everything, what do you do, are you married, do you have children?.....'

Sue had stopped listening at the word 'friendship', she was astounded. Her memories were of intense rivalry, perhaps even intimidation but certainly not friendship. Standing in front of her was not the hard faced person her memory had led her to expect. Instead this was an ordinary middle-aged woman with kind eyes, a broad smile and broader waistline.

Sue blurted out 'I thought you didn't like me.' Sandra stood back in amazement 'You must be joking, we were never apart. Don't you remember the fun we had always being the top of the class in

maths. I loved that we were always ahead of the rest of the class. And art classes, I always sat next to you because you always had such clever ideas. I needed you there to achieve what I did; you were my goal to aim at. Although to be honest we were all a little scared of you.’ Realizing what she had just said, in an instance Sandra was 14 again and back in the classroom. Her face flushed. She hurried to explain. ‘I just mean that when you walked into a room you looked like you owned it. You were so quick witted, you always seemed to have a response to everything, and nothing seemed to faze you. I really envied how umm ‘assertive’ you were and I wished I was more like that - back then’

The two women stood looking at and, the first time in a long time, actually seeing each other.

Memories change over time and as our dear Queen famously said ‘recollections may vary’. But how had Sue got this so wrong? Had she perhaps projected her own imperfections onto Sandra as that was far easier than to own them?

All these years mistaking a desire for friendship for borderline stalking. What a massive mistake.