LIGHTHOUSE
WRITERS WORKSHOP

The essay about nothing (but, really, about everything)

Hello! Below is the reading material for our workshop. Don't worry about getting through it all! We'll focus on two of these pieces together, and briefly touch on a couple of others. If you have time to read only one,
please read Recording.

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Recording by Sallie Tisdale

For *The Threepenny Review* | Fall 2002 | Reprinted for the collection *Violation* (2016)

I'M NOT REALLY EAVESDROPPING ON THE CONVERSATION in the backseat. I can't help it.

"I think the mistake I made with David," says Kristen, her eyes hidden underneath a baseball cap, "was to let him have internet relationships while we were dating. As long as he didn't become emotionally involved."

Cody, her ostensible boyfriend, soft of face and with a blond ponytail as long as Kristen's own, nods sagely. I watch them in the mirror, my eyes darting back and forth between the highway and their reflected faces.

"I've made lots of mistakes in relationships," Cody says.

"That's why I've had so many."

"You haven't had so many," says Alison, Kristen's best friend, squeezed next to her in the backseat.

"Yes he has," argues Kristen. "We've both dated lots of other people and we've dated each other three times. This is the third time we've been together."

We are driving up to the mountain to go snowshoeing, into a winter world seventy miles from the city and valley, where it rarely snows. Three cars, three adult drivers, twelve students on a midweek field trip, and it was my idea. This is Project Week, with days full of field trips, and I am enamored of snowshoeing and wanted to get the kids outside. Though they are all from my daughter's small school, I have never met these particular students before.

They are polite—courteous in a way that seems only reasonable when dealing with a strange adult but it is obvious from the first few minutes that they are also completely uninterested in me.

My earnest attempts at conversation are gently deflected, almost ignored, and quickly I lapse into silence and let them speak. Which they do, without cease.

Kristen regales Cody with tales about David. "I can't stand this girl Stephie who David says is his best friend. She stayed at his house one weekend."

"Were they together?" asked Alison. This is the code word, simple and potent. You are together, or you are apart.

"Nooooo,"' says Kristen, thoughtfully. "But she's too old for him."

A while later, Alison is complaining about her own boyfriend, who hasn't come on the trip and, it seems, has little time for her.

Alison, you know you have to get him to a therapist," Kristen says forcefully. "He has to learn how to talk to you."

They are thirteen years old.

IF THIS WERE television, Cody would be the Cute Guy (subset, Goofy Cute Guy). Kristen slender and blonde, in a faceless, cook-ie-cutter way—would be the Cute Girl. Alison is the Cute Girl's Fat Girlfriend, saved from purgatory by this single thread. And next to me in the front seat is Ryan, the tragic character—the Fat Boy No One Likes. He alternately plays with a Game Boy in brief bouts of concentration, and eats. Now and then he laughs at the conversation he is carefully following, trying to turn his bulky body around in the seat and take part. He is treated with much the same courteous lack of interest with which they treat me.

I find myself thinking of my passengers this way, in capital letters outlining roles, within a few minutes. Their conversation is a script, full of catch words and cheap ideas, the irony entirely unconscious. Where did they learn to talk this way? They are saturated with image, imitating not only behavior but responses well— living through the imagined conversations of imagined selves. This is how people talk on television, in the movies is, this is what the magazines say. Is it that simple—that blunt? Do they inhabit these iconic roles because they have grown so familiar with the formula-or do I see them as icons because I am?

Kristen is still talking about David. "If I wasn't dating you, I'd still be dating him," she says to Cody. "But he wanted to know how old you had to be to get married and I said, 'Yeah, right."

"That's why I broke up with Billy," agrees Alison. "He said he wanted to be together forever."

Ryan is eating peanuts with a steady hand. Quietly, so that only I can hear, he says, "I've never had a girlfriend, so I wouldn't know."

Cody swears and then looks up suddenly and catches my eyes in the mirror and asks innocently, "Is that word allowed?"

"I don't care," I say, looking back at him.

"How about kissing?" he asks.

"A little kissing is okay," I say. But they don't kiss. Perhaps it is still more idea than fact.
A single untutored word blends in with a hundred rehearsed ones; mediation is the norm. This is the normality of adolescence: a wild anarchy of selves. Young people try on points of view and habits of speech like clothes, leaving the discards in a pile behind them. Sometimes there seems to be little but imitation and disguise at this age; at times, the self of each adolescent is little more than a successive mimicry. Chameleons.

I wasn't so different. I dressed the way people I admired dressed, talked like them, parroted their ideas. Young people always have—the culture of youth is obsession with the culture.
And still I think it's different now. These teens live in a world of mirrors, in nothing but mirrors, endlessly reflecting themselves.

Even as they try to live the lives played out before them, the lives they do live are recorded constantly; they live recorded lives. They are always on stage. Every event l attend is a sea of camcorders. Dances, soccer games, dates, picnics, slumber parties—all are Photographed and videotaped, spliced and edited, and then copied and mailed off for distant viewing. Every classroom has computers; every break involves a screen. They can add special effects now, and music, subtitles, narration; their lives are shot across a world wide web in living pixel color. Nothing is more real than what we see made up.

They start talking about celebrities, a favorite topic. When life is an artifact, a recorded event, recorded lives are the most real, "I'm related to that general guy, what's it, Patton, like through my great-grandmother or something," Alison says, and Cody says that he too is related to Somebody Famous and Kristen notes that she is also distantly related to Somebody Famous and adds that even Edmund, crazy Edmund who is the school scapegoat, is supposedly related to Britney Spears.

Ryan, who is eating potato chips now, says to himself in the front seat, "I'm not related to anybody."

“Maybe you'll be famous someday yourself," I tell him, with a note of maternal encouragement that horrifies me as soon as I hear myself speak. "Then everyone in your family can claim to be related to you."

And already I'm wondering why I think it should cheer him up to imagine that he'll have to be famous before his family would be glad to be related to him. But he nods thoughtfully, chewing.

WE REACH THE ski shop. The kids in my car are the youngest, the "seven by eights," in the lingo of this small school, which houses kindergarteners through high school seniors. The middle-schoolers, acutely conscious of each nuance of the high school students, are themselves ignored by their models.

We fill the shop in the massive, floor-to-ceiling way only teenagers can achieve. Everyone gets snow shoes and most get boots, and I count how many of them are wearing jeans after being carefully instructed not to wear jeans, and then we all line up in the parking lot for a quick how-to-put-snowshoes-on lesson and then pile back in the cars and keep heading up. Soon the road is lined with tall conifers sprinkled with snowy confection and with each curve the deep tree-carpeted valleys appear further below, sprinkled white. Smoky fog swirls across the road, shot with sunlight.

"Wow," the kids say, and seem genuinely surprised.

"It's beautiful!" Kristen breathes, eyes wide open for the first time all day, and she pushes the baseball cap back on her head.

None of them are regular skiers, none have been snowshoeing before. Ryan has lived here most of his life but he's never been to the mountain at all. For a moment, the screen of the world fills their sight, a Panavision view as breathtaking as every SUV commercial they've ever seen, as pretty as any backdrop in their video games.

"Don't go in the caves," the man at the ski shop told everyone, referring to the early spring caverns opening in the deep drifts. I look up from the crate of snowshoes in the parking lot and count the feet sticking out of the caves and march over to be a grown-up. Slowly they assemble, complaining good-naturedly, suddenly remembering everything they were supposed to bring but forgot at home—sunglasses, lunch, gloves. I pass out extras of this and that, to the Handsome Guy, his Petite Girlfriend, the Tall Girl, the Skinny Guy With Glasses, the New Girl—I can't stop; I look around and each has a place, a perfect fit. Conversation surrounds me, a blend of rhetorical sophistication and the blunt concerns of teen-agers—sex, power, yearning—a wave vibrating across a web of relationship. The politics of relationship they recite to each other sounds as familiar as nursery rhymes.

We march off, a ragged group spread across a plain of deep snow as smooth and unbroken as the blue sky. They form a body, organic and shifting in the Brownian motion of youth—busily swimming close and then far away, aggregating and dissolving, speeding up, spinning in place. They make a lot of noise, and spread farther and farther apart. Several boys compete to see who can mess up the most snow, who can run the fastest before he falls down, who can come most perilously close to the bank of the river before I yell at him. Two girls march stalwartly ahead, as though they can march forever. They stay side by side, steadily walking in a straight line toward a distant stand of trees across a featureless sheet of soft powder.

I've forgotten my camera and for a minute feel guilty—I, the adult, will fail to record this event. But suddenly out of the hundred-dollar backpacks come the cameras. Light flashes across the snow, but they aren't taking pictures of the snow. They are taking pictures of each other, singly and in groups, and of themselves, the camera held shakily at arm's length. All, that is, except Ryan. He walks wearily along in a group of one—now trailing behind, now slogging ahead, now slipping sideways— and he takes pictures of the empty snow, the unpeopled trees.

I have a lot of photographs of myself as a baby—sleepy or wide-eyed in the arms of my smiling mother, and with Aunt Lois and Aunt Lucille and Aunt Beryl and Aunt Ruth and Grandma and even a few with my father, who always looks like he's about to yell, "Get this baby off of me." And I have quite a few color slides from childhood—summer vacations, shivering at the beach,

standing in anonymous parking lots, nervously watching the Christmas tree. I have only a few photographs of me in adolescence, all taken at our summer cabin—several distinct pictures of me in a swimsuit with a diving mask on, or half-buried in sand.

