

A Disappointment

So I can't take a great photo, so sue me. I didn't want to be there anyway—at my sister's graduation. I begged Mom to let me stay home, but no, this was Haleigh's big day and I had to go. At least it was on a Thursday, so I was missing school and not my weekend. But a couple of days off didn't really make up for having to deal with HHHHarvard.

The day dawned without a cloud in the sky, the sun sparkling ever so gently, warm not hot. Of course the weather gods would smile down on Cambridge: just about every parent there had prayed to some god or other to make the day as special as their mammothly special graduate. Just as the sun squeaked high enough to make shadows, Mom left the hotel so she could snatch the best place along the walk she thought the graduates would file in by. When we found her, she was about to slug some woman in a sari who was trying to ease her way between Mom and the little string that told undergraduate parents where they couldn't go. The dot Indian gave up when me and Dad barreled across the green and planted ourselves protectively next to Mom. A half hour later, we were standing with about a million Proud, so very Proud, parents in Harvard Yard craning our necks to see over everyone in front of us and waiting for the commencement to (finally) commence. Well, they were craning; me, not so much. I was hiding.

Mom had on this yellow silk suit she bought at Saks just for the event. Dad wouldn't let me put on the jeans I'd brought and made me wear Mom's skirt and sandals from yesterday, so now I just wanted to disappear into the crowd. But disappearing wasn't gonna happen. As the marching-in music arose, Dad handed me the camera, pushed me up next to the path, where

everyone could see me, and said, "You can take the pictures, Sandy. We need to listen." I, of course, didn't need to listen because I, of course, wouldn't understand, would I?

Fortunately some amazingly famous guy was speaking so the crowd standing on the perfectly groomed, greener than green grass trained their ears and eyes on him and didn't look my way. I knew they were only pretending to listen. Despite the mega mike, we could barely hear, so there was no way all these proud as peacock parents could keep on top of whatever this guy was saying. It didn't really matter. After all, this was HHHHarvard and tomorrow the speech would be printed in the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and probably the London and Paris papers. Myself, I spent the half hour checking out the ivy and clicking the camera. Meanwhile about forty-five other guys in black and crimson robes got up to talk. But my favorite was the speech in Latin. Like anyone in the whole friggin' field had a clue! Still, all these parents were nodding as if they understood because they understood everything: after all they had a kid who was graduating from HHHHarvard.

And that wasn't even the real graduation. No, everyone gets packed into Harvard Yard just for the fun of it. The diploma part came at Haleigh's dorm. There we got to sit in folding chairs and hear everybody's name called, one by one. Fat mothers and fatter fathers squeezed by whole rows of people to get into the center aisle for the one tenth of a second that their kid was going to walk across the platform so they could take a picture of their Precious. I didn't bother. I just held the camera high up over my head and snapped.

After the festivities, Mom, Dad, and I drove all the way home to Connecticut--Westport--barely talking. I think they were just so overawed with their brainiac daughter that they couldn't say a thing. I was too tired to entertain them, so it was silence silence silence. (Haleigh didn't come home with us because one of her HHHHarvard friends had offered to take her to Italy to

visit the family villa. Haleigh always gets that kind of invitation. My friends ask me to go to the Pizza Hut off Route 1.)

The following Saturday we got the prints of Haleigh's graduation photos back. They were terrible. Really bad. Blurry, unfocused, uncentered. Not one, I have to admit, showed a recognizable face, though there were three or four great shots, real arty, of ivy crawling up weathered brick walls.

"Sandy, these pictures are so...blurry. It's really disappointing. Is it so hard to hold a camera steady?" Mom said in her best plaintive voice.

Here it goes. I'm the bad guy. Not perfect like Haleigh.

"Sandra, this day will never come again, and we have no pictures. Not one."

"Sorry, Mom, I tried."

"I don't think so. If you had tried even a little, there would be at least one focused shot. No, Sandra. You ... You..."

Actually, she's kind of nice, Mom. I mean, she couldn't bring herself to say what she and everyone else thought: that I must have wanted to ruin the pictures because I was jealous. When I first saw the pics, I thought I'd screwed up because I was worried about people looking at my fat legs. But maybe Mom and the rest were right. Maybe I was just jealous. All my life Haleigh has been the star. She could walk when she was six months old, so I was retarded when I walked at a year. Haleigh played the violin so well when she was four that everybody said she could go to Julliard. Haleigh won an ice skating contest when she was six, but she liked school so much she didn't want to try out for the Olympics. And Haleigh is so pretty. Thin and blond and pretty. One day last summer, as she walked down Madison Avenue on her way home from her internship at

Time Magazine (only big-name jobs for Haleigh) some guy ran up to her with a rose to tell her she was the most gorgeous creature in the city. On Madison friggin' Avenue!

In school she was, of course, oh-my-goodness-just-the-best. I mean, I got to Staples High four years after Haleigh left and still the teachers said, "So you're Haleigh's sister. My, my, I bet you are soooo smart."

Like Mom and Dad, the teachers were disappointed.

