HIGH SCHOOL REUNION?
NO THANKS!

by Iris Dorbian

I stared at that photo long and hard on my Facebook feed. It had just been posted by an acquaintance of mine from high school who was downloading photos from a recent reunion. The face in this particular photo, albeit much older, was a familiar one as was the name, which now had another surname hyphenated to it.

It belonged to the 14-year-old girl who bullied me relentlessly when I was in the eighth grade and incited others to do the same. Although I wasn’t physically assaulted by her and her coterie of followers, for almost a year, on a daily basis, I was pelted with myriad epithets and colorful insults, which often poked vicious fun at my braces, the incorrigibly frizzy/curl hair I tried to blow dry into straightened 1970s glory with no success and my quiet, meek demeanor.

I was laughed at so severely (and always in the presence of teachers who never intervened) that sometimes rather than go to school, I would hide in the parking lot of a local VFW building, my eyes glancing nervously at my watch, while rereading a dog-eared copy of “That Was Then, This Is Now,” S.E. Hinton’s classic coming-of-age novel. There I would wait for when my parents were at work so I could safely return home and seek refuge from the pack of adolescent she-wolves who made my regular existence so profoundly joyless.

Only a compassionate school psychologist took pity on me during those less than idyllic days. “You’ll see when you get older, you’ll be with people on your level,” he said, comforting me as I wept yet again in his office. “Things will get better. Trust me.”

He was correct and happily I found that out when I moved to New York City after high school graduation to attend college. Within the epicenter of culture, commerce, and life itself, I met and forged friendships with a constellation of kindred spirits. I got them and they got me in a way that my classmates in junior high, and high school (the latter when the name-calling subsided), never did.

Decades later, the wounds still linger even with an Ivy League degree and a career some might covet. Since then I’ve become hyper sensitive to slights others thicker-skinned than I would be more apt to dismiss as trivial or inconsequential. Part of that is the result of my legacy as a survivor of bullying. In many ways, underneath this urban middle-aged veneer I’m still the same frizzy-haired, vulnerable 14-year-old whom that matronly woman in the photo once targeted for derision and mean-spirited peer approval.

And yes, that woman might now be a pillar of her community; she might be a loving wife, dutiful mother, and industrious worker. In her present life, there may be no remnants of the bully who made my life hell eons ago. But that does little to quell the bad memories from being dredged up from seeing her and the others again.

“We’re having a reunion next weekend,” texted my Facebook high school acquaintance. “You should come. It’s going to be fun.”

I sighed.

If I had gone to that reunion, I’m not sure if my former bully ringleader would even remember the psychological humiliation she inflicted on me back then. Probably not. And yet I know there are people who have struggled with similar experiences in junior high or high school and they do attend reunions as a way to get closure, to reconcile themselves with their erstwhile tormentors and make peace with a painful past.

But I’m not a saint. I’m a survivor and sometimes even we survivors can only tolerate so much.

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