

To My Graduating Class - On The Auspicious Occasion of Our 20th Reunion

Written by Margaret Evans



Dear Sewanee Class of 1987,

Man, you look good. Who knew you would look so good? The last time I saw some of you – *most* of you – your faces were smooth as marble, clean blank pages, uncharted territory. You were pretty then. You're beautiful now.

Johnny G, you've filled out a little, and it suits you. You've been caring for a child with Down Syndrome, loving your family right through it, carrying them all. You, who were always the daredevil-madman-acrobat... always bouncing off the walls. You have a new calm about you, but you're pulling off harder tricks.

Susan, our Homecoming Queen – you've had struggles, too. Sam has autism, right? Or something like it? And being a doctor's wife's not always Easy Street, especially when you're home alone with two back-to-back babies. You never were the typical Homecoming Queen; that beauty thing just confused people, I guess. You're still so funny, so smart, such a *smart ass*. But there's pain around your laughing eyes, now, and you're lovelier than ever.

David B. and Fox and Avery... Steve, Grant, Charlie, etc ... you guys are still It Boys. Still cool. But there's something new there, too. Humility? Compassion? You're husbands and fathers and business tycoons. Who could have imagined it? I still see you in your hiking boots and anoraks and overgrown hair (prep school boys playing dress-up), lounging in Gailor at your staked-out frat tables, bleary-eyed from last night's party, languid and cocky and so good looking. God, how you scared me. You don't scare me anymore. In fact, seeing you with your children, all tender and playful – well, you actually kind of *move* me. (I could never have told you that, then.)

My girlfriends. Dana, Kim, Monterey, Allison, Wendy (and Virginia, you were with us in spirit). You have what we all dreamed of having once upon a time: sweet, successful husbands; happy, healthy children; warm, comfortable homes; plenty of projects and interests. *Contentment*.

Modern society doesn't pay tribute to lives like yours, but modern society's just as ornery and foolish as what came before – only in different ways. You girls have a good thing going. Don't let anybody tell you otherwise.

David. My David. My first grown-up boyfriend. You've suffered more than most of us. You lost your wonderful father a few years ago, and both your siblings, too. Your mother has Alzheimer's - just another, slower loss. You married and divorced (me too!) and came to terms with the fact that you're gay (not me). You went to seminary, then dropped out, no longer certain of your faith. In college, you were the most religious person I'd ever met. You liked U2 before anyone knew who they were; said they were a "spiritual" band. You tried to break up with me, once; told me I was *pulling you away from God*. That was a lot for a suburban Methodist girl to carry. I guess we both know, now, it wasn't true. Though, you probably thought (hoped?) it was at the time.

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I'll never forget that summer after freshman year, when I came to visit you in Houston. We drove from the airport into your neighborhood, River Oaks, and my heart began to pound. I'd never seen anything so flamboyantly grand in my life. We pulled into the driveway of your palatial home, and I suddenly felt sick. Disoriented. Stunningly, wretchedly out of my element. Country Mouse come to the City. I'd never, ever felt that way before. I'd never known wealth like that existed! You led me into your home, introduced me to your deeply kind parents, then showed me to the guest room to "freshen up." When you left me, I threw myself on the luxurious bed and cried like a baby. How could I go back out there? I didn't have the right clothes... the right shoes... the right... *anything*.

After a while, you came knocking at my door. "You okay in there?" I let you in, suddenly shy, because *who were you, anyway?* You could see I'd been crying. You asked what was wrong.

"Why didn't you tell me you were so *rich???*" I wailed, tears streaming down my face, the anguish of insecurity, *inferiority*, clawing at my throat. I felt so betrayed. I'd loved you for almost
a year

, kissed you for hours and hours till my face burned, worn your KA sweatshirt just for the smell of you, taken you to my (perfectly nice) home in Alabama for Easter... and you'd never bothered to tell me you were RICH? As in
rich

rich. Bloody rich. Black Gold, Texas Tea rich. Damn you, David.

You took me in your arms, laughing, stroked my hair and told me it didn't matter. *That money didn't matter.*

You made me believe you, and not just with your words. You lived your life then, just as you do now, like money doesn't matter. Not
really

. And even though, maybe, it's "easy for you to say," that doesn't mean it's not true. In fact, money didn't protect you from all the hardships you've endured since graduation. Luckily, you never expected it to. You always put your stock in love, instead – both giving it and receiving it – and that's an investment that pays off. I can tell, just by talking to you now, that you're still very rich, indeed.

Michael, my New Orleans friend. Thank God you survived Katrina. Otherwise, the world would have lost a great wit and a gentle heart. We don't have enough of those to spare. John S, you're a real live professional actor! So glad I got to know you, albeit 20 years later. Peaches, I don't remember that conversation from freshmen year, but if I treated you badly, please accept my apology. You and I should have been great friends. Annie, you *were* my great friend till we grew apart, as people do. I'm so glad we didn't
stay

apart. Margaret C, why
weren't

we friends 20 years ago? You're the best.

And for all the rest of you, those I knew and those I never had the chance to know, I have but one question: *How lucky are we?!* A couple of decades ago, we got to spend four years on a Tennessee mountaintop, surrounded by natural beauty that defies description, in the shadow of magnificent buildings that drew our eyes toward heaven. We were allowed – forced, even! – to spend our days with Shakespeare and Dickens and Yeats, Beethoven and Brahms, Michelangelo and Monet. We wore gowns to class, hung out with our professors, had coffee in

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their homes while listening to Robert Burns read “To A Mouse” on scratchy vinyl. We lounged beneath towering trees discussing philosophy and religion, met up at the pub for pitchers and cheese fries and gossip, camped out in the library basement before exams. We walked everywhere, or rode our bikes, even in that blinding fog and occasional snow. We learned to work hard and to play even harder. We signed an honor code and lived by it and threw red-eye parties with wild abandon.

In his lyrical memoir *Lanterns on the Levy*, William Alexander Percy wrote of his own time on The Mountain, long before ours; He refers to his fellow Sewanee students as “the Arcadians,” in homage to that great, pastoral utopia of myth:

□ *“Girders and foundations are fine things; and necessary, no doubt. It is stated on authority that the creaky old world would fly into bits without them. But after all, what I like best is a tower window. This hankering is an endless source of trouble to me, and I like to think to myself, in defense, that it comes from having lived too long among mountain folk. For they always seem to be leaning from the top of their tower, busy with idle things; watching the leaves shake in the sunlight, the clouds tumble their soundless bales of purple down the long slopes, the seasons eternally up to tricks of beauty, laughing at things that only distance and height reveal humor in, and talking, talking, talking – the enchanted unstained silver of their voices spilling over the bright branches down into the still and happy coves. Sometimes you of the valley may not recognize them, though without introduction they are known to each other...”*

What a gift we’ve been given, we “mountain folk,” we graduates of this tiny, tremendous liberal arts college. Too few students in today’s career-oriented, ambition-crazed culture ever enjoy such a gift of time and place, of broad intellectual and spiritual nourishment, of “foundation” and “tower window” all rolled into one. Sewanee is more than just somewhere we were; it’s *something* we *are*. More than just a place on the map, it’s a place in our hearts and minds, and we are all better for having been there.

I’m so proud of the people you’ve become. I’m glad we were Arcadians together.