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An 18-Year-Old Looks Back On Life

By JOYCE MAYNARD

Every generation thinks it's special--my grandparents because they remember horses and buggies, my parents because of the Depression. The over-30's are special because they knew the Red Scare of Korea, Chuck Berry and beatniks. My older sister is special because she belonged to the first generation of teen-agers (before that, people in their teens were *adolescents*), when being a teen-ager was still fun. And I--I am 18, caught in the middle. Mine is the generation of unfulfilled expectations. "When you're older," my mother promised, "you can wear lipstick." But when the time came, of course, lipstick wasn't being worn. "When we're big, we'll dance like that," my friends and I whispered, watching Chubby Checker twist on "American Bandstand." But we inherited no dance steps, ours was a limp, formless shrug to watered-down music that rarely made the feet tap. "Just wait till we can vote," I said, bursting with 10-year-old fervor, ready to fast, freeze, march and die for peace and freedom as Joan Baez, barefoot, sang "We Shall Overcome." Well, now we can vote, and we're old enough to attend rallies and knock on doors and wave placards, and suddenly it doesn't seem to matter any more.

My generation is special because of what we missed rather than what we got, because in a certain sense we are the first and the last. The first to take technology for granted. (What was a space shot to us, except an hour cut from Social Studies to gather before a TV in the gym as Cape Canaveral counted down?) The first to grow up with TV. My sister was 8 when we got our set, so to her it seemed magic and always somewhat foreign. She had known books already and would never really replace them. But for me, the TV set was, like the kitchen sink and the telephone, a fact of life.

We inherited a previous generation's hand-me-downs and took in the seams, turned up the hems, to make our new fashions. We took drugs from the college kids and made them a high-school commonplace. We got the Beatles, but not those lovable look-alikes in matching suits with barber cuts and songs that made you want to cry. They came to us like a bad joke--aged, bearded, discordant. And we inherited the Vietnam war just after the crest of the wave--too late to burn draft cards and too early not to be drafted. The boys of 1953--my year--will be the last to go.

So where are we now? Generalizing is dangerous. Call us the apathetic generation and we will become that. Say times are changing, nobody cares about prom queens and getting into the college of his choice any more--say that (because it sounds good, it indicates a trend, gives a symmetry to history) and you make a movement

and a unit out of a generation unified only in its common fragmentation. If there is a reason why we are where we are, it comes from where we have been.

Like overanxious patients in analysis, we treasure the traumas of our childhood. Ours was more traumatic than most. The Kennedy assassination has become our myth: Talk to us for an evening or two--about movies or summer jobs or Nixon's trip to China or the weather--and the subject will come up ("Where were *you* when you heard?"), as if having lived through Jackie and the red roses, John-John's salute and Oswald's on-camera murder justifies our disenchantment.

We haven't all emerged the same, of course, because our lives were lived in high-school corridors and drive-in hamburger joints as well as in the pages of *Time* and *Life*, and the images on the TV screen. National events and personal memory blur so that, for me, Nov. 22, 1963, was a birthday party that had to be called off and Armstrong's moonwalk was my first full can of beer. If you want to know who we are now; if you wonder how we'll vote, or whether we will, or whether, 10 years from now, we'll end up just like all those other generations that thought they were special--with 2.2 kids and a house in Connecticut--if that's what you're wondering, look to the past because, whether we should blame it or not, we do.

I didn't know till years later that they called it the Cuban Missile Crisis. But I remember Castro. (We called him Castor Oil and were awed by his beard--beards were rare in those days.) We might not have worried so much (what would the Communists want with our small New Hampshire town?) except that we lived 10 miles from an air base. Planes buzzed around us like mosquitoes that summer. People talked about fallout shelters in their basements and one family on our street packed their car to go to the mountains. I couldn't understand that. If everybody was going to die, I certainly didn't want to stick around, with my hair falling out and--later--a plague of thalidomide-type babies. I wanted to go quickly, with my family.

Dying didn't bother me so much--I'd never known anyone who died, and death was unreal, fascinating. (I wanted Doctor Kildare to have more terminal cancer patients and fewer love affairs.) What bothered me was the business of immortality. Sometimes, the growing-up sort of concepts germinate slowly, but the full impact of death hit me like a bomb, in the night. Not only would my body be gone--that I could take--but I would cease to think. That I would no longer be a participant I had realized before; now I saw that I wouldn't even be an observer. What especially alarmed me about The Bomb (always singular like, a few years later, The Pill) was the possibility of total obliteration. All traces of me would be destroyed. There would be no grave and, if there were, no one left to visit it.

Newly philosophical, I pondered the universe. If the earth was in the solar system and the solar system was in the galaxy and the galaxy was in the universe, what was the universe in? And if the sun was just a dot--the head of a pin--what was I? We visited a planetarium that year, in third grade, and saw a dramatization of the sun exploding. Somehow the image of that orange ball zooming toward us merged with my image of The Bomb. The effect was devastating, and for the first time in my life--except for Easter Sundays, when I wished I went to church so I could have a fancy new dress like my Catholic and Protestant friends--I longed for religion.