But my parents had more practice. When I was six and just starting first grade, I thought school was going to be so neat. I mean, I'd seen Haleigh come home with tons of homework and be so busy and so intense. It looked like fun, like playing a video game or something. But that was before Mrs. Lindon, my first grade teacher. Mrs. Lindon loved, just loved, worksheets. She had worksheets for the letter Aa and Bb, for numbers, for adding duckies, even for learning your own name. One thing worksheets aren't is intense. So while Haleigh bent over her books and wrote with one hand while she kept her place with another, I scribbled circles so the sheets would look done. Then I'd go play Donkey Kong and get a real workout.

Somewhere around January that year, Mrs. Lindon called Mom into school and told her that I couldn't read or write so I would have to stay back and go into a special-ed first grade class the next year. Since I wasn't there, I don't know for sure what Mom said, but I don't expect it was "Thanks for the information." It was probably more like, "Do you really think the sister of Haleigh Perfect is likely to need special-ed???" But Mrs. Lindon would not have cared about Haleigh Perfect because she was the kind of teacher whose mission in life was to find and encourage failure. So I was right up her alley.

Well, Mom started to do homework with me every night. When she finally figured out that I could read and write just fine, she asked me why Mrs. Lindon didn't know.

"Because I hate worksheets and I hate hate hate Mrs. Lindon. She never gives us books or even real lined paper to write on."

"You don't get to choose, Sandy. You have to do what your teacher tells you."

I don't know how many times in my life I've heard that: "You don't get to choose." No one gets to choose. The whole freaking world is doing what other people say. Even the people who tell everyone what to do have people who tell them what to do. Well, not me!

After the conversation with Mrs. Lindon, Mom felt she needed proof that I was not super retarded, so she called a person who gives kids tests--reading tests, drawing tests, writing tests, counting tests. I went to that office for three days straight. Mom made me promise to do my best, and I did. For two days. But on the third day my friend Amy asked me to go to her house where we could play Barbies. (We couldn't play Barbies at my house because Barbies are sexist and little girls don't need to have those norms reinforced. Whatever that means.) I asked if I could go to the tester a different day, but Mom said no. I couldn't believe Mom would keep me from going to Amy's, so I asked about fifty more times, and every time Mom said no.

When the scores came back, the tester was real disappointed. Her too. She said that at the beginning, she thought I was going to test in the near-genius range, but I wound up just average after all. Average was good enough to keep me out of special-ed, and that was good enough for me.

In all those disasters, no one, not one person, has ever been really pissed at me for screwing up. Not one. From Mom and Dad to principal and teacher, they are just all disappointed. That's me. Disappointing.

One of my best disappointments came freshman year in high school. Haleigh had just gone off to HHHHarvard, and the house was kind of quiet. Mom began to nose into my

homework and ask to see my tests again like I was in first grade, so even at home, I felt as if I was in school. That was too much for me. I needed some time off, just a little time to get away. So I signed up for two different gym classes and then dropped each one separately, implying that I'd take the other. For the whole fall I didn't have to take showers in a smelly gym, and I got two free periods a week when nobody expected me to be in a study hall or a class. I could go out for a bagel or a smoke and nobody would notice. Until report cards. The day after the quarter ended, Mr. Pauling, the vice principal, called me into his office.

"Sandra, you are required by law to take gym."

"Nobody told me," I said as innocently as I could.

"I'm telling you now."

"But I'm a spaz, Mr. Pauling."

"I doubt that," he said with a knowing smile. Of course he would doubt it. How could the sister of Haleigh Perfect, a three varsity-letter girl for all four years, be a spaz? I should tell him about the gymnastics teacher who told Mom when I was four that I was a danger to myself and others on the trampoline and she didn't want to see me in that class again.

"But I hate sports."

"Sorry, Sandra. You have to take gym. It's a state law, not our rule, so it is not bendable."

"But I ruin classes like that. All the teachers all say so."

"Don't even go there, Sandra. I don't make the rules; I have to enforce the law and you have to take gym; that is final."

Another guy with no choices, just doing what someone higher up on the food chain tells him to do. I couldn't stomach it, so I shut up and looked at my feet. I guess Mr. Pauling felt that I

finally got his point, so he kept going, "Since you've missed gym for a whole quarter, you will have to have 100% attendance in gym, mandatory, for the rest of the year in order to pass."

"Yes, sir."

"But that's not all. You'll have to take a dance class or aerobics or something outside of school to make up for the quarter."

"Oh, Mr. Pauling, then why do I have to go 100%?"

"Sandra, the law is clear. If you don't pass gym 16 quarters out of 16, you cannot graduate."

Now I thought he was the one not getting the point.

"But why should I have to make up for the class in two different ways?"

"Because I said so," he said, clarifying everything. "I'll send a note home to your parents to explain the matter."

Funny how Mom and Dad—who were already black and blue with disappointment over the F in gym—never got that note. I just told them I was dying to dance. They believed me, signed me up for dance classes, and looked forward to a recital (and maybe even to my losing a few pounds). They thought this class wouldn't bring another disappointment because, after all, I asked to take it. But at the end of the quarter when I refused to participate in the recital and gave up dance altogether, they were disappointed again. At least I didn't flunk gym that quarter.