All these pictures were taken by my parents, and so I have no pictures of the life I lived away from home. No photographs from five years of Girl Scout camp. No photographs, bar the posed class pictures, from ten years of public school. Nothing of friends, long summer days, field trips, teachers, the county fair, my first job. No photographs from college though I remember a few being taken, like distant clicks of someone else's idea while I disappeared into the moment before me.

There are years of my life from which I have no images at all outside my own mind.

I have many pictures of myself as a young mother, first holding a baby and then suddenly surrounded by three children. I have a lot of pictures of the kids when they were small, and I still take their picture whenever I think about it-which isn't very often. We made a videotape once, when my daughter was three and my sons in grubby late childhood. We borrowed a relative's camera, a heavy and uncertain piece of equipment, and I interviewed them—what did they want to be when they grew up, could they sing us a song? I loved that brief slice of their moving, laughing little selves. We watched it at Christmastime, until my middle son recorded over it when he wanted a copy of *Friday the 13th.*

WE HIKE TOWARD the place where the river comes in against the cliff. The skies have changed from blue to gray and suddenly a squall lets loose and we are enveloped in thick big flakes blowing sideways in a wind. The girl in the lead, a distant speck, breaks through the snow, sinking up to her thigh and dangling briefly over the freezing water hidden beneath the snow. The snow is already covering our tracks, and everyone looks the same dark lines wavering against the shadowless white. The kids in jeans are complaining of the cold. We quickly get them turned around to head into the shelter of the trees, and they are without concern. They are immortal; this is only snow.

Back we go, hill by hill, and the sky suddenly clears again to blue and yellow light. We eat lunch in a hollow of small evergreens, each with its hat of snow. It is again a lovely day, lovely and fresh, white and soft and clean. Ryan stands apart, slowly rolling a giant snowball with his feet. Kristen and Cody and Allison are in a dell, out of sight- -far from the danger of eight potentially contemptuous high school students.

After lunch, we slowly trudge back to the parking lot.

When the obligatory mess of snowshoes and gloves is finally cleaned up and mostly sorted out, and we've made the obligatory stop at Dairy Queen for french fries and shakes, we head home. The kids begin to roughhouse in the back seat. Kristen punches Cody and he shouts, "Ouch, I'm going to need that when I turn eighteen!" and everyone guffaws wildly, and for a few minutes, they're really thirteen years old. Cody chortles and shouts over and over until tell him to stop, and he stops all at once, his eye a bit shocked by all the random firings of his own head and skin.

Kristen says to Alison, "You have to stand up to Billy"

“Stand up to him?" says Alison, "He’s twice as big as l am.”

She is a big girl, and at first I wonder if this is her way of pretending that's not true.

Then I wonder what she's afraid of—is this more imagined life, this anxiety about a young man's rage? Is it a little docudrama, a little bit of primetime? Perhaps they are maturing toward the furthest extremes of each type they inhabit—to the edges of the continuum where there is the least overlap and thus the most coherently defined shape. Perhaps our screens are filled with these few almost mythically charged roles because so many people fit them- because there are finally so few ways for us to meet each other, so few types of people we can be. When will the roles solidify?

At what point is it impossible to take the mask off again?

Divorced, divorced, divorced: every child in my car comes from divorce. I ask them leading questions; they are tired now and more willing to let me ask. Kristen says she thinks her parents are thirty and thirty-two-which means they were young parents indeed. But maybe she has no idea what thirty years old really looks like, certainly, if she gauges life by television and film, she can't know. All the people on television look younger than they are supposed to be. It occurs to me that it is not only Felicity and Ally McBeal who have given her the lines she should say, told her how to react to life's big moments. Perhaps she has been listening to Mom and Dad. Middle-aged divorced parents, dating. Perhaps she listens as they get ready, worried and anticipating, and listens when they come home and unwind. Perhaps she has spent long hours watching her mother dress and take care with her face and hair, wondering aloud what to expect,

whispering in her daughter's ear what to beware of and what to dread. My generation, so determined never to grow up, has turned parenting upside-down.

I never once thought of my parents as my friends, or as anyone I would want for a friend. They couldn't enter the world in which my friends lived. This, too, has transformed into *The Partridge Family, The Brady Bunch*—and a long parade of family sit-coms. Goofy Dad and Exasperated Mom, their struggles played out in the living room. The intimacy of my mother's life was not only separate from mine in a crucial way, it was of no import to me. I took her for granted, which is a different thing altogether from taking her for a friend.

I wonder if my passengers can take anything for granted. They live on shifting sands. Alison tells Cody about another e-mail boyfriend, and he wants clarification of a point: "Is that before or after you fucked each other blue on the web?" he asks.

Ryan is eating his third Odwalla meal bar since leaving Dairy
Queen.

LATER THEY DISCUSS ways of harassing David. I have finally figured out that Kristen never actually met David, but conducted the romance entirely by telephone and e-mail. "My father liked him because he was so far away. 'I like this guy David, he told me. I said, 'Why?' And he said, 'Because I don't have to see him.' But David used to call me at five a.m., I mean really at five a.m., and say, 'Are we still together or not?' and I was trying to sleep and that really pissed my father off."

The girls consider sending David envelopes full of grass clippings, toenails, or dirt, and then discuss whether they could insert themselves in a picture of Everclear and tell David they were hanging out with the group.

"I need a digital camera so I don't have to pay for film and processing and all that," says Alison. "Well, you need a computer," I say helpfully, but Alison looks at me in the mirror and says, "I have a computer. I also have a scanner and a printer and Photoshop and a CD burner."

Of course. I recently attended a wedding of a couple in their mid-twenties. The old-fashioned, expensively engraved invitation included a traditional reply card, a tiny return envelope, and a CD of their favorite love songs with their photo on the label. This startled me. It seemed so—it is so hard to explain why or how, but this slice of their courtship was at once too private and too

casual. I felt I've been invited into a place that belonged to no one else, by mass mailing. I am getting a bit older, and perhaps that's all that going on here. Alison's pronouncement startled me—not the laundry list of expensive toys, but the withering suggestion of technical prowess. These are people of experience, masters of their world. And they are not illiterate, exactly: even fucking on the internet is a matter of writing down the words. She knows how to do this—how to invent, how to manipulate. I'm just not sure if she knows anything else.

A group of affluent parents in a town on the outskirts of the city have banded together to start a private school for their children—a school without computers of any kind. There is plenty of time for that when they are older, they explained to a reporter. Now is the time for fairy tales, art, music, and books. The parents all work at Intel.

When everything is recorded, when we can watch everything as soon as it happens, then every possibility lies before us. Every kind of life is visible, even as real life disappears behind the stage. We describe ourselves most easily as like someone else, our experiences like a story, a movie, a show. We are offered so many things to be like now; life slides by, surface by shiny surface. Teenagers may be doing nothing more than they have always done, but the world in which they do it is not the world it was.

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Author's note: At first glance, any essay about how technology is changing experience—especially one from the point of view of one generation watching another—is stale by the time it is finished. But this essay feels more relevant to me as the years pass. My grandchildren are now the age of the young people in this essay, and the same conversations occur. The same divisions in what we value and fear exist between us. I imagine they have always, in their way, existed between generations, and always will, but the risks of what we can lose, the investment in what is already lost—this feels enormous to me at times. And at the same time, I am one with these young people, longing for and inventing and demanding my future.

Living in New York's Unloved Neighborhood

A nameless section of Manhattan resembles the nineteen- seventies city that's been romanticized in the movies. But do we really want to live in "Taxi Driver"?

By Rivka Galchen for *The New Yorker* | Feb. 8, 2021

For ten years, I have lived in a neighborhood dened by the Port Authority Bus Station to the north, Penn Station to the south, the Lincoln Tunnel to the west, and, to the east, a thirty-one-foot stainless-steel sculpture of a needle threaded through a fourteen-foot button. Though there are many, many people here, the neighborhood is not a people place. It is better suited to the picking up and dropping off of large pallets. Within this homey quadrilateral are a methadone clinic, a parole office, liquor shops with cashiers behind thick plastic screens, a fancy Japanese clothing store, plenty of pawnshops, the Times Building, drumming studios, seven subway lines, and at least four places to get your sewing machine repaired. A young runaway, emerging from one of the many transit hubs, might nd herself—after maybe buying a coffee-cart doughnut and being shouted at for hesitating at a crosswalk, and being nearly hit by a bus—sheepishly deciding to give it one more go back home. There is, though, a lot of office space here. To walk north on Eighth Avenue in order to get to the subway entrance on Fortieth Street is to know what it is to be a migrating lemming.

This is where I have raised my daughter, from birth to her current age of seven. I moved here for pragmatic reasons. I do wonder at times what it means that when my daughter sees someone passed out on the sidewalk, or walking erratically and maybe threatening people with a 7-Eleven Big Gulp cup, she neither panics nor thinks to ask if that person needs help—she just holds my hand a smidge tighter and keeps walking. There aren't a lot of young children in this neighborhood. She seems at ease with her exceptional state, and will one day be confused, I suspect, to live somewhere with many people her same-ish size.

