

Revenge of the nerds

Reunited...and it feels so good

Thomas Wolfe was wrong. You CAN go home again.

That being said, I was still apprehensive about returning to New Jersey for my 20th high school reunion. Like Wolfe's hero, I, too, had written a novel poking fun at my hometown, so I was a little worried that someone would throw a drink in my face.

Instead, I encountered the inevitable question of "Who's who?" in my high school sex farce. I tried to explain that, while the book is a loopy love letter to my nutty friends, the characters are composites. "It's like creating



The Gospel According to Marc
by Marc Acito

Frankenstein's monster," I'd say. "You stitch them together out of spare body parts."

"Sure," my friends replied. "But, who's who?"

Now, there's a saying in Italian: "Si non e vero, e ben-trovato," which translates roughly as "If it ain't true, it should be." So permit me a little artistic license while I create

some more composite characters to give you the flavor of my homecoming.

First, there was Bart, one of the "slow" kids—y'know, the kind who came to school on the short bus. Bart not only had to endure being called "Farty Barty" but never lived down stepping on the class gerbil in the third grade.

When I think of Bart, I remember the torment he endured—the taunts and the physical abuse at the hands of boys who, predictably,

excelled at sports. And while I'm relieved not to have that on my conscience, I don't recall being especially nice to him. Kids like Bart were treated as untouchables, as if mental disabilities were contagious.

So, imagine my surprise when Bart showed up at one of my readings, greeting me like an old friend and fondly recalling our high school days. I was amazed to discover he holds down a blue-collar job and is happily married.

I was floored not only by his success in life (I'm told he still reads on a third-grade level) but also because of his sheer guilelessness. Perhaps I was nicer to him than I remember. Or maybe he's just nicer than I deserve.

By way of contrast, consider Popular Pete. A star athlete, Popular Pete has thickened so much over the years he looks like he's been inflated by an air hose. But, while time may

not have been especially kind to his looks, 20 years of life's ups and downs have humbled his character attractively. When I tell Pete that I ran into Bart, he reddens as his friends giddily relate a recent encounter Pete had with the kid he used to torment. Pete was just coming out of KFC with a bucket of chicken when he found himself face to face with Farty Barty.

"Pete! Popular Pete!" Bart cried, obviously delighted to see him. Then he glanced down at Pete's potbelly and said: "Wow! You're so fat!"

With the cause of his corpulence in his arms, Pete was in no position to protest.

Other intriguing reunion moments abounded, from the former pothead who admitted he remembered nothing of his "school daze" to the former cheerleader who told me how insecure she felt as a teen-ager despite her exalted place in the social pyramid. Then, to top it all off,

there was the guy who knocked back a few drinks, then announced to his old buddies that he was gay.

I now consider him a queer acquaintance.


The night took a decidedly surreal turn as a very drunk former athlete grabbed a bartender and was sent to his room by security. Unfortunately, he wasn't staying at the hotel, and when they found him wandering the halls banging his head on doors, he was escorted out by the police.

If my high school reunion were a scene in a movie (and who knows, it might be someday), for reasons of dramatic unity I would combine the arrested athlete with Popular Pete. The scene would undoubtedly end with the class of '84 applauding the sight of a bully getting his comeuppance.

But, life is more complicated than that.

The fact is, one of the most gratifying aspects of celebrating 20 years out in the world is that all of us—geeks, freaks and Popular Petes—have learned we can withstand life's ups and downs. As someone who, just four years ago, was 60 pounds overweight and working at a job I hated so much I wanted to chew off my arm, I know how rapidly one's fortunes can change. The guy who left the reunion in handcuffs could be endowing the school with a new building by the next one.

After all, if things can work out for a Farty Barty, then why not a Popular Pete?

And that, my friends, is The Gospel According to Marc. 

MARC ACITO's novel, *How I Paid for College*, is available everywhere. Write him at marc@marcacito.com.



"Popular" Pete
Most likely to look back with guilt and shame



"Farty" Barty
Most likely to induce guilt and shame



Marc "Shakespeare"
Most likely to dramatize all this guilt and shame



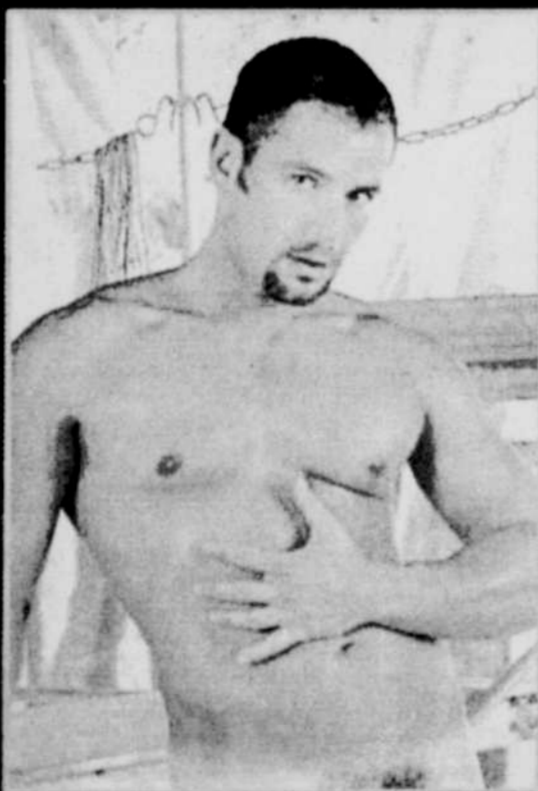
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