

Ghostbusting in the High School Gym

“I wanted my reunion to be the Revenge of the Nerds. This proved mostly true.”

BY AIMEE LEE BALL

There are several envelopes in life whose arrival in the mail is cause for an elevated pulse. The thin one from your first-choice college (and the thick one from your “safety school”). The ones from the IRS or your ex-husband’s lawyer. And then when you are thirtysomething—years past the point when it should have the power to petrify—there is the envelope with a return address marked “Springfield High School Class Reunion Committee.”

Which is why I am standing in front of a full-length mirror in my mother’s house on a Saturday night, as if I am dressing for the prom, measuring the relative merits of red silk, exposed knees, seamed stockings and heels I can stand in without tarsal damage for a maximum of 30 minutes. My mother comes into the room and says admiringly, “Very nice.” The word I am looking for is “fabulous.” If I’m going back to high school, I’m going to do it right.

High school was not my finest hour. “Was it anybody’s?” is the question I seem to hear when I raise this subject with friends, but the answer is: Hell, yes. Think back to blond cheerleaders named Debbie who skipped *luncheon* without guilt and drank beer without throwing up. I, on the completely other hand, was bookish, klutzy and insecure. I was always falling down the gym stairs and breaking a toe, and I ironed my hair—literally wrapped it in a Turkish towel that my best friend pressed flat. I deflected advances on an unsteady ego with self-deprecating humor, and I learned (miserably) how to be everybody’s friend to neatly avoid being anybody’s girlfriend. I longed to be bad, but I didn’t know how to belt it out of my body.

We move, thank God, onward and upward. We discover contact lenses, business school, conversation, sex. We figure out what we’re good at, what makes us appealing and accomplished human beings in the real world, rather than grading ourselves by the bizarre standards and practices of adolescence. We find places where we belong, people with whom we share more than the serendipity of

a hometown. And we look back and laugh.

But then this thing arrives in the mail, this invitation to commemorate the good old, bad old days, presenting a decision about going back and confronting the ghosts. It is no small matter, this ghostbusting business—never mind that we are now dealing from a position of grown-up maturity and strength. All of the successful and attractive people I saw on the night of my reunion admitted to a moment earlier that afternoon when they had turned to a spouse (or themselves) and said hopefully, “Let’s go to a movie instead.” At first I thought this discomfiture had to do with the physicality of being older—the thinning hair, the hips and thighs. But such high anxiety isn’t only skin-deep. We were raw material back then, like so much Silly-Putty, and the real trepidation is about knowing who you were and who you’ve become, and wondering whether people will notice.

So you get on a train or a plane and go Home—put an extra dollop of mousse in your hair, borrow the keys to your parents’ car and show up at a country club festooned with banners and balloons, to eat prime rib, and dance to Martha and the Vandellas, and exclaim in poisoned whispers over who has become gray, bald, rich, gay, criminal. That’s why I went. I wanted my reunion to be a sort of *Revenge of the Nerds*—a confirmation that those of us who were flat-chested or last-chosen-for-volleyball or dateless-for-the-prom turned out to be astronauts and senators and talk-show hosts. This proved mostly true. A rather timid and imprecise girl has become a lawyer for the Teamsters. A boy who used to fumble the ball—any ball—now holds life and death in his hands in the operating room. Some who were charming and gifted and gorgeous are still charming and gifted and gorgeous (dammit). But somehow the would-be ax murderers have become entrepreneurs,



and the weirdos have become Norma Kamali. Prickly little cacti have flowered, and the late bloomers have inherited the earth.

A significant something occurred to me that night: There were certain people of those impressionable teen-aged times who seemed quite powerful—people who had something I wanted (like social ease), people who could hurt me by their withholding or dispensation of approval. Their power was fixed in time because it was dormant and unchallenged all these years. What happens at a confrontation with the past is a disempowering process. When the class hunk now has a diamond stud in his ear and the class bitch is wearing puffed sleeves and chain-smoking, they’re no longer so scary, no longer “the other.” And everyone with straight hair now has a perm.

Beyond high school, each of us has been dealt a hand of circumstances and assets, a set of cutes and smarts with which to proceed through life. (And life, as the Beatles liked to say, is what comes along while you’re making plans.) I knew this, of course, but I needed to be reminded. Like kids who make their moms look under the bed and rattle the hangers in the closet, I needed to give my ghosts some form before I could blow them away. They’re much smaller and friendlier now, those phantoms of prom queens and quarterbacks. It is wonderfully satisfying to know that I never have to be that young and dumb again. Wouldn’t want to. Not for all the straight blond hair in the world.