Everyone knows junior year sucks, but not just because you have to take about a million tests. That's bad--worse is that kids who used to be fun to hang out with all of a sudden turn into ginormous nerds. Grades grades grades, that's all anyone talks about. No one has a life.

When school got off-the-charts serious, me and my friend Trudy tried out for the community theater winter production in Norwalk. Trudy, who would drive us to rehearsals,

went for the lead but wound up in the chorus instead. I bet the Norwalk people didn't want a stuck up Westport brat to take their best spot. But for me the Westport address didn't matter. When I tried out for the tech crew, nobody else showed up, so I was a shoe-in, even though at the time I didn't know which end of the light got screwed into the socket. Two weeks later, I was designing lighting effects, tracking cues, hanging lights--the whole ball of wax.

Of course I didn't tell Mom what I was doing. She'd never have let me waste so much valuable junior year prepping time. After all, I wasn't going to be able to ace the SATs on my own, was I? So I let her think I was going to Princeton Review SAT classes three nights a week. Then one night during Tech Week I didn't get home by 9:30, and she called the Princeton Review to check on me. That's when she found out I was a "no show" for the whole course. Boy was Mom disappointed that time!

Still, all went relatively well until the college conversation. You know that moment when the parents tell the kid how the kid is going to spend the rest of her life because they know best. I said I didn't really want to go to college, and boy, was that a disappointment! This time they actually almost blew up. After all the advantages I'd had, I was about to squander them. Couldn't I see the benefit of going to a good college from all the job offers Haleigh was getting? Didn't I want to start at the top too? Their harangue was so hard to take I just shut up. My silence gave them permission I guess, and last fall Mom and Dad applied me to a bunch of colleges that they thought had enough prestige for the sister of Haleigh Perfect. Their applications got accepted at three colleges: NYU, Skidmore, and Sarah Lawrence. For the first time ever, they were not disappointed. All I had to do was choose. They wanted me to go visit each college, but most weekends I had shows (this stage lighting thing was about the only fun I ever had any more), and

I really didn't care. So I said Skidmore because it was the farthest away. But I never planned on going to any of those colleges. I'm not that person.

All fall, while Mom and Dad were typing up my college essay, I was setting in motion my own plan for my future, one that would cap all those little disappointments in a star studded spectacular. I mean, if your dad is a professor and your mom the past-president of the PTA, what could be more disappointing, more devastating, (and, from my point of view, more lovely) than having a child who can't even graduate from high school?

I sort of wish it had been my plan from day one, but I'm not that smart. Even though I've known my direction for eons, it wasn't really till the college applications that I saw my plan in all its exquisite symmetry.

You'd think it would be easy to flunk out of high school. It isn't. If I'd been just lazy or stupid or something, I would have gotten a report card full of D's. But D's are not good enough for failure. Failure doesn't just happen all on its own. There aren't even that many classes you absolutely have to pass to graduate. There's English, but English teachers don't fail students—it must be part of the job description. And there's math. But I'd already passed all I needed before I decided to flunk.

On the other hand, there's gym. Gym teachers are so defensive about their subject being real that if you treat gym class like a game (duh!) they get pissed enough to flunk you. So all I had to do was really piss off Ms. Sanders, and I would be the first one in my family ever to have flunked out of high school in the very same year that Haleigh Perfect was the first in the family to graduate from an Ivy League college.

I couldn't just cut gym because the school was always on me about that. But I didn't have to play. Starting in second semester, every Tuesday and Friday I made sure to wear a short skirt

and backless clogs, and of course not bring gym clothes. That didn't work. Ms. Sanders gave me a D which was decidedly not good enough. That's what Ms. Sanders thought too. So on the first Friday of the last quarter as I entered the gym, she handed me a pair of sneakers and a new pair of socks and said that if I wanted to pass gym I had to play short skirt and all. Perfect. I stood on one side of the volleyball net and waited. When I saw the ball heading in my direction I moved just a little so it would arch right down into my face and stood there, face up, arms at my sides. The ball hit, the nose bled, and I had to sit out the rest of the period. Ms. Sanders lent her blood stained extra sneakers to someone else the next week, and I didn't play again. That is, I didn't play Ms. Sanders' games. But I had my own game: I did all I could to distract everyone else in the class. I'm pretty good at distraction when I try, and my class didn't finish a single game for the rest of the year.

By June, Ms. Sanders was so angry she couldn't even look at me. Fortunately, no one in the school (least of all Ms. Sanders who positively wanted me to flunk) had thought to warn the principal or my parents.

So there we were—Mom, Dad, me, and Haleigh—on June 26th at home in our split-level ranch, making the final arrangements for our huge double graduation party. Haleigh, who had just gotten back from the Amalfi Coast, was framing enlargements of photos from the HHHHarvard graduation—copies she'd gotten from her friends—and Dad was hanging them around the rec room, kind of like balloons, while Mom busily whipped up four kinds of dip.

When the phone call came, I saw the school's number and didn't even try to run interference. I just got the camera. Mom's and Dad's faces, like a study in disappointment, are captured perfectly. No blur, no fuzz.