I was 8 when Joan Baez entered our lives, with long, black, beatnik hair and a dress

made out of a burlap bag. When we got her first record (we called her Joan *Baze* then- -soon she was simply Joan) we listened all day, to "All My Trials" and "Silver Dagger" and "Wildwood Flower." My sister grew her hair and started wearing sandals, making pilgrimages to Harvard Square. I took up the guitar. We loved her voice and her songs but, even more, we loved the idea of Joan, like the 15th-century Girl of Orleans, burning at society's stake, marching along or singing, solitary, in a prison cell to protest segregation. She was the champion of nonconformity and so--like thousands of others-- we joined the masses of her fans.

I knew she must but somehow I could never imagine Jackie Kennedy going to the bathroom. She was too cool and poised and perfect. We had a book about her, filled with color pictures of Jackie painting, in a spotless yellow linen dress, Jackie on the beach with Caroline and John-John, Jackie riding elephants in India and Jackie, in a long white gown, greeting Khrushchev like Snow White welcoming one of the seven dwarfs. (No, I wasn't betraying Joan in my adoration. Joan was beautiful but human like us; Jackie was magic.) When, years later, she married Rumpelstiltskin, I felt like a child discovering, in his father's drawer, the Santa Claus suit. And, later still, reading some Ladies' Home Journal exposé ("Jacqueline Onassis's secretary tells all. . .") I felt almost sick. After the first few pages I put the magazine down. I wasn't interested in the fragments, only in the fact that the glass had broken.

They told us constantly that Oyster River Elementary School was one of the best in the state, but the state was New Hampshire, and that was like calling a mound of earth a peak because it rose up from the Sahara Desert. One fact of New Hampshire politics I learned early: We had no broad-based tax. No sales or income tax, because the anti-Federalist farmers and the shoe-factory workers who feared the Reds and creeping Socialism acquired their political philosophy from William Loeb's Manchester Union Leader. We in Durham, where the state university stands, were a specially hated target, a pocked of liberals filling the minds of New Hampshire's young with high-falutin, intellectual garbage. And that was why the archaic New Hampshire Legislature always cut the university budget in half, and why my family had only one car, second-hand (my father taught English at the university). And The Union leader was the reason, finally, why any man who wanted to be elected Governor had better pledge himself against the sales tax, so schools were supported by local property taxes and the sweepstakes, which meant that they weren't supported very well. So Oyster River was not a very good school.

But in all the bleakness--the annual memorizing of Kilmer's "Trees," the punishment administered by banging guilty heads on hard oak desks--we had one fine, fancy new gimmick that followed us from fourth grade through eighth. It was a white cardboard box of folders, condensed two-page stories about dinosaurs and earthquakes and Seeing- Eye dogs, with questions at the end. The folders were called Power Builders and they were leveled according to color--red, blue, yellow, orange, brown--all the way up to the dreamed-for, cheated-for purple. Power Builders came with their own answer keys, the idea being that you moved at your own rate and--we heard it a hundred times--that when you cheated, you only cheated yourself. The whole program was called SRA and there were a dozen other abbreviations, TTUM, FSU, PDQ--all having to do with formulas that had reduced reading to a science.

We had Listening Skill Builders, too--more reader-digested minimodules of

information, read aloud to us while we sat, poised stiffly in our chairs, trying frantically to remember the five steps (SRQPT? VWCNB? XUSLIN?) to Better Listening Comprehension. A Listening Skill Test would come later, to catch the mental wanderers, the doodler, the deaf.

I--and most of the others in the Purple group--solved the problem by tucking an answer key into my Power Builder and writing down the answers (making an occasional error for credibility) without reading the story or the questions. By sixth grade, a whole group of us had been promoted to a special reading group and sent to an independent study- conference unit (nothing was a *room* any more) where we copied answer keys, five at a time, and then told dirty jokes.

SRA took over reading the way New Math took over arithmetic. By seventh grade, there was a special Development Reading class. (Mental reading, we called it.) The classroom was filled with audio-visual aids, phonetics charts, reading laboratories. Once a week, the teacher plugged in the speed-reading machine that projected a story on the board, one phrase at a time, faster and faster. Get a piece of dust in your eye--blink--and you were lost.