I realize that it sounds like I'm bragging about my neighborhood. I am never sure where my bragging and my complaining meet up for coffee to agree about their views on the world. Arguably, these blocks resemble the nineteen-seventies New York romanticized in lm and on TV. But do we really want ourselves or anyone we love to live in "Taxi Driver"? Until recently, there were dusty and tattered pennant banners announcing the "Grand Opening" of the Big Apple Meat Market on Ninth Avenue, a market that had been open for at least twenty years. I used to see very good-looking, well-dressed people getting professional photos taken there. Also sometimes at an

abandoned lot nearby. The photographers have had to location-scout again, however, as the market was torn down not long ago and replaced with a tall and as yet unoccupied glass building. The community complained about the loss of the Big Apple market, where you could buy a gallon of mayonnaise and cheap hot food, so a new, affordable home has been found for the store, a couple of blocks south, though there are no banners or “Grand Opening” sign. I am what I am: I have grown into an adult who likes pumpernickel bread and red cabbage, but there were years when my partner’s young sons longed for Eggo waffles and bacon and Campbell’s chicken soup, and Big Apple was there for us.

I was born, somewhat randomly, in Toronto, and between the rst and twelfth grades I lived in Norman, Oklahoma, and after that I moved East. I have lived in New York since 1998. I’ve long held the belief that being a fan or a cheerleader of New York is ethically and aesthetically dubious. Like the Yankees and, for that matter, the Mets, New York needs no more fans. This place is dense with wealth, with cultural capital, with anecdote; it is the setting for too many movies, books, and television shows. To be a vocal fan of New York is like hanging out with the popular kids. Norman, Oklahoma, where so many people I love and admire live— now there’s a place that could use a fan club. Loving New York, which I do, has often made me feel morally compromised, even alien to myself. Moving to the neighborhood, for pragmatic reasons, solved that emotional tangle for me. Almost no one likes this neighborhood or wants to live here. It would be O.K. to cheer for it, if I could learn how to.

At first, we kept our windows open for fresh air, but soon we noticed a pervasive black soot. It turned up on our dishware, our shelving. It was unimpressed with Palmolive and a scratch-free sponge. Was this substance, which was likely lining our alveoli, the kind of character-producing grit for which people move to the city? I have almost never chosen the neighborhood I lived in— it was always determined by external factors, often institutional housing. So I’m accustomed to a time of getting to know a neighborhood, of trying to convince oneself of its unelected virtues.

I went on walks, amid the soot. Rex Stout’s Nero Wolfe, an obese detective who never leaves his apartment and raises orchids, lives on Thirty-fth Street, according to a plaque there. Bob’s Park is nearby. Bob, I learned, had a pet boa constrictor, wore Scottish kilts and an Indian headdress, and was an adopted member of the Blackfoot tribe. He did a lot of good work for tenants’ rights in his building. In 1992, he was found stabbed to death in his apartment; the crime was never solved. One afternoon, I see Baryshnikov at a bagel place. This neighborhood is full of dancers, I notice. The Trisha Brown Dance Company has an office here. There are also many strip clubs. Now and again, I’ll see a velvet rope I have no interest in being invited to cross. I keep thinking that at any moment I’ll find the durably gentle side of this neighborhood. Instead, I find a stable

where livery horses are kept, on levels, like parked cars. The DHL building is kind of cheery, as parts of it are painted yellow.

Our favorite twenty-four-hour deli, on the corner of Thirty-seventh Street and Ninth Avenue, is owned by a Yemeni immigrant who has been running it for nearly forty years. It has never been closed for even a day. Not through 9/11, not through the blackouts, not through Hurricane Sandy, not through the pandemic. The owner tells me he slept on a cot in the basement during the rst six years of the business. Our neighborhood is home for many homeless people, and I've seen him give food and drinks to people who don't pay and I've also seen him ask people who are causing a problem to leave. He's at the register less often these days; instead, we see his children and grandchildren. When I'm tired or overwhelmed, my partner orders me a special treat: an egg-white-and-bacon breakfast sandwich on a toasted English muffin. It arrives home wrapped in thin foil, and tastes like someone taking care of you.

Our apartment overlooks the entrance to the Lincoln Tunnel, which I estimate to be the source of at least two- thirds of the soot. The traffic is particularly heavy one night. My daughter looks out the window, noticing the long line of red brake lights that distinguishes the outgoing traffic from the long line of white headlights that characterizes the incoming. It's a beautiful view, she says. A memory comes to me, of a friend telling me how her grandmother, when she visited from New Delhi, used to describe a night scene like this as "a necklace of rubies and a necklace of diamonds."

The Two Bros pizza at the corner of Eighth Avenue and Thirty-eighth Street sells a fresh, hot slice of cheese pizza for a dollar. There are other Two Bros in the city—there are other Two Bros in the neighborhood—but this one is the best. It is nearly always busy, and it has a fast-moving and efficient line. I fell in love with Two Bros when I was pregnant. I would sometimes step out to have a slice there an hour or two after dinner. You could eat the slice at a table in the back and feel companioned and alone at once. The lighting is like that of a surgical theatre. The Mexican pop music is a reliable endorphin generator. And though the ingredients that go into a dollar slice of pizza do not come from a family farm in the Hudson Valley, these slices are supreme. The clientele, those evenings, was a mix of transgender prostitutes, thin young men, and quiet immigrant families, often with suitcases, headed I have no idea where.

After my daughter was born, I would still get a slice now and again, and, as soon as she was old enough, a slice was a special treat, better than a balloon. By the time she was two or so, she liked holding the dollar and paying for her slice herself. When she was three, she could proudly hold

the paper plate with the hot slice on it, and now she can even take that hesitant rst bite, where you gauge how hot the slice is and how much of a triangle you can bite off.

Because there are so few babies or children in this neighborhood, when you travel with a baby or a child you and the child are treated like a majestic presence, almost like tigers. My daughter is celebrated at the grocery store, at the pizza place, at the deli, and even on the street. In this neighborhood, crowded with mentally unwell people, and with drug dealers and panhandlers, and with tired office workers and sex workers and fruit venders and psychics and police officers —all these people, nearly to a one, say something tender to a child, whether you want them to or not. I remember once journeying to the idyllic family neighborhood of Carroll Gardens, in Brooklyn, where there were more babies and children than pigeons, and no one seemed interested in my baby at all, and I felt like a pigeon.

I have lived in other New York neighborhoods. For a time, I lived near the Mount Sinai Hospital Complex, on Ninety-eighth Street, right near where the Metro-North northbound train changes its path from underground to aboveground. All conversation would pause when a train went by, as in a running gag in a sitcom. Later, I lived in Morningside Heights, near Columbia University, a neighborhood that some find boring, and none and cool, but, as the city changes and changes and changes, Morningside Heights has a permanent population of thousands of eighteen- to twenty-two-year-olds. They reside, forever young, alongside a mysteriously eternal elderly community. Time does not pass in Morningside Heights. In my seven years there, I never changed age. The Cathedral of St. John the Divine will always be partially under renovation. The Hungarian Pastry Shop, now owned by a Greek family, will always be crowded and will never have Internet service or music; the outdoor seating is in use even now. I lived briey in two Brooklyn neighborhoods: Fort Greene and Brooklyn Heights. Both were so pleasant as to make me feel uncomfortable. Maybe because I grew up the daughter of Israeli immigrants in Oklahoma, a neighborhood feels “right” to me only when it suits me in no particular way—when it seems unlikely that I’ll run into another household like my own. If I wear the clothing that might earn me compliments in Fort Greene or Brooklyn Heights, here, near the Lincoln Tunnel, those same clothes make me look as if I’m demented.

When my yearning for a sense of softness and sanity in the neighborhood really soars, I go to Esposito’s butcher shop on Thirty-eighth Street. A handful of businesses have been in this neighborhood for decades, and the butcher shop has been here since 1932. When I go in there, the staff ask me about my kids. They ask everyone about their kids, or their dogs, or their parents, or whatever there is to ask about. In the ten years I’ve lived here, the owner has been there every operating day, six days a week, working alongside his staff. One of the butchers is

strikingly handsome. He always smiles and says it's nice to see me. He says that to everyone and gives everyone that smile. Still, it retains its power. It took me years to realize that the oor on the butchers' side of the glass display case is elevated by about six inches; the butchers look like gods on that side.

Esposito's has a take-a-number ticket dispenser. The slips of paper come out like interlocking Escher frog tiles. Of course, my daughter loves to pull those numbered papers. When your number gets called, it's heraldic. With that take-a-number ticket in hand, I get something I very rarely get—a felt connection to my childhood. I pulled this same kind of numbered ticket at the Skaggs Alpha Beta, in Norman. I would wait, with my mother, to be called on. My mom would ask for Muenster cheese "very thinly sliced, please." Sometimes the deli- counter worker had trouble with my mom's accent. You could measure the deli person's character by how thin he sliced the Muenster. That was my mother's thinking, and I guess it's mine, too. To this day, a thick slice of Muenster signals an uncaring soul. These Thirty-eighth Street butcher guys would slice the Muenster very thin, I'm sure of it, even if I no longer like Muenster, and recently for the first time heard it called the children's cheese.

