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My 50th High School Reunion Disaster

Suddenly you are surrounded by classmates that usually fall into four distinct categories: those few you liked and would pal around with and who you are genuinely glad to see despite the again; at the other extreme, those who you disliked and would never talk to or want to be seen with or even close to in the cafeteria, then there is a large group in the middle that you went through high school with, had absolutely no feelings about, maybe saw on a weekly basis and had no desire to have any contact with other than to sign your picture in their yearbook. You always said something endearing and personal like “Really great to know you and boy did we have fun times.” And finally, as time passes and the number of years since you graduated grow, there is an increasing growing group that are dead.

It is for a variety of reasons, mostly because I tend to be anti-social and basically dislike most people—even fellow high school classmates—that I think reunions are a colossal waste of time. I did make the effort to attend my 10th high school reunion and then skipped the other 40.

“Hey, what ever happened to the 16th reunion?” I once asked.

“Well,” came the answer, “now they are in 5-year gaps and after 20, we are moving them to 10-year increments. Seemed logical.

I went to high school in Rye, New York which was an affluent bedroom community about 45 minutes by train from downtown Manhattan. Fathers lined up like sheep in the mornings to get the commuters trains into their offices in the city, mothers had trips to the A&P, bridge, flower or book clubs and tennis. Evenings were swilling down early cocktails, dinner, and truly little conversation across the table.

And for the kids of a certain age, it was being packed off to Rye High, home of the fighting Garnets. Not quite sure why they called the sports team the Garnets, like we all were going into the jewelry business when we graduated. I am sure that did not engender great fear in our rival team’s eyes—“wow, here comes the jewelers.”

Anyway, as best as I can remember since things about high school are a bit foggy now, we had about 190 people in our graduating class in 1964. Not a huge graduating class, but of a size that allowed you to know most of your fellow classmates—at least those you wanted

to. Despite the small size there was still the various cliques but basically there were two divisions—the preps and the greasers. Preps, of course, embraced everything ever made in madras much to the delight of the greasers who embraced everything made in black leather and inevitably looked a lot cooler.

There were no pitched battles between either side as the madras lovers really had no idea how to fight and would probably run away screaming and ask for the Principal to intervene in order not get their madras soiled in anyway. So, our band of mighty 190 graduated and went off to discover ourselves, work in various capacities, have families and children and for the many smart ones, never to wear madras again in life.

Fast forward 50 years and for those of us who did not remain close to our beloved high school or ever care about what happened to our graduating class, suddenly out of the blue and invitation arrived. “The Rye High School Class of 1964 is proud to announce the 50th anniversary reunion weekend.” For me it was like a bolt of lightning striking, most it was centered on how the hell did they ever find me?

I was never on the mailing list; I never went to a high school reunion except one—40 years ago—as I felt that was enough to see how classmates had changed and what they were up to. It was marginally entertaining and only enhanced and made bearable by copious amounts of liquor that I consumed. Forget being overly social or dancing with any female classmates who were now mostly married with kids or they were lesbians—I just stood and watched. After that, the light was turned off on my graduating class.

But, wham, now I had an invitation to the 50th reunion and, even better, encouragement and pressure to sign up for the Class of '64 Fighting Garnets Facebook page. Now, I could list all the swell things I was up to and keep up to date on classmates that I did not care one fig about. Since I had not done that for the last 50 years, I was not sure of the value of suddenly embracing a lot of high school spirit and attending this event either in person or online.

The dilemma for me was on one side living in Utah and having to schlepp back to New York with all the associated costs to see people that were never part of my life anyway.

And then balanced with, well probably will not be a 100th reunion and this might be the last chance to visit with any that you could remember before dementia set in for good. So, the question became also was it just going to be an event where no face was familiar given the ravages of age where no one remembers much and only the glimmer of recognition comes after staring an exceptionally long time at the person's name tag hoping that the gears could kick in as to who the hell they were.

But wait, the weekend sounded absolutely jammed packed with great events that I thought should not be too quickly dismissed.

Friday night was to be a bar crawl to all the great places we used to frequent during our high school days. That would be a laugh as I can't image any sordid place we went to was still being open after 50 years. In most cases we had to find places where we could drink without being carded—either our car or the beach.