There were no books in the Developmental Reading room--the lab. Even in English class we escaped books easily. The project of the year was to portray a famous author (one of the 100 greatest of all time). I was Louisa May Alcott, and my best friend was Robert McCloskey, the man who wrote "Make Way for Ducklings." For this we put on skits, cut out pictures from magazines and, at the end of the year, dressed up. (I wore a long nightgown with my hair in a bun and got A-plus; my friend came as a duck.) I have never read a book by Louisa May Alcott. I don't think I read a book all that year. All through high school, in fact, I read little except for magazines. Though I've started reading seriously now, in college, I still find myself drawn in bookstores to the bright covers and shiny, power-builder look. My eyes have been trained to skip non-essentials (adjectives, adverbs) and dart straight to the meaty phrases. (TVPQM.) But--perhaps in defiance of that whirring black rate-builder projector--it takes me three hours to read 100 pages.

If I had spent at the piano the hours I gave to television, on all those afternoons when I came home from school, I would be an accomplished pianist now. Or if I'd danced, or read, or painted. . . . But I turned on the set instead, every day, almost, every year, and sank into an old green easy chair, smothered in quilts, with a bag of Fritos beside me and a glass of milk to wash them down, facing life and death with Dr. Kildare, laughing at Danny Thomas, whispering the answers--out loud sometimes--with "Password" and "To Tell the Truth." Looking back over all those afternoons, I try to convince myself they weren't wasted. I must have learned something; I must, at least, have changed.

What I learned was certainly not what TV tried to teach me. From the reams of trivia collected over years of quiz shows, I remember only the questions, never the answers. I loved "Leave It to Beaver" for the messes Beaver got into, not for the inevitable lecture from Dad at the end of each show. I saw every episode two or three times, witnessed Beaver's aging, his legs getting longer and his voice lower, only to start all over again with young Beaver every fall. (Someone told me recently that the boy who played Beaver Cleaver died in Vietnam. The news was a shock--I kept coming back to it for days until another distressed Beaver fan wrote to tell me

that it wasn't true after all.)

I got so I could predict punch lines and endings, not really knowing whether I'd seen the episode before or only watched one like it. There was the bowling-ball routine, for instance: Lucy, Dobie Gillis, Pete and Gladys--they all used it. Somebody would get his finger stuck in a bowling ball (Lucy later updated the gimmick using Liz Taylor's ring) and then they'd have to go to a wedding or give a speech at the P.T.A. or have the boss to dinner, concealing one hand all the while. We weren't supposed to ask questions like "Why don't they just tell the truth?" These shows were built on deviousness, on the longest distance between two points, and on a kind of symmetry which decrees that no loose ends shall be left untied, no lingering doubts allowed. (The Surgeon General is off the track in worrying about TV violence, I think. I grew up in the days before lawmen became peacemakers. What carries over is not the gunfights but the memory that everything always turned out all right.) Optimism shone through all those half hours I spent in the dark shadows of the TV room--out of evil shall come good.

Most of all, the situation comedies steeped me in American culture. I emerged from years of TV viewing indifferent to the museums of France, the architecture of Italy, the literature of England. A perversely homebound American, I pick up paperbacks in bookstores, checking before I buy to see if the characters have foreign names, whether the action takes place in London or New York. Vulgarly and banality fascinate me. More intellectual friends (who watch no TV) can't understand what I see in "My Three Sons." "Nothing happens," they say. "The characters are dull, plastic, faceless. Every show is the same." I guess that's why I watch them--boring repetition is, itself, a rhythm--a steady pulse of flashing Coca-Cola signs, McDonald's Golden Arches and Howard Johnson roofs.

I don't watch TV as an anthropologist, rising loftily above my subject to analyze. Neither do I watch, as some kids now tune in to reruns of "The Lone Ranger" and "Superman" (in the same spirit they enjoy comic books and pop art) for their camp. I watch in earnest. How can I do anything else? Five thousand hours of my life have gone into this box.

There were almost no blacks in our school. There were Negroes then; the word *black* was hard to say at first. *Negro* got hard to say for a while too, so I said nothing at all and was embarrassed. If you had asked me, at 9, to describe Cassius Clay, I would have taken great, liberal pains to be color-blind, mentioning height, build, eye color and shoe size, disregarding skin. I knew black people only from newspapers and the TV screen--picket lines, National Guardsmen at the doors of schools. (There were few black actors on TV then, except for Jack Benny's Rochester.) It was easy, in 1963, to embrace the Negro cause. Later, faced with cold stares from an all-black table in the cafeteria or heckled by a Panther selling newspapers, I first became aware of the fact that maybe the little old lady didn't want to be helped across the street. My visions of black-and-white-together look to me now like shots from "To Sir With Love." If a black is friendly to me, I wonder, as other blacks might, if he's a sellout.

I had no desire to scream or cry or throw jelly beans when I first saw the Beatles on the Ed Sullivan Show. An eighth-grader would have been old enough to revert to childhood, but I was too young to act anything but old. So mostly we laughed at

them. We were in fifth grade, the year of rationality, the calm before the storm. We still screamed when the boys came near us (which they rarely did) and said they had cooties. Barbie dolls tempted us. That was the year when I got my first Barbie. Perhaps they were produced earlier, but they didn't reach New Hampshire till late that fall, and the stores were always sold out. So at the close of our doll-playing careers there was a sudden dramatic switch from lumpy, round-bellied Betsy Wetsys and stiff-legged little-girl dolls to slim, curvy Barbie, just 11 inches tall, with a huge, expensive wardrobe that included a filmy black negligee and a mouth that made her look as if she'd just swallowed a lemon.