It was my daughter's reaching toddler age that began to alter my relationship to this neighborhood. For the first years, my heart had been open to it. I had been proud of its lack of charm, as if this were a consequence of its integrity. I had gone so far as to mildly dislike the perfectly clean and inoffensive "short-term luxury-rental" building that went up on this otherwise rough block—the Emerald Green. The complex planted ginkgo trees all along the block's sidewalk. The trees were thin and pathetic and nearly leafless at first. In winter, the building's staff lit up the trunks of the trees by wrapping them with white Christmas lights. In summer, they planted tulips in the enclosures in front of the entrance. As it grew cold, they planted some sort of hearty kale. We don't need this! I remember thinking. This is even less charming than the lack of charm! Now I worship that building. My daughter and I both wait with anticipation for the November day when they wrap the ginkgo trees in those white lights. In fall, the ginkgo leaves tumble down as elegant yellow fans. The Emerald Green employee who hoses down the sidewalks every single morning, always pausing as we approach—he has my heart.

A recent pandemic afternoon, in socially distanced line yet again with my daughter for two

dollars' worth of Two Bros pizza, the normal sonic atmosphere of honking and Mexican pop music is augmented by more shouting than usual. I can't make out what's going on. Two fashionably dressed Japanese teen-agers start singing Frank Sinatra's "New York, New York." There's a fight going on. We cross the street. One of the shouting protagonists tells us that he's

glad we crossed the street, that there's a guy with a wrench over there and he's crazy. It's unclear who provoked whom, and in the end the only violence involves thrown soda bottles —though, another recent night, someone was stabbed to death on this corner. It's not the violence in the neighborhood that makes me, at times, really hate living here. If anything, it's clearer than ever how safe my family and I are, relatively, except from maybe being hit by a car or dying of lung disease. But the neighborhood used to feel to me like a rough part of a softer place, and nowadays the roughness feels more general, and this makes it harder to cheer for a neighborhood that is so loud and dirty and uninterested in or unfit for human life. It feels t for delivery trucks and construction dust and as a postcard of man's inhumanity to man. Years ago, under the Port Authority crossway, there was some sort of shelter—or at least meal, phone, and shower service —provided, and there is no such thing there anymore, only lots of people with substance-abuse and mental-health problems wandering around with a memory of this being a place where one could find help. There's also a ubiquitous day-and-night smell of pot. Some people love that smell. I don't. I complain about it to my partner one day, on the sidewalk. My daughter says, What smell? Of skunk, her dad says. What does skunk smell like? she asks. Do you mean that smell that is like burnt mushrooms with lots of spices? I don't like spicy food, she concludes.

Twelve years ago—before my time!—the fifth floor of our building was often lit up with red lights. The street at night was crowded with limousines and S.U.V.s. This was the side effect of an improvised and lucrative business run by a man known as Big Daddy Lou. He and his wife made nearly a million dollars in ten months running a sex club favored by bankers and lawyers. For building-code purposes, certain small rooms were designated for recording books on tape. Big Daddy Lou paid at least two hundred and sixty thousand dollars in a no-jail-time plea deal that barred him from strip clubs and similar businesses. He could recently be seen on Twitter, posting about voter suppression in Georgia. A custodian on the second floor said that he hadn't known about the club, but that he had "seen many pretty girls coming through, and no one caused a problem." Judging by the movies and TV shows I see advertised on posters, this is precisely the kind of caper that millions of Americans dream of being near. I am living the dream, or almost.

rOh, I know your neighborhood, a man I was interviewing for a journalism piece once said. He was a scientist who was working on robotics that could land, and then rove, on the moon. He said he had worked in a space not far from Penn Station. He loved it, he said. He said that the company used a fine red Mars simulant dust, and that the dust had caused troubles, as it sifted down onto the silk-tie-manufacturing business that was one floor below. The problem had been resolved, and the two businesses had mutually admired each other's work.

For my daughter, this neighborhood is dense with magic and love. This is her childhood. I will give you an example, one that involves the Lot-Less store that we pass on the way to the subway. In this memory, she is three years old, and we are headed to her preschool. My daughter is supposed to bring in her blankie from home, to be used for nap time for the rest of the year. My daughter has always been very interested in fulfilling these sorts of expectations.

On the sidewalk that day, I realize that I've forgotten the blankie. I suggest that we go into this Lot-Less store, that maybe we'll find something. "I want a Minnie Mouse blanket," my daughter says, in probably the most clearly enunciated sentence of her life up to that moment. She used to watch "Mickey Mouse Clubhouse" every time she stayed with my mother, and her love for Minnie Mouse mirrored the depth of love between a grandmother and a granddaughter. I try to say that we may not find a Minnie Mouse blanket, but that we shouldn't cry or panic or worry, etc. As it turns out, there is only one blanket on sale in the Lot-Less. It is a Minnie Mouse blanket.

I know the neighborhood so well—know the old Hartford Courant building, the countless vape shops, the Hamed Fabric, with its clearance sale, the Money Change/Weed World/NY Gift & Luggage, and Daytona Trimming, with its boas—on account of the carrying, and then the strollering, and then the very slow walking, and then the normal-paced walking of these same streets year and again with this child of mine. When she was a baby, the only way to reliably get her to fall asleep was to push her round and round these blocks in her stroller. Amid the honking, shouting, and backfiring, and the music coming from the Wakamba bar, her eyes would close, then stay closed.

She began walking. I was made aware that every tree enclosure and every concrete border was an irresistible balance-beam challenge. To get from our door to the corner took twenty minutes. Each challenge needed to be met, step by careful step, whether coming home or leaving. Some of the enclosures were at brick. Some were curved metal. What a playground. She knew she could run up to the barrier near the parking garage but then had to wait to pass by it. In any month on any day, she might ask when the ginkgo leaves would turn yellow, when the Christmas lights would go up, when the illuminated snowflake would be hung over the intersection of Ninth Avenue and Thirty-eighth Street. When we neared the corner butcher shop, she would sing a little made-up tune about the butcher, Bobby Esposito (though he goes by, and we always call him, Robert). The tune has a nineteen-forties cadence that I think she picked up from her Irish grandfather.

One afternoon, when we were on a tree-lined, picturesque block of Brooklyn Heights, near where I had once lived, with clean sidewalks and elegant buildings and gaslit lamps and no smell of garbage, my daughter turned to me very seriously and said, “This place is spoooooo-ky.”

“It is?”
“It would be terrible—terrible!—to live here.”

I do my best to adopt her view of our not beautiful neighborhood. After all, what is the Staples store but the enchanted red place that had a sequin notebook in the window for sale? Here is the 7-Eleven, with its bounty of stuffed animals and key chains, where on her birthday she got to pick out, after long deliberation, an owl Beanie Baby. The fruit man, whom I find slightly “off ” but who is cheerful and always gives her an extra banana whenever we buy anything—where has he been since March? The hat-and-glove sidewalk vender called her Madam President when he gave her that double-bobbled hat which was pretty but itchy. Near that large sculpture of a needle going through a button, there appeared, in a plant enclosure, a metal sculpture of the head of a woman. It looked odd, unlabelled, just that head. I told my daughter that I thought it was someone named Emma Goldman, maybe, but the next time we passed by the sculpture was mysteriously gone.

One day, I have my own experience of magic in the neighborhood. A rack of plastic-wrapped dresses is being wheeled across the street. Its bars are wrapped in tape labelled “Hjelm, Hjelm, Hjelm.” That is very near to the name of the family who lived across the street from me as a child, who were a second family to me. There are so many stories there, but that is not where my mind goes. I realize in that moment that I have been walking, all these years, on the same streets I walked as a seven-year-old girl. These fabric shops, these button emporiums, these sewing-machine-repair shops, even the sparsely populated Ben’s Kosher Delicatessen, which is so large and hard for me to believe in: is it possible that this was exactly where I was once or twice or three times before? With my aunt ordering cheesecake for dessert and taking only a bite and leaving me with the burden of trying to eat the rest out of politeness?

My aunt, who lives in Sydney, Australia, used to come to New York—to these same streets—to buy fabric for her line of clothing for young women. She used to give me leopard-print jeans and crop tops and clingy polyester dresses that no other kid in Oklahoma had. When my aunt went to New York, sometimes my mother and I would y out to see her.

We are in the back rooms of the third and fourth floors of these buildings. These are my earliest memories of seeing the suits and hats of Orthodox Jewish men. We are being shown bolts of fabric. We are told that they are very special prints, and that not everyone gets to see these. My

aunt has introduced my mother as her "assistant," and my mother holds a notebook and pen—not something that I have ever seen her do. Usually she holds large stacks of computer code printed on that old dot-matrix computer paper with those side strips you can tear off. My aunt tells the men that she has seen better prices, and that the fabric pills, or tears, or something. We leave, maybe we return, I don't remember. Later, there is matzo-ball soup with matzo balls of unfathomable scale and fluffiness. These trips are also marked by the marvel of my aunt, her four-inch red fingernails and her resemblance to Tina Turner. It makes the most sense to meet her in New York, or sometimes Los Angeles, since why would she y all the way out to the Will Rogers World Airport, in Oklahoma City?