To complicate things, we would need someone old enough to make various stops to buy six-packs of beer for those who were underage. The bars we would frequent would usually be someone's house whose parents were out of town for the weekend. Then we could have wonderful things like Kalua and ginger ale or Canadian Club with green Crème de Menthe. So, in my mind, the bar crawl would already be a non-starter.

But, as I read on, it only got better.

On Saturday, the entire class was going to have the privilege of going back to Rye High during the day to attend some yet to be defined sporting event. Given that this reunion was happening at the end of April, I was curious as to exactly what sporting event could we all cheer on? Cross country, the golf team, baseball, varsity darts? But no, somehow the end of football.

But then came the highlight and what we were all waiting for.

That evening everyone would be bussed from command central, which was the Hilton in Rye, to some sightseeing boat docked in Manhattan for a glorious evening cruise around Manhattan island.

Panic suddenly set in.

No, it was not that I was afraid to be out on the water, rather, it was the thought that being out on the water there was no way to leave...no way to get off...no way to run away in breakneck speed from the fun festivities. One was stuck for at a minimum of four hours. But why would one ask would you want to leave? There was going to be a gourmet buffet of chafing dishes filled to the brim of Italian delights that I am sure only the boat company's master chefs could have concocted. There was going an open bar with only the highest quality of spirits possible as that is what they normally do at these types of events —no cheap stuff for us. And then there will be dancing. Disco balls and music from the '60's so that every classmate also in their '60's could insure with some grand pelvic thrust they could end up either in traction or at a chiropractor on a regular basis. The likelihood was extremely high that a fellow classmate would trip over someone's parked walker and land flat on their face as a final wind up crescendo to Chubby Checker's "The Twist" or perhaps the Dave Clark 5's "Bits and Pieces."

The pen-ultimate highlight of the night, and what every high school reunion needs, was the committee had planned to stop our floating geriatric party boat at the Statue of Liberty, where the names of those classmates who have passed on to the high school reunions in the sky would be read out loud and a rose would simultaneously be thrown overboard in their memory. Am I talking fun or what? Been to many class reunions where the obituary pages were read?

Well, that last event about did it for me and the 50th seemed blocked from my schedule. No tequila shots or pole dancing, just roses over the side and names I could never remember anyway. Goodbye Rye reunion.

My wife said I should go; it could be fun. She is always the optimist and despite my repeated “please highlight for me one fun aspect of this” she came up with several. Looking at the listed events and seeing that said Sunday was going to be a “lazy of day of brunch and talking to friends about all the fun we have had over the weekend” she said, “see look at all the good time you could have catching up.” To which I replied, “I could do that in about 3 minutes.”

Figuring I could see my son who lives in the city, some friends from my days in the advertising industry, I reluctantly decided to plow on and confirmed that I was coming. I got back a chippy note from the organizer, who was heading up the weekend committee saying how delighted he and the committee was that I was making the effort to come and how he was looking forward to having lots of time to reconnect. Since I think I talked to him about 15 minutes during the entire time I was at Rye High, I was dubious that was a major draw for me.

Off went my money for the weekend. Best I could remember about close to \$200 for the delightful boat ride and the Italian/disco event, some more money to stay at the epicenter of fun at the Hilton (which I did not), more money for the pub crawl (which I missed) and more money for Sunday brunch (which there was no way I was going to attend), and can't remember now if there was any fee for the committee for the fabulous logistical plan they put into place.

So, the Friday of the weekend I flew to NY—sorry I had to miss the pub crawl. Had dinner with a great friend and stayed with he and his wife in New Jersey. I then had to secure a room in Manhattan for Sat and Sunday, which was only about \$350 a night. Anything less costly and one was on a bench in the Port Authority.

So, Saturday rolled around and now it was the night of the big event.

What to wear? What to wear? What would bring on a combination of cool and youthful frivolity that must be shown to have never left me. What is going to highlight my hip side and driving comments like “how young you look” aside from the wrinkle, receding hair, and turkey like neck. All black—rock star. And so, it was to be, that was my outfit of the evening. Except for one minor addition, a raincoat as it was freezing bloody cold and on an off-rain showers. Perfect for a boat outing.