Barbie wasn't just a toy, but a way of living that moved us suddenly from tea parties to dates with Ken at the Soda Shoppe. Our short careers with Barbie, before junior high sent her to the attic, built up our expectations for teen-age life before we had developed the sophistication to go along with them. Children today are accustomed to having a tantalizing youth culture all around them. (They play with Barbie in the nursery school.) For us, it broke like a cloudburst, without preparation. Caught in the deluge, we were torn--wanting to run for shelter but tempted, also, to sing in the rain.

To me, a 10-year-old sixth-grader in 1964, the Goldwater-Johnson election year was a drama, a six-month basketball playoff game, more action-packed than movies or TV. For all the wrong reasons I loved politics and plunged into the campaign fight. Shivering in the October winds outside a supermarket ("Hello, would you like some L.B.J. matches?"), Youth for Johnson tried hard to believe in the man with the 10-gallon hat. We were eager for a hero (we'd lost ours just 11 months before) and willing to trust. Government deceit was not yet taken for granted--maybe because we were more naive but also because the country was. Later, the war that never ended and the C.I.A. and the Pentagon Papers and I.T.T. would shake us, but in those days, when a man said, "My fellow Americans. . .," we listened.

At school, I was a flaming liberal, holding lunchroom debates and setting up a 10-year-old's dichotomies: If you were for Johnson, you were "for" the Negroes, if you were for Goldwater, you were against them. Equally earnest Republicans would expound the domino theory and I would waver in spite of myself (what they said sounded logical), knowing there was a fallacy somewhere but saying only, "If my father was here, he'd explain it. . . ."

A friend and I set up a campaign headquarters at school, under a huge "All the Way With L.B.J." sign. (The tough kids snickered at that--"all the way" was reserved for the behavior of fast girls in the janitor's closet at dances.) The pleasure we got from our L.B.J. headquarters and its neat stacks of buttons and pamphlets was much the same as the pleasure I got, five years later, manning the "Support your Junior Prom" bake-sale table in the lobby at school. I liked playing store, no matter what the goods.

And I believed, then, in the power of dissent and the possibility for change. I wrote protest songs filled with bloody babies and starving Negroes, to the tune of "America the Beautiful." I marched through the streets of town, a tall candle flickering in my hand, surrounded by college kids with love beads and placards (what they said seems mild and polite now). I remember it was all so beautiful I cried, but when I try to recapture the feeling, nothing comes. Like a sharp pain or the

taste of peach ice cream on a hot July day, the sensation lasts only as long as the stimulus.

Ask us whose face is on the \$5 bill and we may not know the answer. But nearly everyone my age remembers a cover of Life magazine that came out in the spring of 1965, part of a series of photographs that enter my dreams and my nightmares still. They were the first shots ever taken of an unborn fetus, curled up tightly in a sack of veins and membranes, with blue fingernails and almost transparent skin that made the pictures look like double exposures. More than the moon photographs a few years later, that grotesque figure fascinated me as the map of a new territory. It was often that way with photographs in Life--the issue that reported on the "In Cold Blood" murders; a single picture of a boy falling from an airplane and another of a woman who had lost 200 pounds. (I remember the faces of victims and killers from seven or eight years ago, while the endless issues on Rome and nature studies are entirely lost.)

Photographs are the illustrations for a decade of experiences. Just as, when we think of "Alice in Wonderland," we all see Tenniel's drawings, and when we think of the Cowardly Lion, we all see Bert Lahr, so, when we think of Lyndon Johnson's airborne swearing-in as President in 1963, we have a common image furnished by magazines, and when we think of fetuses, now, those cabbages we were supposed to have come from and smiling, golden-haired cherubs have been replaced forever by the cover of Life. Having had so many pictures to grow up with, we share a common visual idiom and have far less room for personal vision. The movie versions of books decide for us what our heroes and villains will look like, and we are powerless to change the camera's decree. So, while I was stunned and fascinated by that eerie fetus (where is he now, I wonder, and are those pictures in his family album?) I'm saddened too, knowing what it did to me. If I were asked to pinpoint major moments in my growing up, experiences that changed me, the sight of that photograph would be one.

Eighth grade was groovy. When I think of 1966, I see pink and orange stripes and wild purple paisleys and black and white vibrating to make the head ache. We were too young for drugs (they hadn't reached the junior high yet) but we didn't need them. Our world was psychedelic, our clothes and our make-up and our jewelry and our hair styles were trips in themselves. It was the year of the gimmick, and what mattered was being noticed, which meant being wild and mod and having the shortest skirt and the whitest Yardley Slicker lips and the dangliest earrings. (We all pierced our ears that year. You can tell the girls of 1966--they're the ones with not-quite-healed-over holes in their ears.)

