



# LONG PLAYERS

School reunions can fill you with dread. Then you hit your late 60s and realise the swagger of youth has been replaced by the sheer joy of still being alive and able to reminisce with those who helped shape you.

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**D**O YOU remember that Tom Hanks film *Big*? Hanks' character's younger self, the pint-sized, 12-year-old Josh Baskin, pops a coin into an antique fortune-teller machine with a wish to become big, just so he can impress a girl.

His wish is granted, but not only does he turn into an adult overnight – descending scrotum, thickening voice box, feet dangling over the bunk bed – he starts forgetting what it was like to have been a boy.

This story is the opposite. This is about a group of men in the late autumn of their lives, reuniting after a half-century to remember what it was like, in part, to have once been young.

“What about the 12As?” Peter says as we greet each other in the dining room. To my fast-adjusting good eye, he's still the same prepossessing figure he once was, notwithstanding the stents in his heart and the eight screws in his right shoulder.

“Do I remember the 12As?” I reply. “We won the competition.”

“We sure did,” he says. “We were undefeated. You were half back.”

I sure was. At 67, I'm suddenly time-travelling to that 12-year-old, freckle-faced boy with a cowlick, cutting down lumbering forwards with ankle-high tackles, pulling off little reverse flick passes, bamboozling – in his own mind's eye – the opposition.





“Will was five-eighth,” Peter continues, breaking my glory-days reverie. “Mark over there, he was inside centre. He was the star, just a brilliant guy with a left-footed sidestep... and I was outside centre.” (Mark wasn’t only inside centre; he was my best friend and, two decades later, my groomsman.)

“How good were we?” I say. “And you, Pete, you were amazing. What do you remember?”

“I remember getting that intercept near the halfway mark and running around the fullback and scoring.”

“That’s right... you won the game for us.”

“And look,” he says, surveying the room. “The whole team is practically here. There’s Thorpie over there, he was on the right wing.”

“And Marty,” I say, “fearless under the high ball...”

EXCEPT, OF course, the whole team is not here – not in the wider, more literal sense of “whole” or “here”. We were 180 boys in that leaving year of 1973, and there are 55 of us gathered today. Twenty have sent apologies because they’re travelling and/or living overseas, and 15 are dead, probably not a bad statistic considering

life’s sometimes awful economy, but still sobering. Richard, who lived around the corner from me in primary school, and later wore pink suits and smoked Sobranie cigarettes: dead by suicide. (He sent a Christmas card the year before his death with a quote from Lou Reed’s 1974 Sydney press conference, saying, “Taking drugs is better than playing Monopoly.”) David, dux of our year: killed by a mystery virus; he would almost certainly have become an anthropologist of international renown. Colin, gentle, beautiful Colin, who bounced terrifyingly fast and accurate cricket balls at our heads: felled by a massive heart attack. And Simon, barely a faint memory in my mind’s eye: perished in a light aeroplane crash shortly after takeoff.

All manner of deaths: reckless, random, sudden, painful, surrendering, graceful and, depending on your view of these things, well before time.

Then there are those who would never have come to an event like this. And I’m thinking now of the guy I picked up hitchhiking several years ago in Byron Bay. He was wearing saffron robes and carrying a begging bowl, and introduced himself as a swami.

“How long have you been living like this?” I asked.

“Quite some time,” he answered.

After a few glances in his direction, I recognised him.

“You’re Anthony Smith\*,” I exclaimed. “We were in the same year at school.”

He lifted out of his seat in shock.

“Who are you?”

“I’m David Leser.”

“Jesus Christ. What are you doing here?”

“I live around here.”

Anthony Smith had not wanted to be found.

I WENT to an all-boys school in Sydney, one with a strong streak of egalitarianism. We came from all walks of life, not just privileged or moneyed, and not just white Anglo-Saxon. Even though many of us would go on to become doctors, dentists, lawyers and architects, others would plough different fields: oceanography, veterinary science, public health, security, sales, music, journalism, lumberjacking, modelling, farming, marketing, crop dusting, the police service.

Some of us came from happy homes, others deeply unhappy ones. Some were early starters, others late bloomers. Some knew from a young age what they wanted to do in life. Others had no idea. Some would find their sweethearts early and remain with them up until this very day; others would remarry once, twice, even three times, or they would stick resolutely to singlehood, waiting until the right person walked through that door.

My memories of high school have always been mixed. I was often in trouble with my teachers, constantly placed on after-school detention, and more than a few times caned by a kindly headmaster who apologised while caning me.

What saved me were my friendships, all the boys who helped form the core of who I was and – without my knowing it – who I was going to become. All the boys who tested me, teased me, made me laugh until I cried, brought out the worst and best in me. These boys were my reference point, my benchmark.

Yet in the lead-up to this reunion, I had no strong desire to attend, mainly because two previous ones had felt fake, or too full of swagger, or too much like speed dating.

A few weeks before this year’s event, however, an acquaintance had told me over lunch that he’d just been to his own half-century gathering and been overjoyed by the experience.

“Why?” I asked him.

“Because there was no competitiveness between anyone,” he replied. “In previous years everyone was



Above: The mighty, undefeated 12As in 1968. The author is in the back row, centre (note the cowlick).

trying to prove they were either a success or not a failure. This time, no one had anything to prove. There was just love in the room.”

SO HERE I am. As I wade into a sea of bald heads and grey hair, I begin to feel like I’m in a hall of mirrors, walking through a series of arcades filled with faces both ancient and youthful.

Here’s Darryl telling me now that he had his first kiss at my 13th birthday party. And there’s Jonny, still handsome and passionate after all these years; the same Jonny I went to the Sydney Stadium with in 1968 to see the Monkees. (We both screamed!) Jonny, who taught me how to play *Dear Prudence* on guitar and who – when we were 14 – brought that beautiful girl to the garage party, the one I kissed on the dance floor and married 18 years later.

And here’s Toby, renowned rock journalist, telling me how his life changed in that San Francisco bookstore 50 years ago when he picked up an anthology of *Rolling Stone* album reviews. “There was one by [American music critic] Lester Bangs on MC5’s *Kick Out the Jams* album,” he says. “That was the light-bulb moment. That’s when I knew what I wanted to do.” Toby, a modern medical miracle after his heart transplant a few years ago, and Nigel – is that Nigel with the eye patch?

– and Ian, that powerhouse of yesteryear, sitting with a walking stick. And don’t tell me that’s Mike L. His European-born father gave me my first glass of slivovitz when I was 15, and his wonderful mother often felt like a second mother to me.

And is that Mike M walking in my direction? Seriously, he looks like he did in 1973. And Mike H? That can’t

be. Yes it is. Our fathers were lifelong friends and colleagues.

Here we all are, old men grinning from ear to ear, reintroducing ourselves, sometimes twice. Never mind that I have no idea who many of the other people are.

What seems true and real is that we are saying hello and goodbye to each other, possibly for the last time.

“Do you remember me?” says Nick.

“No,” I reply.

“Do you have dementia?” he asks.

“I don’t think so,” I say, but now I’m not so sure. (I’m not even sure he said his name was Nick.) What I am sure about, though, is that since that surreal and celebratory afternoon, I’ve thought a lot about the gardens we abandon as we grow older, and all the ways we might flourish or vanish in this life.

We boys started off as innocents and remained together for six foundational years. To paraphrase American songwriter Lyle Lovett, it didn’t matter now whether we thought we had anything in common, because we did. We had our lives... and it’s taken me a lifetime to appreciate that. ■

\*Name has been changed.