I've lived my adult life so far away from my childhood, away from whatever madeleines might return it to me, and yet here I am, in some sense having never left this neighborhood. Time has and hasn't wrought its transformational power. Now it's my aunt's children who shop for fabric. They don't come to these streets; they go to Guangzhou. There are still fabric stores here, but there's something nostalgic and aspirational about calling the area the garment district. If you look up, there are magnificent Art Deco buildings, one after the other, but in the windows you see dusty stacks, sometimes mannequins, and very little that looks as if it had been moved in years. These are a thousand Miss Havisham stage sets, though before the pandemic there was some trend of expensive, often "organic," "Made in NYC" brands settling in the area. Here and there, one would see a beautiful person. Café Grumpy, of trendy Greenpoint, had opened a branch here. And Pacific Trimming had recently remodelled, so that if you walked by on Thirty-ninth Street, between Seventh and Eighth Avenues, even the least crafty among us might be filled with a desire for rickrack, for zippers in thirty-six colors, for shank buttons. Shortly before the pandemic made itself credible to New Yorkers, in early March, a fancy food court was opening across the way from Pacific Trimming, the kind of place where one could pay as much for a cup of coffee as you might ever dream of, where three soft tacos could be sixteen dollars. I wonder what will happen to that food court.

So much has closed, and now there are no crowds to navigate up Eighth Avenue in the morning. The pandemic has revealed that, apart from all my grousing, this neighborhood was working very well. It lacked sweetness, sure, and hygiene, but it had office space, and it had office workers, and it had breakfast carts and restaurants, and it even had—I saw this three times—unremarkable-looking pedestrians who, seeing someone slumped over in a crosswalk, in the line of traffic, would pick that person up and help him onto the sidewalk. There may be little or no sunny side to the prostitution in this neighborhood, but there's something cheering about walking by the Holiday Inn park benches at 7:30 .., and seeing the tall, long-limbed sex workers in

leggings and false eyelashes, sitting together over a coffee, chatting, laughing, adjusting their bras, their hair.

I know it would be wrong to get romantic about it, just as I know that the people on the sidewalk near Fortieth Street who shout at me that they love my hair and where do I get it done are just hawking their salon on the second floor, but what can I say? It sometimes feels as if these chaotic crowds were here because we were all inside the velvet rope to the one club that would interest me, the one where we all belong.

I used to wonder about people who were born in New York and who still lived here. Did it not annoy them that any block they walked down, any business they passed, was liable to bring up a ghoulish or irritating memory? Even good memories can be exhausting. Maybe especially good memories. For this reason, I pitied the New York natives. And envied them, naturally. Lately, I nd myself awake in the middle of the night in a panic, wondering, Why am I here? Where are all the people I have known? My mother lives only two miles away, but I still sometimes think, Where is my mom? Where is my black-sheep stuffed animal? Now my child is a native New Yorker. The pandemic will be over one day. She will again make her way up a very crowded Eighth Avenue. New businesses will open. Maybe, years from now, she will wonder what happened to these irreplaceable days. ♦

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Life's Swell by Susan Orlean

For *Women Outside* (aka *Outside Magazine*) Aug 23, 2002

To be a surfer girl in Maui is to be the luckiest of creatures. It means you're beautiful and tan and ready to rip. It means you've caught the perfect dappled wave and are on a ride that can't possibly end. The Maui surfer girls love each other's hair. It is awesome hair, long and bleached by the sun, and it falls over their shoulders straight, like water, or in squiggles, like seaweed, or in waves. They are forever playing with it—yanking it up into ponytails, or twisting handfuls and securing them with chopsticks or pencils, or dividing it as carefully as you would divide a pile of coins and then weaving it into tight yellow plaits. Not long ago I was on the beach in Maui watching the surfer girls surf, and when they came out of the water they sat in a row facing the ocean, and each girl took the hair of the girl in front of her and combed it with her fingers and crisscrossed it into braids.

The Maui surfer girls even love the kind of hair that I dreaded when I was their age, 14 or so—they love that wild, knotty, bright hair, as big and stiff as carpet, the most un-straight, un-sleek, un-ordinary hair you could imagine, and they can love it, I suppose, because when you are young and on top of the world you can love anything you want, and just the fact that you love it makes it cool and fabulous. A Maui surfer girl named Gloria Madden has that kind of hair—thick red corkscrews striped orange and silver from the sun, hair that if you weren't beautiful and fearless you'd consider an affliction that you would try to iron flat or stuff under a hat.

One afternoon I was driving two of the girls to Blockbuster Video in Kahului. It was the day before a surfing competition, and the girls were going to spend the night at their coach's house up the coast so they'd be ready for the contest at dawn. On contest nights, they fill their time by eating a lot of food and watching hours of surf videos, but on this particular occasion they decided they needed to rent a movie, too, in case they found themselves with 10 or 20 seconds of unoccupied time. On our way to the video store, the girls told me they admired my rental car and said that they thought rental cars totally ripped and that they each wanted to get one. My car, which until then I had sort of hated, suddenly took on a glow. I asked what else they would have if they could have anything in the world. They thought for a moment, and then the girl in the backseat said, "A moped and thousands of new clothes. You know, stuff like thousands of bathing suits and thousands of new board shorts."

“I’d want a Baby-G watch and new flip-flops, and one of those cool sports bras like the one Iris just got,” the other said. She was in the front passenger seat, barefoot, sand-caked, twirling her hair into a French knot. It was a half-cloudy day with weird light that made the green Hawaiian hills look black and the ocean look like zinc. It was also, in fact, a school day, but these were the luckiest of all the surfer girls because they are home-schooled so that they can surf any time at all.

The girl making the French knot stopped knotting. “Oh, and also,” she said, “I’d really definitely want crazy hair like Gloria’s.”

The girl in the backseat leaned forward and said, “Yeah, and hair like Gloria’s, for sure.”
A lot of the Maui surfer girls live in Hana, the little town at the end of the Hana Highway, a fraying thread of a road that winds from Kahului, Maui’s primary city, over a dozen deep gulches and dead-drop waterfalls and around the backside of the Haleakala Crater to the village. Hana is far away and feels even farther. It is only 55 miles from Kahului, but the biggest maniac in the world couldn’t make the drive in less than two hours.

There is nothing much to do in Hana except wander through the screw pines and the candlenut trees or go surfing. There is no mall in Hana, no Starbucks, no shoe store, no Hello Kitty store, no movie theater—just trees, bushes, flowers, and gnarly surf that breaks rough at the bottom of the rocky beach. Before women were encouraged to surf, the girls in Hana must have been unbelievably bored. Lucky for these Hana girls, surfing has changed. In the ’60s, Joyce Hoffman became one of the first female surf aces, and she was followed by Rell Sunn and Jericho Poppler in the seventies and Frieda Zamba in the ’80s and Lisa Andersen in this decade, and thousands of girls and women followed by example. In fact, the surfer girls of this generation have never known a time in their lives when some woman champion wasn’t ripping surf.

The Hana girls dominate Maui surfing these days. Theory has it that they grow up riding such mangy waves that they’re ready for anything. Also, they are exposed to few distractions and can practically live in the water. Crazy-haired Gloria is not one of the Hana girls. She grew up near the city, in Haiku, where there were high-school race riots—Samoans beating on Filipinos, Hawaiians beating on Anglos—and the mighty pull of the mall at Kaahumanu Center. By contrast, a Hana girl can have herself an almost pure surf adolescence.

One afternoon I went to Hana to meet Theresa McGregor, one of the best surfers in town. I missed our rendezvous and was despairing because Theresa lived with her mother, two brothers, and sister in a one-room shack with no phone and I couldn't think of how I'd find her. There is one store in Hana, amazingly enough called the General Store, where you can buy milk and barbecue sauce and snack bags of dried cuttlefish; once I realized I'd missed Theresa I went into the store because there was no other place to go. The cashier looked kindly, so I asked whether by any wild chance she knew a surfer girl named Theresa McGregor. I had not yet come to appreciate what a small town Hana really was. "She was just in here a minute ago," the cashier said. "Usually around this time of the day she's on her way to the beach to go surfing." She dialed the McGregors's neighbor—she knew the number by heart—to find out which beach Theresa had gone to. A customer overheard the cashier talking to me, and she came over and added that she'd just seen Theresa down at Ko'ki beach and that Theresa's mom, Angie, was there too, and that some of the other Hana surfer girls would probably be down any minute but they had a History Day project due at the end of the week so they might not be done yet at school.

I went down to Ko'ki. Angie McGregor was indeed there, and she pointed out Theresa bobbing in the swells. There were about a dozen other people in the water, kids mostly. A few other surfer parents were up on the grass with Angie—fathers with hairy chests and ponytails and saddle-leather sandals, and mothers wearing board shorts and bikini tops, passing around snacks of unpeeled carrots and whole-wheat cookies and sour cream Pringles—and even as they spoke to one another, they had their eyes fixed on the ocean, watching their kids, who seemed like they were a thousand miles away, taking quick rides on the tattered waves.

After a few minutes, Theresa appeared up on dry land. She was a big, broad-shouldered girl, 16 years old, fierce-faced, somewhat feline, and quite beautiful. Water was streaming off of her, out of her shorts, out of her long hair, which was plastered to her shoulders. The water made it look inky, but you could still tell that an inch from her scalp her hair had been stripped of all color by the sun.

In Haiku, where the McGregors lived until four years ago, Theresa had been a superstar soccer player, but Hana was too small to support a soccer league, so after they moved Theresa first devoted herself to becoming something of a juvenile delinquent and then gave that up for surfing. Her first triumph came right away, in 1996, when she won the open women's division at the Maui Hana Mango competition. She was one of the few fortunate amateur surfer girls who had sponsors. She got free boards from Matt Kinoshita, her coach, who owns and designs

Kazuma Surfboards; clothes from Honolua Surf Company; board leashes and bags from Da Kine Hawaii; skateboards from Flexdex. Boys who surfed got a lot more for free.

