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610 words

## DOING TIME AT UNI HI

by

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I think I may have enjoyed the first years of school, but by the sixth grade the handwriting was already on the wall. Junior high was purgatory, and high school was a living hell, just as bad as I feared it would be.

I went to University High in West Los Angeles. Uni Hi was a sprawling campus with a large enrollment. Fortunately, I don't remember much about it. Good grades were no problem, but I was painfully shy and young-looking, and felt as dorky and out of it as a schoolmarm in a drunk tank.

My mother insisted I wear my hair parted straight down the middle, skinned back, and braided so tightly my eyes took on a slight Asian slant--a style which did absolutely nothing for my round face except totally expose it. I didn't have to wear braces, a minor miracle given my luck, but the God I was fast losing faith in made up for it by assuring multiple trips to a dentist with terrible breath for an endless series of fillings. My grandmother made all my clothes, and while her craftsmanship was impeccable, her ideas of a dress code matched my mother's--anything that made me look ten pounds heavier and five years younger.

Until my senior year, the only store-bought clothes I had for school were regulation gym shorts and blouse required for Phys. Ed., the only class I truly hated. Never athletic, I had the ignominious distinction of always being chosen last for team sports. Baseball was the worst: I spent hours out in left field in my natty black shorts and white shirt, praying no balls would come my way.

And out in left field I remained, all through high school, a loner with a quirky sense of humor and a penchant for reasoning and reflection quite at odds with the rest of my classmates. I dreaded the days when my one girlfriend was absent. Lunch hours spent lurking

in the hallways, sure I was the only one of several thousand kids who had no one to eat with, left scars that still ache occasionally when the wind is from the past.

At sixteen, I took an after-school job as a stock clerk at Desmond's, an upscale men and women's clothing store in Westwood. This turned out to be my salvation, eventually, as many college students shopped there, and by the time I was a senior I was going out with a philosophy major from UCLA.

From this lofty position I was able to largely ignore the social aspects of my senior year in high school. Graduation was my only goal, release from an interminable prison sentence based solely on my youth. I didn't buy a class ring or class sweater, didn't go to the junior-senior football game or buy a yearbook, didn't even go to the prom. My boyfriend took me to hear Dave Brubeck at Zardi's in Hollywood instead.

A few years ago, however, I made contact with my old Uni Hi girlfriend, and the first time she visited me she brought her yearbooks. I dreaded seeing my geeky, childishly chubby, unattractive face staring back at me from the page. But I was astonished to find I looked no different from any of the other girls in those little rectangular photos. Neither fat nor thin, neither unattractive nor beautiful, I was just an ordinary, nice looking teenager.

With the clarity of hindsight I see I was incarcerated not by the school system but by my own mind. Nothing in the world, however, could have convinced my seventeen-year-old self of that.