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One Dollar

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The Faces of Alaska

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AHS Class of '61, Where Are You?

BY JOANNA CRAVEY HUTT



Snapshots from the reunion, from top left: Sweet nothings whispered to an Old Flame? The straight half of the comic twins. Still stunning as winner of the Most Gray Hair. The Old Gang: Executive Outdoorsman, Preppy, Baby Face, Quietest, Sourdough, Guru.

DOONESBURY

by Garry Trudeau



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I READ OR HEARD somewhere that the world's deep thinkers have grappled with the psychology of reunions, especially class reunions. One theory suggests that reunionizing is a manifestation of sado-masochistic egoism, in which the goer's self image is enhanced by his or her perception of how he or she stacks up against the control group, i.e., other class members. Of the countless Americans who attended a reunion this summer, I have found no one who cares what those deep thinkers think. Reunions are all-American fun.

So, whatever the reasons, I joined the countless and went to my high school class's twentieth reunion.

In a lot of ways, mine was a typical reunion. You meet some of the same types whether in Boston or Flagstaff; you do many of the same things; you feel the same emotions. But mine was also an exaggeration, almost a caricature, of reunions. "AHS" stands for Anchorage High School. Some of us traveled more than 4,500 miles on eleven- or twelve-hour flights back through five time zones to spend an Arctic weekend in Anchorage, Alaska, with the class of '61.

As if in a time machine, we returned to the outrageous, superlative land: to twenty-four hours of daylight, to a city protected from temperature extremes by a mountain range that dwarfs the Rockies, a city near the Matanuska Valley where farmers grow seventy-pound cabbages and lettuces, on an inlet where bore tides and whales are common.

If our destination was exaggerated, we weren't; we were a pretty typical high school class in both 1961 and 1981. But we came from all over the United States. From Hawaii came Pat, the gorgeous majorette the boys were crazy about; today she manages a large luxury hotel. Beautifully tanned (an oddity in Anchorage), divorced twice and holding, with a figure enhanced by nature and perhaps modern medical miracles, she drove the grown boys crazy. She leaned over to a long lost friend and assessed the room. "I don't see a *thing* yet that interests me," she sighed with a toss of her shoulders. She drew a crowd anyway.

A large group came from Seattle and other Washington cities, including Kaylee, close friend and next door neighbor twenty years ago on Elmendorf Air Force Base where our fathers were stationed. Two class sweethearts since the eighth grade, Armond and Judy came from Michigan; now married nearly twenty years, they have children as old now as we were then. Rhode Island sent Navyman Chuck, where he lives when not on duty

on a Polaris sub. Pam V. came from California, Janice from Tennessee, and I from Alabama.

My Army brat friend and fellow AHS cheerleader Julie (her father was stationed at the other military enclave, Fort Richardson) came from Washington, D.C. Like most of the classmates, we had had little opportunity to bump into each other for two decades and had lost touch many years ago; thankful to be renewing our friendship we agreed not to dwell on the

The ad read: "Looking for weird, exotic fun? Contact the class of '61."

fact that I had been in Washington more than once, not knowing she was there.

It all started as most reunions do — an idea in someone's head, but the challenge to the organizers was as audacious as the destination itself: The creativity lay in their ability to find and lure to the Land of the Midnight Sun as many as they could of the almost 600-member class. We were a motley bunch, about half military brats presently living God knows where and the other half Sourdoughs (longtime Alaskans) many of whom had relocated somewhere in the lower forty-eight. For example, Doug, now a successful lawyer in Seattle, was born and raised in an Anchorage of 3,500 people; now the population is half the state's 400,000 total. The 200,000 Anchorageites play host for about ninety days each summer to half again that many tourists in the city. Maybe that's how the organizers learned to throw a bash.

The student council officer voted Most Likely to Succeed, Pam B., was at her most successful spearheading this crazy undertaking. Still pretty and petite after twenty years (she was nominated at the sock hop for Least Changed Woman), Pam, like most Sourdoughs, has not gotten out of Alaska often, since it is farther from Anchorage to Los Angeles than it is from L.A. to New York, Washington, D.C., or anywhere in Tennessee or Alabama. But she believed we'd come.

Undaunted by the odds against finding many of the class members or by the ridiculously un-central location, Pam gathered her troops and began the search in the fall of 1979. Together they rode around the city as if it were America's crossroads, with orange and black (AHS colors) bumperstickers that asked, "Anchorage High School Class of '61, WHERE ARE YOU?"

