

HERS/HIS

MEETING OLD FRIENDS



CLARE WOOD

They've helped me discover the me I was, and still am

I'd like to make it clear that I'm not one of those people who look back on their high school and college years as the heyday of existence. If I think about my teenage years at all (which I try not to do), I'm more likely to remember their awkwardness and discomfort than their glory. I'd as soon have thought of looking up friends from that time as I would of seeking out old photographs of me taken the year I weighed 143 pounds. So it amazes me that I've run into three old friends in the last year or so, women I hadn't seen for at least a dozen years, and found each meeting warm and enriching.

Linda and I first met at summer camp when we were ten, and although she was an agile athlete, while I could as easily hit a baseball as I could fly to the moon on my own power, we somehow became friends. We played vaguely erotic games with our Barbie and Ken dolls, and sneaked into her mother's room to sit on the most glamorous piece of furniture I'd ever seen: a chaise lounge covered in pink silk shantung. I hadn't seen her for over fifteen years when we met by chance in a restaurant last winter.

The enormous pleasure I felt at seeing her—and her obviously reciprocal feeling—surprised me, as did the pride we both took in acknowledging our old connection and

introducing each other to our dinner companions. But the biggest surprise came at her next words: "You look as pretty as ever," she said. And I wondered to myself, pretty? Had Linda thought I was pretty? Even when I was ten and I despaired of my waist's ever appearing on my body? Is it possible I wasn't quite the ugly duckling I thought I was?

Gail and I giggled our way through high school together. We were a closed corporation, with such highly personalized frames of reference that we became unintelligible to others and a complete mystery to both our families. We rediscovered each other at a large party recently, and wound up spending the evening together.

The conversation was 90-percent reminiscence. Remember when we made up our own language? Remember when we tried out for cheerleaders? I was struck by how warm and loving Gail's memories were, and by her unexpected confession: She felt bad that when I was living alone after college, she had lorded over me the fact that she was married and had a baby. "But," I blurted out, surprised, "I never wanted your life." It was true. I had been lonely and uncertain then, but I never wanted Gail's life. Her confession helped me re-realize that I'd made the right choice when I'd allowed myself to grope around on my own.

As teenagers, Carol and I agonized over unrequited crushes and sympathized with each other over our parents' shortcomings. Together, we planned our glorious lives to come as wives, mothers and world-famous celebrities. We met last summer in a fish store.

It was meeting Carol that tied all three experiences together for me in such a happy package. When our eyes met again over a lobster tank last August, I found myself looking not at some dimly recalled childhood specter, but at a woman who was my friend that very minute, someone who had the immediate place in my life that a flood of recollection gave her the right to.

In her eyes I saw a reflection that made me appear renewedly familiar to myself. The first thing she said to me was, "You're still wearing your hair in bangs, like Audrey Hepburn. You always loved her." And so I had, although I'd completely forgotten about that long-ago crush until Carol reminded me. My old friend remembered facts about me I'd completely shed. It was as if she'd been holding parts of me in trust.

We recalled our adolescence together and traded news about our present lives. I felt a renewed awareness of where I was now. These two points of reference gave me a sense of my life as it turned on its axis, and hinted at how it might continue to spiral in the future. I saw myself as I was and as I am now, all blended together in a complete and ongoing personality.

These are three nice women, and that's good to know. It's good to know that the things I valued in them were worth valuing. For if they are such worthwhile people, and if I've made positive contributions in their lives—as the warmth of their memories at-tests that I have—then I couldn't have been as much of a jerk as I've always feared I was.

My old friends returned my past to me in a more appealing light. They gave me the chance to reevaluate the younger me, from whom I'd been so eager to distance myself all these years. I could finally see her through the eyes of people who'd been back there with me, but who recalled the old me with more objectivity than I did, and who, moreover, valued her.

We've all changed, of course. It would be a terrible thing if we'd all been frozen sometime back there in the sixties. But Carol still has the good humor and good sense she had when she was seventeen, and Gail is still wistful, with a fine, quirky sense of the absurd, and Linda is as sturdy and straightforward as ever. And to them, I'm still me: Underneath the semi-polished professional woman, the funny, romantic, clumsy old Bette-Jane is in there still. My old friends see her there, that slightly comic character, and they like her. Now I like her, too.

by Bette-Jane Raphael