So, got a cab in mid-town as there were no Ubers available in under 30 minutes and off to Queens where the boat was supposed to be waiting for the fighting Garnets. The pier was across from Citi Field where the NY Mets played. Two great events happened to start my evening off in style.

The first was my cab driver must have just started his first day of driving since leaving two days before from Bangalore as he had no idea of where he was going, what was Citi Field and if there were any boats remotely close. Also, he had the subtle smell of stale chicken tikka masala. The second was that there was a night game at Citi Field just at the same time we began our search for the pier and so there were only about 2 jillion cars and buses blocking our path.

Finally seeing water and piers and now about \$80 into my ride, we were circling in empty parking lots with no boats around and him repeating constantly, "I don't see anything." No shit neither do I and it is now about 7:45pm and the Queen Mary is supposed to leave on our pleasure cruise at 8pm.

Out of the corner of my eye, way down from the empty parking lots we were driving around, I saw a lone white boat at the end of the pier. I bid a quick fond farewell to Arnav, pay my \$87 and bolt across the grass to the waiting luxury liner of fun. At that point, the wind gusts are picking up and across the water there are a lot of white caps and the boat seems to be rolling a lot even moored to the dock. Lovely.

I got down the dock and things just didn't look right.

There huddled at the boat gangplank and ready to board are a group of Indians—I assume not relatives of Arnav the cab driver nor from any Cherokee tribe, all standing around with "50" buttons pinned in various places. There were men, women, children, little girls shivering in chiffon dresses all with their "50" buttons on. Why were they wearing buttons?

I knew I had not lost my mind, but I also remembered there were not a lot of classmates from Mumbai at Rye High. In fact, I think the greatest distance that one of our foreign exchange students came from was Texas. So, what the hell were these people doing? Were they there as a crowd to acknowledge the 50th and give a rousing send off to our party? Did our organizer outdo himself on weekend planning and if so, why Indians?

Along with the huddle of Indians were various crew members with different stripes on their epaulets looking at their watches and trying to get the attention of a woman—who from India—who seemed to be in some frantic cellphone conversation with someone. It was now about 5 minutes before departure time and the dock consisted of the crowd from India, several crew members, one woman in a frantic conversation and me. Not one single fun party person from the Rye High class of 1964.

When the woman finally hung up and started mumbling something to one of the crew, I felt it was my moment to try to figure out what the shit was going on. "Excuse me" I ventured to her, "Do you know anything about a reunion from a high school in Rye, NY?"

"Mike" she quickly blurted out without batting an eye.

I knew I did not have a name tag on at that moment and for the life of me could not figure how this one woman standing on the dock knew my name. "Janice" she quickly followed up "you remember me, of course." I stood there frozen, "who" I was thinking and again how did she know my name. "Don't you remember me," she continued, "we were best friends at Rye High, we used to date."

“No” I was thinking, but quickly countered, “Janice of course I do, you haven’t changed a bit, still stunning as always, you have not changed a bit since I saw you last at graduation.” Trying to get to the heart of the matter, I said, “Say are we the only two people coming to this event—did the rest of our class die?” Thinking maybe it was just Janice and I who were going to have to throw dozens of long stem roses off the boat at the Statue of Liberty.

“No, everyone is still at the Hilton waiting for the bus to come—it has not arrived. I was just on the phone with someone—no one from the organizing committee—and we were trying to figure out what to do.”

At that point several of the crew came over and said what did we want to do as the Indians were all on the boat and it was time to go.

I asked one of the crew just for a point of clarification, were the Indians going to be joining our group of funsters?

“No, they have their own

deck, and you have yours.” So, Janice asked again what I thought we should do.

“Well,” I replied, “since it takes about an hour and a half to get from Rye to this boat and the bus has not come and the boat needs to leave in 3 minutes, I think the answer is obvious—the boat goes without the class of 1964 or we are going to have some really pissed off Indians.” And I thought to myself, I bet those were supposed to be our buttons with “50” on them.

The crew were more than generous saying that Janice and I could go and see if we could work our way on our own through a chafing dish or two under the disco ball or if we cared to and they would have us, perhaps we could join the Indians. No, we thanked them and noted that standing around on an empty deck for 4 hours listening to tapes of Frankie Valli and the Four Seasons singing “Big Girls Don’t Cry” was not our idea of fun. And so, the fun cruise slipped off into the night and I am sure that the Indians must have also enjoyed a few chafing dishes of Italian food instead of curry.

