

## THE ANGST OF MY HIGH-SCHOOL ABYSS

~BY ALAN BENNETT ILAGAN~

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The memory of my high school days is a dim corridor of sporadic, whispered longings, none of which came to fruition. It is mostly empty ~ a fractured crackling of loneliness, shot through by some insanely undying sense of hope, of something better. A yearning for more ~ for knowledge and answers and, inexplicably, a want and desire for formulated questions. If I only knew why, or what, or who ~ would it all make sense?

But I didn't know which "why", "what", or "who", and not knowing what to even ask made finding out anything that much more difficult. If I didn't know the questions, how could I possibly figure out the answers, even when they stared me in the face?

This much I understood: men turned me on, men made me hard, men were the focus of my desire. In every one of the straight sex stories to which I had born witness ~ on television, in the movies, on records, in songs, or in books ~ it was always the men to whom my attention invariably flowed. But this was all wrong, all impossible.

I was supposed to find a girl, get married, have kids, and live happily ever after (along with going to college and getting a well-paying job.) The fairy-tales said so, the stories I read in grade school said so, my favorite television shows said so, and my parents - through example and silence - said so. And me ~ I almost did what I was told.

There was a girlfriend, some straight locker-room talk (which amounted to grunts and snickers,) and a pretty damn convincing facade; so convincing, in fact, that even I bought into it at isolated moments of generous delusion and misguided wishful thinking.

Gay? ME?! No way. Whatever. You believe what you want ~ I know the truth. And the self-confidence ploy worked ~ for a while. Ignorance was certainly not bliss, but I still couldn't admit what was wrong. So I waited. And wasted. All those beautifully tender high school years ~ the ones that seem to matter so much at the time, then quickly dissipate into forgotten fragments, no matter how deeply we vow to never forget.

And no matter how vehemently some of us promise to never return to our respective high schools, it is an inescapable voyage ~ a journey we must make at some point ~ to remember, to discover, to rejoin, and to rejoice - if only for how far we have come.

When I'm feeling especially grown-up and mature (which at twenty-four-years-old isn't all that often, nor will it ever be,) I do want to return to those lost years of sadness and fear ~ to inhabit my teenage body knowing what a few years in the world illuminates ~ and then I don't. It wouldn't make much of a difference. I knew then what mattered, what people would, and most importantly wouldn't, tolerate, and I knew that I didn't fit into any of it.

That still makes me sad. I will always mourn that there wasn't a place for me. This isn't to say there wasn't fun to be had, but to partake I had to forsake so much ~ and I did. Back then, in the moment, it was worth it.

Now I'm not so sure. A sense of shame and embarrassment rises to the surface when I look back at myself in high school, a nagging feeling of remembered longings and misplaced emotions. The pangs of desire I felt and hid when the football players wore their tight outfits on game days...the sick and oddly exciting talk of jocks by my locker, the way they displayed their horny hormones for all the world to see...the furtive glances I risked in the locker-room during physical education...these all existed on a dark, subterranean level of utmost secrecy.

I countered my burgeoning homosexuality with a good-boy act, bringing home top grades, excelling in band and orchestra, and dating a girl whose world I would ultimately destroy a year or so later. For all that I was involved in, for all the people I talked to and befriended, and for all the teachers who thought they knew me, I was living an absolute lie, and the resulting loneliness lent an isolation to all my memories.

I was there ~ I had to be. My picture is documented in the yearbook, you can see it in the band and orchestra pictures, in the National Honor Society group shot, and in the clumsily formed "93" of senior students on the back lawn of the school. Yes, I was there, but that wasn't really me. Does that mean that the real me ~ the true me ~ would not have been liked? I will never know; I can only suspect and wonder and doubt.