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Reunion: A plunge back into the angst of teen age

Melissa Dribben

is an Inquirer staff writer.

By your mid-50s, you really shouldn't care what people you haven't seen or heard from since you wore kneesocks think of you.

But high school trauma has the half-life of uranium. So it was crucial to prepare for my husband's 40th reunion.

In some ways, the pressure was worse than if it were my own. We went to the same high school, although I'm younger by a whole year. Which, when you're 17, is practically, like, a generation.

Older, then, was a good thing. The seniors had status, they always seemed cooler, the "Purple Haze" to our "Red Rubber Ball." His girlfriend was demoralizingly pretty and popular. His buddies were dangerously confident and broke rules and my heart raced to pass them in the hall. And his class had Brad. I loved Brad. For a few weeks, he loved me, too. Or so he said.

At the reunion, there was a chance he'd show.

Here's the unwritten rule: Anyone who has (1) royally screwed up, or (2) become famous enough to impress your children, does not attend. Serial divorces, a minimum five years out of rehab, 50 extra pounds, rigor mortis face-lift - you go. Attempted murder, involuntary celibacy, going from National Merit Scholar to living in a double-wide - you don't.

Sane people don't willingly present themselves to a jury of their fanged peers unless they can make a good case for themselves, or have such a good case that their time is too valuable. "You already know me from late night TV show."

You'll talk about them anyway.

My husband was blase. In high school, he was a star. In life, he hasn't done half bad either. He had nothing to prove; he just wanted to see old friends.

For me, it was more complicated. Despite four years as a varsity cheerleader, my social status had been shakier. At the reunion, if anyone was kind enough to speak to me, I figured I could hold my own with the career and kids. And hey, I did marry the senior class president.

We all know what really matters, though. So two weeks before, I tried on three outfits and let my daughters judge.

"The skirt's good, but not the top."

"Oh God, no."

"I like the boots, but the sweater's got to go."

The morning of, I got dressed and went downstairs to the kitchen.

"Black? In New York? Really?" my 17-year-old said.

Ironic, coming from a girl who recently went to school in sheepskin ankle boots and a secondhand flowered mini skirt and (my) jean jacket. But she's surviving adolescence much better than I did. And she was right. Wearing black in New York is trite, like quoting Kahlil Gibran in a mash note. It's cliched, like planning to play Pachelbel's Canon at your wedding. (A wedding, incidentally, that will never happen because your ex-boyfriend won't ever forgive you for that time he told you to get naked and you laughed, thinking he was joking.) It's . . . never mind.

I changed. You can interpret that on several levels, but I also mean it literally.

We drove 2 1/2 hours, made pilgrimages to the high school, the rec center, and our houses, which have belonged to other families for so long their kids have grown up and moved away, too. Then we headed for the old Holiday Inn, parked, climbed the stairs and presto! There we were, back where we started. Almost. Half the faces looked as if they were drawn by a police artist projecting what the person would look like today if they'd been kidnapped in 1970 after a Derek and the Dominos concert at the Fillmore East.

The rest were instantly recognizable: My husband's ex-girlfriend, still beautiful. An actor from L.A. I'd last seen in an episode of *Grey's Anatomy*. A midwife from Oregon who helped deliver her grandchildren. A stunt man. An environmental lawyer who flew in from his lake house in Maine. A local politician. A pianist who went into insurance and now lives in a SoHo loft. A tenured college professor recently furloughed because California is bankrupt. A Manhattan baker. And one single mother with 9-year-old twins.

This is what everyone said: "Oh My God! You look so great!"

When they dove in for a closer look at the little yearbook picture pinned to your shirt, you knew they were lying.

Five hours goes fast when you're in a time warp. It is weirdly, profoundly comforting to be surrounded by people who remember your first dog's bad breath, your mother's stuffed cabbage, and the anti-Melvin Laird poster on your bedroom wall. Friends who knew, even liked, you when you were still raw material. Before you grew into yourself. "Back when we were pure," someone said. Still, you have to be cautious.

Below the happy surface, there is cancer, addiction, children who have faltered. Whom can you trust to sympathize, not judge?

"At the 20th," one of my husband's friends said, "everyone was comparing themselves to each other, trying to see who was more successful. Now we're more mellow."

Sure. Some of us. But did he really believe the judging was over? The jury had only softened with age, not died. Speaking of which, there was a death table with more than a dozen pictures of classmates who really could not make it to the reunion. Only a few of the causes were known: Lou Gehrig's disease, multiple sclerosis, heart attack, and suicide. And lest you think that once you're gone, you're safe from high school rumors, forget it. Even in memoriam, you can be misunderstood.

"I think he had AIDS," someone said, pointing to the photo of someone I knew had died of a congenital heart defect.

Many of the memories were one-sided. "I felt so bad that time we went out and I was backing up the car and accidentally slapped you in the face," said Steve, now a dentist in Florida.

I'd forgotten. Kind of wish he hadn't brought it up.

"You ruined my life," one woman informed my husband. "You told me I had a mustache."

"I'm so sorry," he said, mortified.

"It's OK," she said kindly. "It was 40 years ago."

She still remembered, though.

Note to future reunion-goers: It's OK, even recommended, to bring pictures of your beautiful, talented, successful children, but pulling out framed 8x10 glossy prints of them taken by Richard Avedon will get you talked about on the car ride home, and not in a good way.

Note to Brad: It's OK. It was 40 years ago.

Note to my daughters: When it's your turn, you'll blow them away. Just don't wear black.