“Now what,” said Janice.

“Well,” I replied, “I have really had so much fun so far that I would be hard to think of something that could top this. But I have an idea, and so let’s go into Manhattan have a nice dinner and get drunk.”

My next thought was how were we going to find a way to get from this desolate pier back to civilization. Janice said quickly that her husband was sitting in a limousine at the end of the pier and that we can get back into the city with him. Apparently, he had been sitting there all the time in case the boat sank, or plans went awry. Boy was he right. Quickly, he was filled in on all the details and thankfully, he thought my idea of dinner was spot on.

Janice, bless her good heart and high school spirit decided to call the contact with the fellow Garnets sitting at the Hilton to tell them of our plans. The conversation was longer than I hoped and ended with something I was not keen to hear, "Ok we will see you in a little bit."

"See you in a little bit...what does that exactly mean," I incredulously asked. "Yes, what does it mean?" her husband quickly echoed.

"Well," said Janice, "they were so disappointed that we were not coming and really wanted to see you Mike, so I told them we were going to drive up and join the festivities."

Really wanted to see me I was thinking, well damn, they have survived for 50 years, so why tonight? Janice's husband was not thrilled either as it meant that we would have to be dropped off at their place in the city, get their car, drive about an hour to Rye, yuk it up with all the fun hogs, turn around and drive back into the city. I could see that this turn of events was not high on his dance card.

Well, it was almost 10pm as we pulled into the Hilton to hook up with our fellow classmates celebrating the fact that the boat left without us. I tried to remain positive thinking that I was at least going to be able to have a few laughs with some friends that I have not seen in many years.

Wait, it got even better.

Somehow even with a small graduating class and even smaller with the number of roses ordered for our obituary reading event, there was a fight between two factions of our graduating class. One side seemed not to like the organizing head and his team and therefore boycotted the reunion. And the current organizer and his followers were not going to attend the break-away contingents' event. Are you kidding? Christ, we only had about 190 people in the graduating class and I was sure at least 20% were dead given the number of planned roses and now we have a battle over who is in charge. Those of us who were not intimately involved in the planning and flew in from exotic destinations like Utah only found out about this as we were pulling up to the front portico.

"Got it," I said to Janice who seemed to be on the inside of all the information and past war like happenings. "Well, at least I can see my great buddy Larry, since I remember he lives in Greenwich, about 3 miles away."

"Oh, Larry is not coming, he does not like reunions," said Janice sheepishly.

"You got to be kidding, I came from Utah and he can't come 3 miles?"

"Nope"

"Well, another great best friend was Peter, what about him?"

"No, he died several years ago."

Swell, there went my list, maybe Dick will be there.

Since it was a Saturday night, the hotel was not planning that the fighting Garnets of the Rye High class of 1964 would be anywhere other than yukking it up on a boat, eating copious amounts of Italian food, and counting down the minutes until the rose toss. In other words, all event rooms were filled and so this wild reunion undertaking was now crammed into the corner of the lobby. Additionally, since the Hilton assumed that we would be having our fill of gourmet Italian food, there was no need for them to plan anything food wise.

So, scanning around as I walked in, I saw a gloomy bunch of old people sitting on couches---pretty much all of whom I had no idea who they were or their names even after looking at nametags. Sort of looked like a Medicare enrollment waiting area, but wait, there were also a bunch of chafing dishes along a wall that I am sure the Hilton kitchen put a long time in preparing---what luck. And there was a bar. Since there were just name tags and no pictures on lapels, when anyone who was "dying to see me" (could be counted on one hand), came over there was no recognition on my part until they repeated their name a few times and said, "don't you remember we took Home Economics together?"

"Of course, I remember you." I would quickly reply without a clue turning away in a hurry.

Starving, I made a bee line to the chafing dishes which consisted of barbeque chicken feet and assorted other trays of uncertain food groupings I had not seen before. So, dinner was some rice and vegetables, and the best part was I had to pay once again for dinner to the hotel for this feast.