Even a little bit of sponsorship made the difference between surfing and not surfing. As rich a life as it seemed, among the bougainvillea and the green hills and the passionflowers of Hana, there was hardly any money. In the past few years the Hawaiian economy had sagged terribly, and Hana had never had much of an economy to begin with. Last year, the surfer moms in town held a fund-raiser bake sale to send Theresa and two Hana boys to the national surfing competition in California.
Theresa said she was done surfing for the day. “The waves totally suck now,” she said to Angie. “They’re just real trash.” They talked for a moment and agreed that Theresa should leave in the morning and spend the next day or two with her coach Matt at his house in Haiku, to prepare for the Hawaiian Amateur Surf Association contest that weekend at Ho’okipa Beach near Kahului.

Logistics became the topic. One of the biggest riddles facing a surfer girl, especially a surfer girl in far-removed Hana, is how to get from point A to point B, particularly when carrying a large surfboard. The legal driving age in Hawaii is 15, but the probable car-ownership age, unless you’re rich, is much beyond that; also, it seemed that nearly every surfer kid I met in Maui lived in a single-parent, single- or no-car household in which spare drivers and vehicles were rare. I was planning to go back around the volcano anyway to see the contest, so I said I’d take Theresa and another surfer, Lilia Boerner, with me, and someone else would make it from Hana to Haiku with their boards.

That night I met Theresa, Angie, and Lilia and a few of their surfer friends at a take-out shop in town, and then I went to the room I’d rented at Joe’s Rooming House. I stayed up late reading about how Christian missionaries had banned surfing when they got to Hawaii in the late 1800s, but how by 1908 general longing for the sport overrode spiritual censure and surfing resumed. I dozed off with the history book in my lap and the hotel television tuned to a Sprint ad showing a Hawaiian man and his granddaughter running hand-in-hand into the waves.

The next morning I met Lilia and Theresa at Ko’ki beach at 8:00, after they’d had a short session on the waves. When I arrived they were standing under a monkeypod tree beside a stack of backpacks. Both of them were soaking wet, and I realized then that a surfer is always in one of two conditions: wet or about to be wet. Also, they are almost always dressed in something that can go directly into the water: halter tops, board shorts, bikini tops, jeans.

Lilia was 12 and a squirt, with a sweet, powdery face and round hazel eyes and golden fuzz on her arms and legs. She was younger and much smaller than Theresa, less plainly athletic but very game. Like Theresa, she was home-schooled, so she could surf all the time. So far Lilia was sponsored by a surf shop and by Matt Kinoshita's Kazuma surfboards. She had a twin brother who was also a crafty surfer, but a year ago the two of them came upon their grandfather after he suffered a fatal tractor accident, and the boy hadn't competed since. Their family owned a large and prosperous organic fruit farm in Hana. I once asked Lilia if it was fun to live on a farm. "No," she said abruptly. "Too much fruit."

We took a back road from Hana to Haiku, as if the main road weren't bad enough. The road edged around the back of the volcano, through sere yellow hills. The girls talked about surfing and about one surfer girl's mom, whom they described as a full bitch, and a surfer's dad, who according to Theresa "was a freak and a half because he took too much acid and he tweaked." I wondered if they had any other hobbies besides surfing. Lilia said she used to study hula.

"Is it fun?"

"Not if you have a witch for a teacher, like I did," she said. "Just screaming and yelling at us all the time. I'll never do hula again. Surfing's cooler, anyway."

"You're the man, Lilia," Theresa said, tartly. "Hey, how close are we to Grandma's Coffee Shop? I'm starving." Surfers are always starving. They had eaten breakfast before they surfed; it was now only an hour or two later, and they were hungry again. They favor breakfast cereal, teriyaki chicken, french fries, rice, ice cream, candy, and a Hawaiian specialty called Spam Masubi, which is a rice ball topped with a hunk of Spam and seaweed. If they suffered from the typical teenage girl obsession with their weight, they didn't talk about it and they didn't act like it. They were so active that whatever they ate probably melted away.

"We love staying at Matt's," Lilia said, "because he always takes us to Taco Bell." We came around the side of a long hill and stopped at Grandma's. Lilia ordered a garden burger and Theresa had an "I'm Hungry" sandwich with turkey, ham, and avocado. It was 10:30 a.m. As she was eating, Lilia said, "You know, the Olympics are going to have surfing, either in the year 2000 or 2004, for sure."

"I'm so on that, dude," Theresa said. "If I can do well in the nationals this year, then …" She swallowed the last of her sandwich. She told me that eventually she wanted to become an

ambulance driver, and I could picture her doing it, riding on dry land the same waves of adrenaline that she rides now.

I spent a lot of time trying to picture where these girls might be in 10 years. Hardly any are likely to make it as pro surfers—even though women have made a place for themselves in pro surfing, the number who really make it is still small, and even though the Hana girls rule Maui surfing, the island's soft-shell waves and easygoing competitions have produced very few world-class surfers in recent years.

It doesn't seem to matter to them. At various cultural moments, surfing has appeared as the embodiment of everything cool and wild and free; this is one of those moments. To be a girl surfer is even cooler, wilder, and more modern than being a guy surfer: Surfing has always been such a male sport that for a man to do it doesn't defy any received ideas; to be a girl surfer is to be all that surfing represents, plus the extra charge of being a girl in a tough guy's domain. To be a surfer girl in a cool place like Hawaii is perhaps the apogee of all that is cool and wild and modern and sexy and defiant. The Hana girls, therefore, exist at that highest point—the point where being brave, tan, capable, and independent, and having a real reason to wear all those surf-inspired clothes that other girls wear for fashion, is what matters completely.

It is, though, just a moment. It must be hard to imagine an ordinary future and something other than a lunar calendar to consider if you've grown up in a small town in Hawaii, surfing all day and night, spending half your time on sand, thinking in terms of point breaks and barrels and roundhouse cutbacks. Or maybe they don't think about it at all. Maybe these girls are still young enough and in love enough with their lives that they have no special foreboding about their futures, no uneasy presentiment that the kind of life they are leading now might eventually have to end.

Matt Kinoshita lives in a fresh, sunny ranch at the top of a hill in Haiku. The house has a big living room with a fold-out couch and plenty of floor space. Often, one or two or 10 surfer girls camp in his living room because they are in a competition that starts at 7:00 the next morning, or because they are practicing intensively and it is too far to go back and forth from Hana, or because they want to plow through Matt's stacks of surfing magazines and Matt's library of surfing videos and Matt's piles of water-sports clothing catalogs. Many of the surfer girls I met didn't live with their fathers, or in some cases didn't even have relationships with their fathers, so sometimes, maybe, they stayed at Matt's just because they were in the mood to be around a concerned older male.

Matt was in his late twenties. As a surfer he was talented enough to compete on the world tour but had decided to skip it in favor of an actual life with his wife, Annie, and their baby son, Chaz. Now he was one of the best surfboard shapers on Maui, a coach, and head of a construction company with his dad. He sponsored a few grown-up surfers and still competed himself, but his preoccupation was with kids. *Surfing* magazine once asked him what he liked most about being a surfboard shaper, and he answered, "Always being around stoked groms!" He coached a stoked-grom boys' team as well as a stoked-grom girls' team. The girls' team was an innovation. There had been no girls' surfing team on Maui before Matt established his three years ago. There was no money in it for him—it actually cost him many thousands of dollars each year—but he loved to do it. He thought the girls were the greatest. The girls thought he was the greatest, too.
In build, Matt looked a lot like the men in those old Hawaiian surfing prints—small, chesty, gravity-bound. He had perfect features and hair as shiny as an otter's. When he listened to the girls he kept his head tilted, eyebrows slightly raised, jaw set in a grin. Not like a brother, exactly—more like the cutest, nicest teacher at school, who could say stern, urgent things without them stinging. When I pulled into the driveway with the girls, Matt was in the yard loading surfboards into a pickup. "Hey, dudes," he called to Lilia and Theresa. "Where are your boards?"

"Someone's going to bring them tonight from Hana," Theresa said. She jiggled her foot. "Matt, come on, let's go surfing already."

"Hey, Lilia," Matt said. He squeezed her shoulders. "How're you doing, champ? Is your dad going to surf in the contest this weekend?"

Lilia shrugged and looked up at him solemnly. "Come on, Matt," she said. "Let's go surfing already."

They went down to surf at Ho'okipa, to a section that is called Pavilles because it is across from the concrete picnic pavilions on the beach. Ho'okipa is not a lot like Hana. People with drinking problems like to hang out in the pavilions. Windsurfers abound. Cars park up to the edge of the sand. The landing pattern for the Kahului Airport is immediately overhead. The next break over, the beach is prettier; the water there is called Girlie Bowls, because the waves get cut down by the reef and are more manageable, presumably, for girlies.

A few years ago, some of the Hana surfer girls met their idol Lisa Andersen when she was on Maui. She was very shy and hardly said a word to them, they told me, except to suggest they go

surf Girlie Bowls. I thought it sounded mildly insulting, but they weren't exactly sure what she was implying and they didn't brood about it. They hardly talked about her. She was like some unassailable force.

