

PARADE

Forty years after high school, a famed writer finds...

You Can Go Home Again

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This year, 8 million Americans are expected to attend their high school reunions—even though a national survey says 65% of reunion attendees don't want to go through those years again.

Personally, I couldn't wait to escape adolescence, to be somebody besides that gawky kid in my graduation photo. Yet, strangely enough, I'm one of those eager faces who showed up at my high school reunion. So why did I—and the 7,999,999 other people—go back?

This July, I finally found out, when I flew to my hometown of Shelby, Mont., to attend a reunion for everyone who went to its lone high school during the 1960s.

My rental car cruised into town along Main Street, where people called me Jimmy, not the James on my business cards today. The Roxy movie theater now has a brick façade, not there when my father was its manager. Old stores are gone, and vacant windows reflect little traffic.

I saw the white box house where I grew up. How could it have been so small? I drove past the home of my unrequited adolescent crush, Linda, wondering if she and her husband would come to the reunion. Sprinklers hissed on the football field where I learned how to get knocked down, get up, and get knocked down again. And looming at the edge of town was the sprawling two-story pink cement building—my high school.

On Friday night, each of the graduating classes met at designated taverns. My 1967 class had 87 boys and girls. A third of my classmates and some spouses (not mine, who declined with a smile) gathered at the Tap Room, a wood-paneled bar decorated with a class banner.

Amid squeals and laughter, I met friends wearing name tags that we sometimes needed. We swapped data about work, children, grandchildren, and what happened to our parents. Heartaches were related in stoic sentences, and nobody—nobody—whined.

We snapped pictures. We marveled at who went to prison and whose environmental entrepreneurship might help save the world. We were proud that Sandy, the woman voted "Most Likely To Succeed," is now a counselor helping veterans cope with post-traumatic stress disorder. We spoke gently about our own strung-out alums who were not there but whom we hoped still might recover. Nobody dwelled on politics or religion. E-mail addresses got jotted on the back of motel receipts. We kept scanning the crowd to see who came. (Linda and her husband didn't make it.)

What struck everyone I talked with is how little we actually knew back then. Lorna, a university staffer who was voted "Most Representative" of our class, told me: "We didn't know who we were." Nutritionist Mary Jeanne, who'd been voted "Best All Around," said that she secretly thought she was the only one who was "scared and didn't have a clue."

None of us knew that one of the seemingly happiest guys in our class spent his nights using his fists

to save his younger sister and mother from his stepfather's beatings. Now a successful local businessman, he told me: "I thought that's how it was for everybody."

Reunions change reality. As one celebrant remarked, "The 10-year reunion is about impressing your former peers—showing them, and perhaps yourself, that you made it. By the 20th reunion, you get to just be yourself."

Eleven years ago, at our 30th reunion, Wally sought out Randy. He had always felt a special connection, though they'd never dated. He walked up to her and said, "I came to see you." Then he walked away. "I was so scared," Randy told me. Two years later, she and Wally married, and they're still going strong.

Gary, one of the reunion organizers who never left Shelby, whistled for the crowd in the Tap Room to quiet down. His voice trembled as he read the list of those forever gone: "Mike Jodrey, Rick Mauritson, Sue Turner..." We cheered for each name, but we didn't cry. Instead, our emotions came out in the classic high school reunion hugs—hugs from someone you treasure more now than before. The hug from the woman you can't remember who says she'd know you anywhere. The hug from an old girlfriend who was so right to dump you, the hugs of those who once shared hairbrushes in the girls' room. Gene the airline tycoon hugged Kirby the family farmer. Sid the professor hugged Jesse the truck driver.

The hug meant we're still here.

Driving to the airport, I felt valued and validated, glad I had gone, gladder to be returning home. I clicked on my left blinker. Like any experienced motorist, I checked my mirrors—and saw my old pink high school.

Just one last glance, and then it was gone.

James Grady is the author of "Six Days of the Condor." His latest novel is "Mad Dogs."