Feeling guilty for Janice's husband who was a good sport, I went to the bar and bought two bottles of wine, one for me and one for Janice and her husband. Two bottles of marginal Chardonnay that I can buy even in Utah for less than \$25 cost me right around \$120. Ahh, the thought of those Italian chafing dishes seemed like such a lost moment that I now longed for. So, dinner on the boat that I did not have was \$200 and a wonderful dinner of rice and bad Chardonnay that now cost me close to \$175 made my dinner experience come in at \$375 with no dessert. A real bargain.

Somehow on one of the walls of the lobby our committee was able to get a projector that was flashing pictures of various times in the life of many there that started in the 3rd grade and went up. For some reason it seemed to stop about the 10th grade at Rye High. The meaningful part of me was that I began to attend Rye High in the 10th grade and so when everyone was pointing out "oh that was Peggy in the 4th grade" I could have given a shit and never knew who the hell she was anyway.

A few people I remembered did come by for some small talk and flashbacks. One good friend of mine named Dick reconnected. Dick had a duck egg green Volkswagen beetle in high school and would scare the living hell out of me driving around with him as he

would get into animated conversations and usually forget he was the driver. Suddenly he would turn around and look to the back seat to make his point while still going 50mph. All of would scream, "eyes on the road, Dick."

I was stunned to find later that Dick has just retired as a senior captain for Alaska Airlines. The thought of sitting on a plane in bad weather making an approach into Juneau, Alaska with Dick at the controls sent shivers remembering his VW driving days, but I guess he was good and did not have to look in the back seat to make a point. Well done on you, Dick, congratulations.

One of the best parts of the evening came when our corner of the lobby burst into a rousing version of "Fight on for old Rye High" much to the delight of those at least 50 years younger who were coming back to the hotel from various parties or weddings. There was sheer shock as they thought "what are those geezers doing in the lobby singing?" crossed many minds. "Did they let the nursing home out for a night on the town?"

Then it was the moment of the grand finale.

Our noble leader had the obituary moment that he had to quickly adjust. Now there was no boat to stop, no Statue of Liberty to admire, no roses to throw over the side as someone's name was read out...a brief, but memorable moment. No, what was now announced was that as a name was read out someone who knew the person was to offer up their memories of the departed.

Oh my God, it was now well past midnight, and the list was just beginning. And to my dismay, there seemed to be quite a few of fellow classmates who had corked off—again, most I could not remember. Naturally, no time limits—like under a minute before the music starts—were placed on anyone who were to say their memories of someone no longer having the pleasure of attending this reunion. Since many had more than enough drinks because they were staying in the hotel, this became an ordeal of the highest pain level. On and on people droned about some who might have been their friend, but not to those of us standing around. Several were sobbing dramatically which elongated their time as they had to fight back choking, which is what I wanted to do to them.

In trying not to scream out loud, I began to talk to some classmates in the back of the crowd about too bad that the bus never showed up—the bus company should really get it. The best part I found out--the bus had been there all the time waiting! Someone from the committee's merry band of geniuses had gone out to the bus asked the driver if this was the bus for the Rye High event and he said he did not think so, he thought it was for some wedding. So, instead of doing something logical like calling the bus company, the brilliant takeaway was, "Oh, ok, I guess we will just have to wait."

Janice, her husband who was not a happy camper by this point, and I, decided we could not possibly have more fun and so decided it was time to head back into the city. They live in the upper part of Manhattan and my hotel was mid-town, so I was grand fun trying to find a cab at 2:30am and I finally made it to bed at 3:15am. It was hard to get asleep as my mind was filled with all the joyous memories that I was thrilled to have from my class

reunion. With airfare, hotels, cabs, dinner at the Hilton, drinks etc. I was out over \$1,500 for 7 hours of events not to be believed.

I came back to Utah resolved to the fact that there was no way I was going to the 75th or 100th reunion and angry that I had not been able to hook up with my best high school friend, Larry.

Then, a few weeks later something arrived out of the skies in my mailbox.

Not kidding, it was an invitation to the 50th reunion of the 1964 class of Rye High School. What was this Ground Hog Day or what? I quickly got in contact with Janice and asked her was this a joke and in her usual efficient way she replied,

“No, that is from the other group that did not like the first organizers, now it is their turn to have their own reunion. You are going to come, I hope?”

No bloody way, no more reunions...sign me up, however, for the 125th.