We walked past the pavilions. "The men at this beach are so sexist," Lilia said, glaring at a guy swinging a boombox. "It's really different from Hana. Here they're always, you know, staring, and saying, 'Oh, here come the *giiiirls*,' and 'Oh, hello, *ladies*,' and stuff. For us white girls, us haoles, I think they really like to be gross. So gross. I'm serious."
"Hey, the waves look pretty sick," Theresa said. She watched a man drop in on one and then whip around against it. She whistled and said, "Whoooa, look at that sick snap! That was so rad, dude! That was the sickest snap I've seen in *ages*! Did you see that?"

They were gone in an instant. A moment later, two blond heads popped up in the black swells, and then they were up on their boards and away.
Dinner at Matt's: tons of barbecued chicken, loaves of garlic bread, more loaves of garlic bread. Annie Kinoshita brought four quarts of ice cream out of the freezer, lined them up on the kitchen counter, and watched them disappear. Annie was fair, fine-boned, and imperturbable. She used to be a surfer "with hair down to her frickin' butt," according to Theresa. Now she was busy with her baby and with overseeing the open-door policy she and Matt maintained in their house.

That night, another surfer girl, Elise Garrigue, and a 14-year-old boy, Cheyne Magnusson, had come over for dinner and were going to sleep over, too. Cheyne was one of the best young surfers on the island. His father, Tony, was a professional skateboarder. Cheyne was the only boy who regularly crashed at Matt and Annie's. He and the girls had the Platonic ideal of a Platonic relationship. "Hell, these wenches are virgins," Annie said to me, cracking up. "These wenches don't want anything to do with that kind of nastiness."

"Shut up, haole," Theresa said.

"I was going to show these virgins a picture of Chaz's head coming out when I was in labor," Annie yelled, "and they're all, 'No, no, no, don't!'"

"Yeah, she's all, 'Look at this grossness!'" Theresa said. "And we're all, 'Shut up, fool.'"
"Duh," Lilia said. "Like we'd even want to see a picture like that."

The next day was the preliminary round of the Quicksilver HASA Competition, the fourth of eight HASA competitions on Maui leading to the state championships and then the nationals. It was a two-day competition—preliminaries on Saturday, finals on Sunday.
In theory, the girls should have gone to bed early because they had to get up at five, but that was just a theory. They pillow-fought for an hour, watched "Sabrina, the Teenage Witch" and "Boy Meets World" and another episode of "Sabrina," then watched a couple of Kelly Slater surfing videos, had another pillow fight, ate a few bowls of cereal, then watched *Fear of a Black Hat*, a movie spoofing the rap-music world that they had seen so many times that they could recite most of the dialogue by heart. Only Elise fell asleep at a decent hour. She happened to be French and perhaps had overdosed on American pop culture earlier than the rest.

Elise sort of blew in to Hawaii with the trade winds: She and her mother had left France and were planning to move to Tahiti, stopped on Maui en route, and never left. It was a classic Hawaiian tale. No one comes here for ordinary reasons in ordinary ways. They run away to Maui from places like Maryland or Nevada or anyplace they picture themselves earthbound, landlocked, stuck. They live in salvaged boxcars or huts or sagging shacks just to be near the waves. Here, they can see watery boundlessness everywhere they turn, and all things are fluid and impermanent.

I don't know what time it was when the kids finally went to sleep because I was on the living room floor with my jacket over my head for insulation. When I woke up a few hours later, the girls were dressed for the water, eating bowls of Cinnamon Toast Crunch and Honey Bunches of Oats, and watching *Fear of a Black Hat* again. It was a lovely morning and they were definitely ready to show Hana surfing to the world. Theresa was the first to head out the door. "Hey, losers," she yelled over her shoulder, "let's go."

The first heats of the contest had right-handed waves, three or four feet high, silky but soft on the ends so that they collapsed into whitewash as they broke. You couldn't make much of an impression riding something like that, and one after another the Hana girls came out of the water scowling. "I couldn't get any kind of footing," Theresa said to Matt. "I was, like, so on it, but I looked like some kind of kook sliding around."

"My last wave was a full-out closeout," Lilia said. She looked exasperated. "Hey, someone bust me a towel." She blotted her face. "I really blew it," she groaned. "I'm lucky if I even got five waves."

The girls were on the beach below the judges' stand, under Matt's cabana, along with Matt's boys' team and a number of kids he didn't sponsor but who liked hanging out with him more than with their own sponsors. The kids spun like atoms. They ran up and down the beach and stuffed sand in each others' shorts and fought over pieces of last night's chicken that Annie had packed for them in a cooler.

During a break between heats, Gloria with the crazy hair strolled over and suddenly the incessant motion paused. This was like an imperial visitation. After all, Gloria was a seasoned-seeming 19-year-old who had just spent the year surfing the monstrous waves on Oahu's North Shore, plus she did occasional work for Rodney Kilborn, the contest promoter, plus she had a sea turtle tattooed on her ankle, and most important, according to the Hana girls, she was an absolutely dauntless bodyboarder who would paddle out into wall-size waves, even farther out than a lot of guys would go.

"Hey, haoles!" Gloria called out. She hopped into the shade of the cabana. That day, her famous hair was woven into a long red braid that hung over her left shoulder. Even with her hair tamed, Gloria was an amazing-looking person. She had a hardy build, melon-colored skin, and a wide, round face speckled with light-brown freckles. Her voice was light and tinkly, and had that arched, rising-up, quizzical inflection that made everything she said sound like a jokey, good-natured question.

"Hey, Theresa?" she said. "Hey, girl, you got it going on? You've got great wave strategy? Just keep it up, yeah? Oh, Elise? You should paddle out harder? OK? You're doing great, yeah? And Christie?" She looked around for a surfer girl named Christie Wickey, who got a ride in at four that morning from Hana. "Hey, Christie?" Gloria said when she spotted her. "You should go out further, yeah? That way you'll be in better position for your wave, OK? You guys are the greatest, seriously? You rule, yeah? You totally rule, yeah?"

At last the junior women's division preliminary results were posted. Theresa, Elise, and two other girls on Matt's team made the cut, as well as a girl whom Matt knew but didn't coach. Lilia had not made it. As soon as she heard, she tucked her blond head in the crook of her elbow and cried. Matt sat with her and talked quietly for a while, and then one by one the other girls drifted up to her and murmured consoling things, but she was inconsolable. She hardly spoke for the rest of the afternoon until the open men's division, which Matt had entered. When his heat was announced, she lifted her head and brushed her hand across her swollen eyes. "Hey, Matt!" she called as he headed for the water. "Rip it for the girls!"

That night, a whole pack of them slept at Matt's—Theresa, Lilia, Christie, Elise, Monica Cardoza from Lahaina, and sisters from Hana named Iris Moon and Lily Morningstar, who had arrived too late to surf in the junior women's preliminaries. There hadn't been enough entrants in the open women's division to require preliminaries, so the competition was going to be held entirely on Sunday and Iris would be able to enter. Lily wasn't planning to surf at all, but as long as she was able to get a ride out of Hana she took it.

This added up to too many girls at Matt's for Cheyne's liking, so he had fled to another boy's house for the night. Lilia was still blue. She was quiet through dinner, and then as soon as she finished she slid into her sleeping bag and pulled it over her head. The other girls stayed up for hours, watching videos and slamming each other with pillows and talking about the contest. At some point someone asked where Lilia was. Theresa shot a glance at her sleeping bag and said quietly, "Did you guys see how upset she got today? I'm like, 'Take it easy, Lilia!' and she's all 'Leave me alone, bitch.' So I'm like, 'Whatever.'"

They whispered for a while about how sensitive Lilia was, about how hard she took it if she didn't win, about how she thought one of them had wrecked a bathing suit she'd loaned her, about how funny it was that she even cared since she had so many bathing suits and for that matter always had money for snacks, which most of them did not.
When I said a Hana girl could have a pure surfing adolescence, I knew it was part daydream, because no matter how sweet the position of a beautiful, groovy Hawaiian teenager might be in the world of perceptions, the mean measures of the human world don't ever go away. There would always be something else to want and be denied. More snack money, even.
Lilia hadn't been sleeping. Suddenly she bolted out of her sleeping bag and screamed, "Fuck you, I hate you stupid bitches!" and stormed toward the bathroom, slugging Theresa on the way.

The waves on Sunday came from the left, and they were stiff and smallish, with crisp, curling lips. The men's and boys' heats were narrated over the PA system, but during the girls' and women's heats the announcer was silent, and the biggest racket was the cheering of Matt's team. Lilia had toughened up since last night. Now she seemed grudgeless but remote. Her composure made her look more grown-up than 12. When I first got down to the beach she was staring out at the waves, chewing a hunk of dried papaya and sucking on a candy pacifier.

A few of the girls were far off to the right of the break where the beach disappeared and lustrous black rocks stretched into the water. Christie told me later that they hated being bored more than

anything in the world and between heats they were afraid they might be getting a little weary, so they decided to perk themselves up by playing on the rocks. It had worked. They charged back from the rocks shrieking and panting. “We got all dangerous,” she said. “We jumped off this huge rock into the water. We almost got killed, which was great.”