They had tried a rhyming ad in the *An-*

chorage Times' classifieds. It went, "Looking for weird, exotic fun? Contact the class of '61." The address followed. So did some kinky responses. They pulled it.

Some tactics used to find class members were of dubious legality and sanity, since military matters can spell d-a-n-g-e-r; after all, you're dealing with the Pentagon, maybe national secrets, and most dangerous of all, Washington bureaucrats. An unnamed organizer got hold of a bureaucrat at the other end of a telephone line, who refused to give out a telephone number of a retired officers' group from which some of the fathers' whereabouts — and therefore, members' — could be found. After some kind of incredible story, the weary bureaucrat revealed the number.

Why did we come back? It wasn't for Alaska's bargain prices; they are as superlative as the mountain peaks. At some point in my eleven-hour flight, I remembered that twenty years ago hamburgers had cost \$1 or more. I figured they must be closing in on \$4 or \$5 these days. They were. One breakfast menu had the audacity to offer "Egg Benedict"; the singular is not a misprint. I guess the manager simply could not offer two eggs at \$10; one at \$5.25 seemed O.K. Exaggerated prices in these inflated times are common in Kalamazoo certainly, but egg benedict? Outrageous.

We didn't really come back for a taste of nostalgia either. Take the schoolhouse, for example. Actually you can't. Most of the building and all of the second floor and gym had slid into Cook Inlet during the disastrous 1964 Good Friday earthquake, the most powerful one in North America's recorded history. Instead of gathering at the school, we huddled together like a school of fish in a huge new aquarium — Anchorage's shiny glass high-rise hotel, the Captain Cook. This building and many others like it in Anchorage were the clearest indication that twenty years and an earthquake had intervened.

Any city can expect change in twenty years. It's just that Anchorage had a longer way to go to reach 1981 than most cities, and few resort to earthquakes to get the job done. "Can you believe how the city has changed?" asked many of the Sourdoughs at some point in the weekend. I gushed appropriately and mentally grinned; to myself I said, "I sure hope so," remembering the Last Chance bar on Fourth Avenue.

I had left Anchorage a frontier saloon town in a brand new state, a town that had to clean up the life-sized nudes displayed beside the front doors on the elbow-to-elbow saloons lining the main road to town, the one President Eisenhower was to travel in his ceremonious ride from Elmendorf to the city. The patriotic deco-

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rations diverted the eye from additional boardwalks over the gray volcanic mud and from the whiskey bottles and litter left over from the spring thaw.

Today, sidewalks have replaced boardwalks; planters are brimming with oversized flowers — marigold plants the size of shrubs, with flowers the size of softballs, petunias as big as saucers — which come from long hours of sunlight — have replaced litter. Glass and steel high rises mingle with early twentieth century clapboard cottages. But the A & W drive-in is still there. Some things don't change.

Did we come back for the people we hadn't seen in so long? We didn't know the answer when we left our points of origin, but we would find out by the reunion's post-mortem on Monday. En route to Anchorage, I know I scanned a lot of people in airports who looked like they might be between twenty-six and thirty-eight. What must they have looked like twenty years ago? Would friends from the past recognize them? What the heck do I look like? Who am I?

Perhaps we did come back partly because reunions are fun even though pretty much alike: The champagne breakfast — no eggs of any kind — was held for class members only. (The champagne is to gloss the wrinkles, and the "members only" is to reduce the margin for error.) A cocktail party of some description was arranged for members, spouses, ex-spouses now belonging to another classmate, and old lovers not with anyone (it can get confusing; don't lay odds on who shows up with whom). Finally, there was a picnic for class members, present spouses, and his-and-hers children, but no pets, please.

We were nervous as we neared the elevator leading to the Crow's Nest at the top of the hotel. It was like a first date with someone you have had a crush on. We took tentative steps. It took uninhibited Carol's grabbing, hugging, and kissing to break the ice. She had been voted Biggest Flirt in '61; in fact, Carol's "flirtatiousness" is actually a zest for life that has gotten her through some rough spots the last twenty years. But what do seventeen-year-olds know?

Suddenly all the years melted away like the Arctic snow in April. As I encountered familiar faces on the elevator, I began to understand that people change very little. The realization is comforting.

