



American
Writers
Review

2019

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Bittersweet

Fiction

It's that time again. Like swallows winging their way back to Capistrano, cicadas emerging from the earth, lunar eclipses returning to the night sky, it's high school reunion time.

Predictably, every five or ten years Kate retreats to her basement, digs out her yearbooks and dusts them off with a sleeve as though wiping cobwebs off a mirror. Perched on the edge of her motionless treadmill, she flips through the pages, examining the images and words. So many young girls wearing their hair in flips with long bangs, or permed pixie cuts, or pageboys, others with their hair teased to make it look fuller. The boys with their crew cuts, V-necked sweaters, chunky glasses with dark frames. She recognizes most of her classmates, though every year the memories fade somewhat, like something Xeroxed too many times, the pages blanched, the ink running out.

What was her place in this unwieldy group, a graduating class of nearly six hundred? Who was she back then? Comments written by friends sound so foreign to Kate now: "You're really a sweet kid." "Stay sweet; it's a good quality." "You're really a sweet

girl, stay that way always.” “You’re the sweetest Spanish student.” “You are cute and sweet and funny.” “Stay cute and sweet.” “To one of the cutest, sweetest and funniest girls.” Sweet sweet sweet, by far the most frequently written word in her yearbooks.

The sight of the word scribbled in various handwritings makes her cringe, cursive loops snaking their way across dozens of pages. *Who wants to be remembered as “sweet?” What kind of legacy is that? Did friends of Virginia Woolf or Sylvia Plath or Emily Dickinson describe them as sweet?* Kate doubts it, slamming the yearbooks shut, yet embarrassed that she once cherished that label. But sweet just meant she was desperate to be liked, to be noticed, to be included.

Sweet also meant she was lost in the middle of the pack, not a leader or scholar or athlete or cheerleader or popular or “queen” of anything, yet not ostracized for being overweight or on probation, or for having a bad complexion or poor hygiene or strange clothes. Invisibly inoffensive in the crowd. The list of activities alongside her senior picture is proof: Advanced Girls’ Chorus; Girls’ PepClub; 10th Grade Girls’ Chorus; Class Hockey; Tri-Hi-Y — two and a half lines. Classmates who stood out have four, even five lines, with entries you had to be chosen for, not just those you volunteered for. Kate had been a joiner, not someone picked by others.

Years before, Kate had returned to her small Midwestern town for her tenth high school reunion and immediately regretted it. Same cliques, same rail-thin popular girls-now-women trailed after by a queue of fawning boys-now-men at Green Hills Country Club, the girls whispering secrets to each other, slipping into the bathroom for secret powwows. Time had stood still, frozen everyone in place and then released them for the reunion, changing only slightly the hairstyles, the clothes, adding wedding rings on most people’s fingers. No use in Kate trying to convey that

she was a late bloomer and no longer that fawning, desperate, “sweet” teenager they’d once known, that she’d evolved, moved on. To everyone she was still “sweet” Kate, no matter what she said or did. Hopeless to budge tectonic plates created when their lives were still being formed, back when they were all young and malleable. Impossible to move the chess piece to a different place on the board at this stage of the game.

Shoving the yearbooks back into their slots, Kate sighs and walks upstairs. She has been sucked into the time bubble of her high school days, though, the sleeping giant now awake, and she struggles to snap back to the reality of her current life, one of substance, light years from that speck of time back in high school when she had been branded as sweet. But just that short time spent flipping through her yearbooks made her feel hung-over, sluggish. Her dilemma in reconciling both worlds reminds her of the term cognitive dissonance, the ability to simultaneously hold two opposing ideas in one’s mind. That’s what she’s trying to do, fuse high school Kate with adult Kate, two different people.

She makes some tea in her sunny kitchen and sips it as she stares at the postcard on her blue countertop, the one announcing the upcoming reunion. Every five or ten years she has to make the same decision, whether or not to attend, and this is no exception. No one will notice if she doesn’t go, of course; none of the various groups claim her as one of their own. With each passing year there are fewer long-distance overtures from former friends urging her to make the trip from the East Coast, their voices increasingly faint.

The postcard has two boxes on the back: “will attend” and “will not attend.” It would be easy enough to check “will attend,” to make flight, hotel, and rental car arrangements, throw some clothes into a suitcase and attend Friday and Saturday evening events at local bars (no more country club parties), and the Sunday afternoon picnic at a local park. Easy enough to wear a name tag

and smile and listen to her classmates talk about their children, grandchildren, husbands, careers, lives.

What could it hurt, she wonders? Many in her graduating class have moved on like her, reinvented themselves, evolved into interesting people independent of their yearbook personas. But that's not the point. Finishing her tea, she picks up a pen, slides the postcard towards her, and checks "will not attend." To do anything else would be self-destructive, would amount to rewinding her life, unspooling the years between high school and now. It would mean becoming "sweet Kate" again, if only for a weekend, reviving someone long dead.