I've kept my Seventeen magazines from junior high: vinyl skirts, paper dresses, Op and Pop, Sassoon haircuts, Patty Duke curls and body painting. My own clothes that year would have glowed in the dark. I remember one, a poor-boy top and mod Carnaby Street hat, a silver microskirt and purple stockings. (Pantyhose hadn't been invented yet; among our other distinctions, call us the last generation to wear garter belts. I recall an agonizing seventh-period math class in which, 10 minutes before the bell rang, my front and back garters came simultaneously undone.)

It was as if we'd just discovered color, and all the shiny, sterile things machines made possible for us. Now we cultivate the natural, home-made look, with earthy

colors and frayed, lumpy macramé sashes that no one would mistake for store-bought. But back then we tried to look like spacemen, distorting natural forms. Nature wasn't a vanishing treasure to us yet--it was a barrier to be overcome. The highest compliment, the ultimate adjective was *unreal*.

I can understand the Jesus freaks turning, dope-muddled, to a life of self-denial and asceticism. The excesses of eighth-grade psychedelia left me feeling the same way and I turned, in 1967, to God. To the church, at least, anxious to wash away the bad aftertaste of too many Cokes and too much eye shadow. The church I chose, the only one conceivable for a confirmed atheist, wasn't really a church at all, but a dark gray building that housed the Unitarian Fellowship. They were an earnest, liberal-minded, socially-conscious congregation numbering 35 or 40. If I had been looking for spirituality, I knocked at the wrong door; the Unitarians were rationalists--scientists, mostly, whose programs would be slide shows of plant life in North Africa or discussions of migratory labor problems. We believed in our fellow man.

We tried Bible-reading in my Liberal Religious Youth group, sitting on orange crates in a circle of four but in that mildewed attic room, the Old Testament held no power. We gave up on Genesis and rapped, instead, with a casual college student who started class saying, "Man, do I have a hangover." We tried singing: one soprano, two tenors and a tone-deaf alto, draped in shabby black robes designed for taller worshipers. After a couple of weeks of singing we switched, wisely, to what Unitarians do best, to the subjects suited to orange crates. We found a cause.

We discovered the Welfare Mothers of America--one Welfare Mother in particular. She was an angry, militant mother of eight (no husband in the picture) who wanted to go to the national conference in Tennessee and needed someone to foot the bill. I don't know who told us about Mrs. Mahoney, or her about us. In one excited Sunday meeting, anyway, the four of us voted to pay her way and, never having earned \$4 without spending it, never having met Peg Mahoney, we called the state office of the Unitarian Church and arranged for a \$200 loan. Then we made lists, allocated jobs, formed committees (as well as committees can be formed, with an active membership of four and a half dozen others who preferred to sleep in on Sundays). We would hold a spaghetti supper, all proceeds to go to the Mahoney fund.

We never heard what happened at the welfare conference--in fact, we never heard from our welfare mother again. She disappeared, with the red-plaid suitcase I lent her for the journey and the new hat we saw her off in. Our \$200 debt lingered on through not one but three spaghetti suppers, during which I discovered that there's more to Italian-style, fundraising dinners than red-and-white-checked tablecloths and Segovia records. Every supper began with five or six helpers; as more and more customers arrived, though, fewer and fewer L.R.Y.-ers stayed on to help. By 10 o'clock, when the last walnut-sized meatball had been cooked and the last pot of spaghetti drained, there would be two of us left in our tomato-spotted aprons, while all around, religious youth high on red wine sprawled and hiccuped on the kitchen floor, staggering nervously to the door, every few minutes, to make sure their parents weren't around. I never again felt the same about group activity--united we stand, and that wonderful feeling I used to get at Pete Seeger concerts, singing "This Land is Your Land"--that if we worked together, nothing was impossible.

After the debt was paid I left L.R.Y., which had just discovered sensitivity training.

Now the group held weekly, nonverbal communication sessions, with lots of hugging and feeling that boosted attendance to triple what it had been in our old save-the-world days. It seemed that everybody's favorite topic was himself.

Marijuana and the class of '71 moved through high school together. When we came in, as freshmen, drugs were still strange and new; marijuana was smoked only by a few marginal figures while those in the mainstream guzzled beer. It was called pot then--the words grass and dope came later; hash and acid and pills were almost unheard of. By my sophomore year, lots of the seniors and even a few younger kids were trying it. By the time I was a junior--in 1969--grass was no longer reserved for the hippies; basketball players and cheerleaders and boys with crew-cuts and boys in black-leather jackets all smoked. And with senior year--maybe because of the nostalgia craze--there was an odd liquor revival. In my last month of school, a major bust led to the suspension of half a dozen boys. They were high on beer.