It was shy Joel, all right, subtly holding back until someone else made the first move. Without his distinctive blond flat top (in fact without anything to take its place) he had kept his wide, warm grin and the twinkle in his eye. It was Frank in his preppy green sweater (we have come full circle from Izod and back again); Ginger's smashing sophistication punc-

uated by her strand of pearls; Doug, with his still-baby face in spite of an additional pound for each intervening year; Sharon's ga-ga squealing, still familiar above the din; and Sally's reassuring stability.

It was ironic Allen behind the hair on his face (a lot less on his head). He's the city prosecutor — actually a hifalutin term for sheriff. Like Matt Dillon, Allen is going to clean up the Last Frontier's main town. He started by cracking down on the drunks; first offenders spend twenty-four hours in the hoosegow. After all, he was voted Most Ambitious in '61. Maybe seventeen-year-olds know more than you'd think.

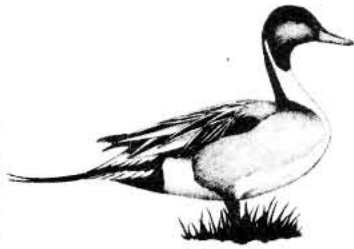
The Barrett twins! I'd have known them in Times Square. Voted Wittiest in '61, Donna, living in Anchorage, is still playing the clown; prim Judy, from Michigan, is still the straight, with not a hair out of place. They hadn't seen each other in about ten years, since tickets for four from anywhere in the lower forty-eight are expensive. How did Donna handle it? Like old times, thank goodness. She went around all weekend explaining that Judy was the afterbirth. Judy? She tapped her foot a lot.

We were a tangle of expressions and gestures that ran the gamut from quizzical to incredulous to gleeful to ironic and back. The comfort of recognition was there, but sometimes the name — merely a superficial detail anyway — wouldn't come; so between hugs, shoulder slaps, handshakes, and kisses, many eyes surreptitiously glanced at nametags — our '61 yearbook picture and name.

At Saturday night's sock hop, it was the Most Changed Man, Ron, handing out awards, including one to Least Changed Man, Chris. With little changes being the rule, there's always one who breaks that rule in an extraordinary way. Few of us recognized Ron; he could have come straight from central casting, Mahatma Bushi behind all that Guru coif. Twenty years ago he was no ugly duckling, but no swan either; like most of us, he was something in between, his mark of individuality being his slightly protruding front teeth. He claims the Guru look is only part of his DJ image, but I think he just likes it. And he should. Every reunion has to have a Guru or Beatnik or Hippie, after all.

Amid strains of the Big Bopper's "Rockin' Robin" and Buddy Holly's "It's So Easy to Fall in Love," old flames flickered momentarily. One past boyfriend was overheard to say, "I still wish you were dead." Later, to "In the Still of the Night," he was overheard to relent with, "I lied."

There were winners for Most Gray Hair (nominations were plentiful); Most Distance Traveled (the prize included a hemorrhoid ointment — painfully fa-



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miliar to the nearly-forty crowd); Most Grandchildren (no one stepped forward; wait til the twenty-fifth); and lots more.

Then came the pep rally. Some of us had sewn old letters on new sweaters, borrowed our daughters' bobby socks, and prayed we wouldn't fall during "Two bits, four bits." Overlooking the small alligator on the left chest, Sharon said to one of the girls in an awed tone, "I can't believe you can still wear your cheer-leading sweater!" "Now Sharon, this isn't the original," the girl politely replied. "Oh," said Sharon, eyes wide, "but my letter looks like a fifty cent piece on me these days."

Anchorage summertime weather and the sock hop's ringing in the ears deterred no one from Sunday's picnic at Eagle River, north of Anchorage in the foothills. The drizzle made primordial soup of the gray mud. But the softball game went on. There crouched Norm at third base, a soap commercial's archetype. Voted Best Dressed in '61, he was the epitome of tacky in his rose velour V-neck, white bermudas, and muddy Nikes and knees. We seventeen-year-olds were right, however, about the female half of the Best Dressed team. Kathy wasn't there; she'd have hated it. What I remember most is Kathy's unlimited supply of dyed-to-match Dalton skirts and sweaters.