Sometimes watching them I couldn’t believe that they could head out so offhandedly into the ocean—this ocean, which had rolls of white water coming in as fast as you could count them, and had a razor-blade reef hidden just below the surface, and was full of sharks. The girls, on the other hand, couldn’t believe I’d never surfed—never ridden a wave standing up or lying down, never cut back across the whitewash and sent up a lacy veil of spray, never felt a longboard slip out from under me and then felt myself pitched forward and under for that immaculate, quiet, black instant when all the weight in the world presses you down toward the ocean bottom until the moment passes and you get spat up on the beach.

I explained I’d grown up in Ohio, where there is no surf, but that didn’t satisfy them; what I didn’t say was that I’m not sure that at 15 I had the abandon or the indomitable sense of myself that you seem to need in order to look at this wild water and think, I will glide on top of those waves. Theresa made me promise I’d try to surf at least once someday. I promised, but this Sunday was not going to be that day. I wanted to sit on the sand and watch the end of the contest, to see the Hana girls take their divisions, including Lilia, who placed third in the open women’s division, and Theresa, who won the open women’s and the junior women’s division that day. Even if it was just a moment, it was a perfect one, and who wouldn’t choose it over never having the moment at all? When I left Maui that afternoon, my plane circled over Ho’okipa, and I wanted to believe I could still see them down there and always would see them down there, snapping back and forth across the waves.

Jazz June by Clifford Thompson

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When I was fourteen and nearing the end of eighth grade I developed my first serious crush. The girl, named June, was in ninth grade and about to graduate from the junior high school we attended. Given where my crush ultimately got me—i.e., nowhere—June's impending departure, a source of grief for me at the time, was unimportant. June herself, actually, was unimportant. I mean that as a comment not on her worth as a person but on her being the object of my affection, which seems, when I think back on it, almost completely arbitrary. I was of an age and inclination to make one person the center of my can't-sleep-at-night, can't-focus-on-my-homework longing; along came June, hardly gorgeous but pretty enough, nice if not preternaturally sweet. She fit the bill. I had all I needed to be miserable, which I quickly became, not admitting to myself, possibly not even understanding, that my crush was its own point.

June played the violin. I never heard any of her performances myself, but I heard a lot about them. My friend Big Darryl Greenfield, also a ninth-grader, said about a musical number June played at their graduation, "I don't usually like the violin, but she was tearin' it up." I borrowed Darryl's yearbook so that (I didn't tell him this) I could gaze upon and occasionally kiss June's picture, which showed her smiling in her graduation cap. June was part of a group of musical friends to which I was connected tangentially. To have a stronger tie to those superior beings, I signed up that spring of 1977 for summer clarinet lessons with the D.C. Youth Orchestra Program—not to be confused with the actual D.C. Youth Orchestra, the program's elite, of whom June was one. The program had three levels of bands and orchestras, and I got the unspoken message that the orchestras, with their stringed instruments, were considered more important. While I spent that typically sweltering D.C. summer riding two buses to my lessons, squawking and squeaking through quarter- and eighth-notes, June went away to a music camp, adding physical distance to the other forms of distance separating us. And as I waited that summer for the promised postcard from her, which never arrived, June—and, by association, the violin—came to represent for me an unattainable ideal.

June itself, not the girl but the month, has something about it of the unattainable, the unfulfilled promise. That is, paradoxically, because June, at least in the cities where I have spent my life, is the only reliably spring-like month. Spring officially arrives in late March, finding a lot of people still wearing their winter coats; April and even early May sometimes carry a chill. But in June we

can venture outside, where green leaves and flowers are, contending neither with the cold nor with the heat of that long march from Independence Day to Labor Day, that season of commuting in sweat-dampened shirt collars over gradually shortening days. June brings freedom and those wonderful extra hours of sunlight, June whispers that anything is possible, and therein lies the ache: as its days fly by—it is, in the end, just another month, and one of the shorter months at that—we may feel a vague regret over what we have yet again failed to achieve, a hint of sadness for what was promised but not delivered.

There is an answer for this, one that has something in common with my long-ago crush on the girl June: a focus on the feeling itself rather than on where it might lead. In my adopted home, New York City, one way that I revel in the feeling of June, of spring, is to walk across the Brooklyn Bridge, particularly at night, when the Manhattan skyline is lit, each of the many brightened windows in the silhouettes of those tall, tall buildings suggesting industry, energy, creativity. The sense of possibility this inspires, the belief that we can do, that we can at least try, may lead somewhere; but it is also a wonderful thing all by itself.

Among her many other poems, the African-American writer Gwen-dolyn Brooks wrote the following, perhaps her most famous work:

WE REAL COOL

We real cool. We
Left school. We

Lurk late. We
Strike straight. We

Sing sin. We
Thin gin. We

Jazz June. We
Die soon.

The poem adopts the viewpoint of marginalized black boys who shoot pool together. Brooks explained about the passage “We / Jazz June” that these boys, effectively locked out of

mainstream society, gleefully attack its cherished symbols: to June, that month of wedding announcements in newspapers' society pages, the boys bring jazz, originally the music of the low-down. ("Jazz" was once a verb, synonymous with "fuck.")

I may have read that explanation in a textbook, but it's possible—and this is the version of events I prefer—that I heard it from Brooks's own lips, on the one, cringe-worthy occasion when I met her. This was in New York in 1991. I was a freelance (read: an unemployed) writer of twenty-eight, scrounging for a living, and I had signed on to write a young-adult biography of Brooks. In ninety-nine cases out of a hundred, such books are cobbled together with information from secondary sources, but I saw in the newspaper that Brooks was giving a reading in Manhattan, and so I went, hoping to infuse my project with insights that only the poet herself could provide. To my delight, one of the poems she read that night was "We Real Cool." After the reading, while Brooks greeted friends and signed books, I lurked late, waiting for my chance to speak to her. Finally, noticing this silent young stranger, she turned to me, curious. I explained what I was doing, and she asked what she could do for me. And then, God help me, I said to this Pulitzer Prize–winning septuagenarian, "I was hoping I could buy you a cup of something."

I should say here, to portray Brooks in an appropriately positive light and make myself look like less of a fool, that she later personally mailed me materials she thought would help my project. (One of them is the book, signed by Brooks, from which I just copied her poem.) In that moment, though, maybe misinterpreting my offer—or, possibly worse, understanding it perfectly—she bent double with laughter, long, loud laughter of embarrassment for me, for us. It's probably superfluous to report that I bought the poet no cups of anything that night, or ever. As she laughed I felt sorry I had said what I did, sorry I'd come at all to see this woman, who seemed to have about as much use for me as did my old schoolmate June.

We / Jazz June. I have another way of observing and celebrating June: I listen to the late Jaki Byard's solo piano jazz record *Blues for Smoke*, recorded in 1960. Whatever the reason, and it may well be purely subjective, the tunes on *Blues for Smoke*, none more so than "Spanish Tinge No. 1," make me think of soft June nights, of walking slowly, perhaps aimlessly, through dark streets lined with trees that are thick with leaves, the yellow glow of the occasional street lamp illuminating just enough green foliage to hint at its black depths.

There is also the six-minute title track of Sonny Rollins's album *The Bridge*, from 1962. Prior to making that album, Rollins, a young turk of the tenor saxophone, had found himself being

praised by jazz critics even as he sometimes failed to play as well as he wanted. To bring himself closer to what he felt he could do, to pursue what he hoped was possible, Rollins stopped performing and recording for a time and took to practicing his horn on the Brooklyn Bridge. "The Bridge," a nod to those days and nights of dogged self-improvement, features contrasts. Rollins plays in a rapid tempo that occasionally slows, possibly reflecting the ebb and flow of traffic on the bridge; and while he often races up and down chords, seemingly playing every note in existence, he sometimes plays impressionistically, blowing isolated two- or four-note phrases, dabs of sound, bringing to mind the pinpoints of light from office windows of the Manhattan skyline. Rollins's practice sessions were not recorded. Still, sometimes during those June walks over the Brooklyn Bridge, I think of those no doubt beautiful sounds, those expressions of feeling, played not long before my birth and heard mainly by Rollins himself. I am happy to be where that music was made, even if it can't be heard, even if, in the traditional sense, it got nowhere.

I own a clarinet. It was given to me years ago by a friend who found it in the apartment she had just moved into and remembered that I had once played. I don't play anymore. Truth is, I was never very good. There are a number of possible explanations for that—an obvious one, which I don't discount, is simple lack of talent—but an important one may be that I didn't have a model. At age fourteen I didn't know from jazz and wouldn't for years, and so I was without a sense of what was possible on the instrument.

That is not a real regret. I am more than content, today, to be a fan, and to subject my wife and daughters to my fandom. They are good-natured about it. On a recent, chilly autumn day I pulled out one of my oldest jazz CDs, a compilation of the work of the alto saxophonist Julian "Cannonball" Adderley, and played it for my teenaged younger daughter. I have long maintained that the late Cannonball possessed the sweetest sound in all of jazz; I drew my daughter's attention in particular to a ballad called "Spring Is Here," a work my wife once pronounced to be "too beautiful." As we listened to that indeed almost inexpressibly lovely tune, I realized something that I hadn't during the innumerable times I had played this record before, and I said to my daughter about Cannonball's delicate, quivering tone, "He made his horn sound like a violin." And even as, outside, the fall wind stirred brown leaves and deposited them in piles on the wide sidewalks of our Brooklyn neighborhood, I thought for just a moment, hearing that sweet jazz, of June.

Clifford Thompson is the author of Love for Sale and Other Essays *and* Twin of Blackness: A Memoir.