Now people are saying that the drug era is winding down. (It's those statisticians with their graphs again, charting social phenomena like the rise and fall of hemlines.) I doubt if it's real, this abandonment of marijuana. But the frenzy is gone, certainly, the excitement and the fear of getting caught and the worry of where to get good stuff. What's happened to dope is what happens to a new record: you play it constantly, full volume, at first. Then, as you get to know the songs, you play them less often, not because you're tired of them exactly, but just because you know them. They're with you always, but quietly, in your head. My position was a difficult one, all through those four years when grass took root in Oyster River High. I was on the side of all those things that went along with smoking dope--the clothes, the music, the books, the candidates. More and more of my friends smoked, and many people weren't completely my friends, I think, because I didn't. Drugs took on a disproportionate importance. Why was it I could spend half a dozen evenings with someone without his ever asking me what I thought of Beethoven or Picasso but always, in the first half hour, he'd ask whether I smoked?

It became--like hair length and record collection--a symbol for who you were, and you couldn't be all the other things--progressive and creative and free-thinking--without taking that crumpled roll of dry, brown vegetation and holding it to your lips. You are what you eat--or what you smoke, or what you don't smoke. And when you say "like-- you know," you're speaking the code, and suddenly the music of the Grateful Dead and the poetry of Bob Dylan and the general brilliance of Ken Kesey all belong to you as if, in those three fuzzy, mumbled words, you'd created art yourself and uttered the wisdom of the universe.

In my junior year I had English and algebra and French and art and history, but what I really had was fun. It was a year when I didn't give a thought to welfare mothers or war or peace or brotherhood; the big questions in my life were whether to cut my hair and what the theme of the Junior Prom should be. (I left my hair long. We decided on a castle.) Looking back on a year of sitting around just talking and drinking beer and driving around drinking beer and dancing and drinking beer and just drinking beer, I can say, "Ah yes, the post-Woodstock disenchantment; the post-Chicago, postelection apathy; the rootlessness of a generation whose leaders had all been killed. . . ."

But if that's what it was, we certainly didn't know it. Our lives were dominated by

parties and pranks and dances and soccer games. (We won the state championship that year. Riding home in a streamer-trailing yellow bus, cheering "We're Number One," it never occurred to us that so were 49 other schools in 49 other states.) It was a time straight out of the goldfish-swallowing thirties, with a difference. We knew just enough to feel guilty, like trick-or-treaters nervously passing a ghost with a UNICEF box in his hand. We didn't feel bad enough not to build a 20-foot cardboard-and-crepe-paper castle, but we knew enough to realize, as we ripped it down the next morning, Grecian curls unwinding limply down our backs, that silver-painted cardboard and tissue-paper carnations weren't biodegradable.

I had never taken Women's Liberation very seriously. Partly it was the looks of the movement that bothered me. I believed in all the right things, but just as my social conscience evaporated at the prospect of roughing it in some tiny village with the Peace Corps, so my feminist notions disappeared at the thought of giving up eye liner (just when I'd discovered it). Media-vulnerable, I wanted to be on the side of the beautiful, graceful people, and Women's Libbers seemed--except for Gloria Steinem, who was just emerging--plain and graceless. Women's Lib was still new and foreign, suggesting--to kids at an age of still-undefined sexuality--things like lesbianism and bisexuality. (We hadn't mastered *one*--how could we cope with the possibility of two?)

Besides, male chauvinism had no reality for me. In my family--two girls and two girl-loving parents--females occupied a privileged position. My mother and sister and I had no trouble getting equal status in our household. At school, too, girls seemed never to be discriminated against. (I wonder if I'd see things differently, going back there now.) Our class was run mostly by girls. The boys played soccer and sometimes held office on the student council--amiable figureheads--but it was the girls whose names filled the honor roll and the girls who ran class meetings. While I would never be Homecoming Sweetheart--I knew that--I had power in the school.

Then suddenly everything changed. A nearby boys' prep school announced that it would admit girls as day students. So at 17, in my senior year, I left Oyster River High for Phillips Exeter Academy.

The new world wasn't quite as I'd imagined. Exeter was a boys' school ("*Huc venite pueri, ut viri sitis*") in which girls were an afterthought. We were so few that, to many, we appeared unapproachable. Like the Exeter blacks, the Exeter girls moved in a gang across the campus, ate together at all-girl tables and fled, after classes, to the isolated study areas allotted to them. The flight of the girls angered me; I felt newly militant, determined not to be intimidated by all those suits and ties and all the ivy-covered education. I wasn't just me anymore, but a symbol of my sex who had to prove, to 800 boys used to weekend girls at mixers, that I could hold my own. I found myself the only girl in every class--turned to, occasionally, by a faculty member accustomed to man-talk, and asked to give "the female point of view."