Armond was ticked off that no prize had been awarded the night before for classmates married the longest. And I remember that twenty years ago people walked softly if Armond was ticked off; he had had that thuggy five o'clock shadow at 10:00 A.M. in the tenth grade. I'd have bet he'd end up one of those "make you an offer you can't refuse" types. Well, I discovered his secret.

The picnic was winding down; people were discussing that evening's or the next day's flight times. I felt weak-kneed and teary. I glanced at Armond. He had the biggest, globbiest tears in his eyes I've ever seen. I think Judy knew his secret twenty years ago when she married him: He's a closet softie.

No surprise to a cliché hound, it's the quiet ones you have to watch. Like Joel, so shy he was voted Quietest in '61. Watching people leave Eagle River and the reunion come to an end, I decided the only way to cope was to drown my sorrows in the Olympia beer in the tubs, a solution I voiced half to myself and half out loud. Overhearing me, Joel reacted quickly. "Well," he said leeringly, "let me give you my telephone number." From shy to lecherous overnight.

And there's Pat R., so busy that he couldn't leave Juneau to join us until the picnic. He had been so quiet and inconspicuous in '61 that he had no activities to list by his name and picture in the year-

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book. Not even sure who he was, the Anchor editors spelled his last name wrong. As he said Sunday, "I was too busy bagging groceries at Piggly Wiggly after school to pile up activities." He was plotting his strategy, I think. No one is spelling Alaska's Senate Majority Leader's name wrong these days.

Joe is our quiet multimillionaire who also had no activities or honors listed in the Anchor. Once in '61 he broke his code of silence when he turned to Pam in chemistry and said, "Stick with me, I'm gonna be rich." I guess Pam didn't hear him.

We held a sort of post-mortem all day Monday and into the evening at the airport, as friends drifted away on various flights. Ironically, though, we felt complacent, because something had been accomplished: we knew why we had come.

What the reunion meant for us is that we were not among strangers, only among old friends whom we just hadn't seen in a long, long time. As my re-friend Julie explained, "Deep down we're still the people we were as kids, and the deep down was right up on the surface that weekend."

As much as from those who came, we learned from those who didn't come, some having better excuses than others: Tom, our '61 class president, Harvard law school graduate, and now a fancy Boston lawyer; Teresa, beautiful and talented, with Tom voted Most Unforgettable in '61, once a Miss Universe finalist, now living somewhere in the Georgia countryside; Mark, having some kind of mid-life crisis in California — or so we heard. A rumor like that wouldn't get started if he'd come. Ron, voted Most Popular in '61, didn't show up to defend his title.

Whatever their excuses, we missed them. We hadn't come back to live in the past or relive better times. We were reacquainting ourselves with the things that had been important to us as seventeen-year-olds — like friendships. It's those things that don't change, like the mountains protecting Anchorage.

We found promises fulfilled in unexpected ways, too. One of the guys in the Who's Who lineup, a good citizen award recipient, student council bigwig, and particularly ambitious, had a promise to fulfill, yes, but somewhere along the line his ambition overtook his other traits. We hear he is in a federal pen somewhere serving forty-five years. Seventeen-year-olds don't know everything.

Whatever we were in 1961 essentially we still are. But no one can gather a graduating class into a room and predict outcomes with a computer. No computer can cope with life's twists and turns. Only humans can do that.

Class of '61, we know where you are. □

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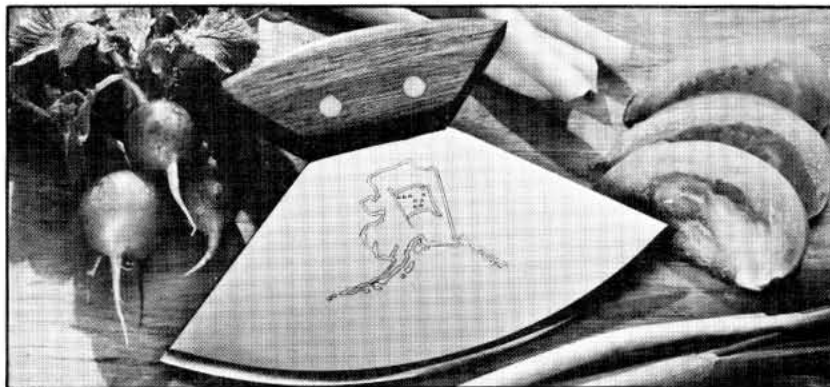
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