It makes one suspicious, paranoid. Why was I never asked to give the Scorpio's viewpoint, the myopic's, the half-Jewish, right-handed, New Hampshire resident's? Was being female my most significant feature? The subject of coeducation gets boring after a while. I wanted to talk about a book I'd read (having just discovered that reading could be fun) or a play I was in--and then somebody would ask the

inevitable, "What's it like to be a girl at Exeter?"

I became a compulsive overachiever, joining clubs and falling asleep at the typewriter in the hope of battering down doors I was used to having open, at my old school, where they knew me. Here someone else was the newspaper editor, the yearbook boss, the actor, the writer. I was the girl. All of first semester I approached school like a warrior on the offensive, a self-proclaimed outsider. Then, in the cease-fire over Christmas, I went to a hometown New Year's Eve party with the people I'd been romanticizing all that fall when I was surrounded by lawyers' sons. The conversation back home was of soccer games I hadn't been to and a graduation I wouldn't be marching in. The school had gone on without me; I was a preppie.

Something strange got into the boys at Exeter that year as if, along with the legendary saltpeter, something like lust for the country was being sprinkled into the nightly mashed potatoes. It wasn't just the overalls (with a tie on top to meet the dress code) or the country music that came humming out of every dorm. Exonians--Jonathan Jrs. And Carter 3d's, Latin scholars and mathematicians with 800's on their college boards--were suddenly announcing to the college placement counselor that no, they didn't want a Harvard interview, not now or ever. Hampshire, maybe, (that's the place where you can go and study Eastern religion or dulcimer-making). But many weren't applying any place--they were going to study weaving in Norway, to be shepherds in the Alps, deckhands on a fishing boat or--most often--farmers. After the first ecological fury died down, after Ehrlich's "Population Bomb" exploded, that's what we were left with. Prep school boys felt it more than most, perhaps, because they, more than most, had worked their minds at the expense of their hands. And now, their heads full of theorems and declensions, they wanted to get back to the basics--to the simple, honest, uncluttered life where manure was cow s___, not bovine waste.

Exeter's return to the soil took the form of the farm project, a group of boys who got together, sold a few stocks, bought a red pick-up truck and proposed, for a spring project, that they work a plot of school-owned land a few miles out of town. The country kids I went to Oyster River with, grown up now and working in the shoe factory or married-- they would have been amused at the farming fairy tale. In March, before the ice thawed, the harvest was already being planned. The faculty objected and the project died, and most--not all--went on to college in the fall. (They talk now, from a safe distance, about the irrelevance of Spenser and the smell of country soil and fresh-cut hay.) A friend who really did go on to farming came to visit me at school this fall. He looked out of place in the dorm; he put his boots up on my desk and then remembered he had cow dung on the soles. He laughed when I reminded him about the farm project. It's best they never really tried, I think. That way, in 10 years, when they're brokers, they'll still have the dream: tomatoes big as pumpkins, pumpkins as big as suns and corn that's never known the touch of blight.

Gene McCarthy must have encountered blizzards in 1968, and mill towns like Berlin, N.H.--where I went to campaign for George McGovern last February--must have smelled just as bad as they do now. But back in '68 those things made the fight even more rewarding, because in suffering for your candidate and your dreams, you are demonstrating love. But now, in 1972, there's nothing fun about air so smelly you buy perfume to hold under your nose, or snow falling so thick you can't make out the words on the Yorty billboard right in front of you. No one feels moved to

build snowmen.

Campaigning in New Hampshire was work. Magazines and newspapers blame the absence of youth excitement on McGovern and say he lacks charisma--he isn't a poet and his bumper stickers aren't daisy shaped. But I think the difference in 1972 lies in the canvassers; this year's crusaders seem joyless, humorless. A high-school junior stuffing envelopes at campaign headquarters told me that when she was young--what is she now?--she was a Socialist. Another group of students left, after an hour of knocking on doors, to go snowmobiling. Somebody else, getting on the bus for home, said, "This makes the fifth weekend I've worked for the campaign," and I was suddenly struck by the fact that we'd all been compiling similar figures--how many miles we'd walked, how many houses we'd visited. In 1968 we believed, and so we shivered; in 1972, we shivered so that we might believe.

Our candidate this year is no less believable, but our idealism has soured and our motives have gotten less noble. We went to Berlin--many of us--so we could say "I canvassed in New Hampshire," the way high-school kids join clubs so they can write "I'm a member of the Latin Club" on their college applications. The students for McGovern whom I worked with were engaged in a business deal, trading frost-bitten fingers for guilt-free consciences; 1968's dreams and abstractions just don't hold up on a bill of sale.

The freshman women's dorm at Yale has no house mother. We have no check-in hours or drinking rules or punishments for having boys in our rooms past midnight. A guard sits by the door to offer, as they assured us at the beginning of the year, physical--not moral--protection. All of which makes it easy for many girls who feel, after high-school curfews and dating regulations, suddenly liberated. (The first week of school last fall, many girls stayed out all night, every night, displaying next morning the circles under their eyes the way some girls show off engagement rings.)

We all received the "Sex at Yale" book, a thick, black pamphlet filled with charts and diagrams and a lengthy discussion of contraceptive methods. And at the first women's assembly, the discussion moved quickly from course-signing-up procedures to gynecology, where it stayed for much of the evening. Somebody raised her hand to ask where she could fill her pill prescription, someone else wanted to know about abortions. There was no standing in the middle any more--you had to either take out a pen and paper and write down the phone numbers they gave out or stare stonily ahead, implying that those were numbers *you* certainly wouldn't be needing. From then on it seemed the line had been drawn.

But of course the problem is that no lines, no barriers, exist. Where, five years ago a girl's decisions were made for her (she had to be in at 12 and, if she was found--in--with her boyfriend. . .); today the decision rests with her alone. She is surrounded by knowledgeable, sexually experienced girls and if *she* isn't willing to sleep with her boyfriend, somebody else will. It's peer-group pressure, 1972 style--the embarrassment of virginity.

Everyone is raised on nursery rhymes and nonsense stories. But it used to be that when you grew up, the nonsense disappeared. Not for us--it is at the core of our music and literature and art and, in fact, of our lives. Like characters in an Ionesco play, we take absurdity unblinking. In a world where military officials tell us "We

had to destroy the village in order to save it," Dylan lyrics make an odd kind of sense. They aren't meant to be understood; they don't jar our sensibilities because we're used to *non sequiturs*. We don't take anything too seriously these days. (Was it a thousand earthquake victims or a million? Does it matter?) The casual butcher's-operation in the film "M*A*S*H" and the comedy in Vonnegut and the album cover showing John and Yoko, bareback, are all part of the new absurdity. The days of the Little Moron joke and the elephant joke and the knock-knock joke are gone. It sounds melodramatic, but the joke these days is life.

You're not supposed to care too much any more. Reactions have been scaled down from screaming and jelly-bean-throwing to nodding your head and maybe--if the music really gets to you (and music's the only thing that does any more)--tapping a finger. We need a passion transfusion, a shot of energy in the veins. It's what I'm most impatient with, in my generation--this languid, I-don't-give-a-s____-ism that stems in part, at least, from a culture of put-ons in which any serious expression of emotion is branded sentimental and old-fashioned. The fact that we set such a premium on being cool reveals a lot about my generation; the idea is not to care. You can hear it in the speech of college students today: cultivated monotones, low volume, punctuated with four-letter words that come off sounding only bland. I feel it most of all on Saturday morning, when the sun is shining and the crocuses are about to bloom and, walking through the corridors of my dorm, I see there isn't anyone awake.

I'm basically an optimist. Somehow, no matter what the latest population figures say, I feel everything will work out--just like on TV. I may doubt man's fundamental goodness, but I believe in his power to survive. I say, sometimes, that I wonder if we'll be around in 30 years, but then I forget myself and speak of "when I'm 50. . . ." Death has touched me now--from Vietnam and Biafra and a car accident that makes me buckle my seat belt--but like negative numbers and the sound of a dog whistle (too high-pitched for human ears), it's not a concept I can comprehend. I feel immortal while all the signs around me proclaim that I'm not.

We feel cheated, many of us--the crop of 1953--which is why we complain about inheriting problems we didn't cause. (Childhood notions of justice, reinforced by Perry Mason, linger on. Why should I clean up someone else's mess? Who can I blame?) We're excited also, of course: I can't wait to see how things turn out. But I wish I weren't quite so involved, I wish it weren't my life that's being turned into a suspense thriller.

When my friends and I were little, we had big plans. I would be a famous actress and singer, dancing on the side. I would paint my own sets and compose my own music, writing the script and the lyrics and reviewing the performance for The New York Times. I would marry and have three children (they don't allow us dreams like that any more) and we would live, rich and famous (donating lots to charity, of course, and periodically adopting orphans), in a house we designed ourselves. When I was older I had visions of good works. I saw myself in South American rain forests and African deserts, feeding the hungry and healing the sick, with an obsessive selflessness, I see now, as selfish, in the end, as my original plans for stardom.

Now my goal is simpler. I want to be happy. And I want comfort--nice clothes, a nice house, good music and good food, and the feeling that I'm doing some little

thing that matters. I'll vote and I'll give to charity, but I won't give myself. I feel a sudden desire to buy land--not a lot, not as a business investment, but just a small plot of earth so that whatever they do to the country I'll have a place where I can go--a kind of fallout shelter, I guess. As some people prepare for their old age, so I prepare for my 20's. A little house, a comfortable chair, peace and quiet--retirement sounds tempting.

Joyce Maynard, who will complete her freshman year at Yale in June, is writing and illustrating a book on building dollhouses.

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