

Endless Summer

A few weeks ago, I was sitting – or more accurately, sweating – on a friend’s lumpy Los Angeles couch when I was asked a question that stopped me in my tracks. It was not a revolutionary question, nor was it particularly difficult to answer. In fact, it was a simple question with a simple answer – the simplicity of it all which gave me pause. But the asking of the question – by a friend of a friend wearing khaki Bermuda shorts – did the opposite; it restored some real-world consciousness buried in my brain – a light bulb flashing above my head as an alarm clock for a reality check.

The question arose in small talk. You know the kind: the perfunctory nodding, thin-lipped smiles, and questions that teetered between friendly and intrusive. This particular small talk was aloof more than anything else. The two conversationalists – a friend of a friend named Jared whose face I cannot even picture now and me – were both painfully shy and felt out of place, apparent from our rigid questions and absence of prolonged eye contact.

“So, where have you been staying this summer?” Jared shoved his hands into his very long short pockets.

“Isla Vista!” I replied brightly. I’d ask him the same, but since I saw him wander over from next door, the question seemed pointless.

“Oh,” he faltered. I tried to imagine all the partying and scantily-clad, drunk teenagers that he was conjuring at the very words “Isla Vista”. I waited patiently in arms, ready to defend my rundown beach town.

“Where is that?”

This time, it was Jared who was waiting for a reply. But I was too stunned for social niceties; I had just learned the world didn’t revolve around Isla Vista or me. I assumed everyone

in California knew of the infamous college town – probably because I spent the last three years in that infamous college town. But Jared didn't.

I racked my brain on how to describe Isla Vista. It was an all-amorphous word in my mind – like beauty or love. I settled on the textbook answer.

“It's a little town next to UCSB where all the students live,” I felt a polite thin-lipped smile form.

“Oh cool,” Jared's hands burrowed deeper into his seemingly bottomless pockets. We exchanged perfunctory nods.

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On paper, Isla Vista is the opposite of everything I am. If Isla Vista was a real-life person, we'd be archenemies – if I was the type of person who had nemeses and wasn't an all-consuming people-pleaser.

Despite its organized neighborhood blocks, Isla Vista is a mismatched mass complete with broken beer bottles, graffitied sidewalks, and erosion that worsens with every coming year until disappearing into the ocean below. None of the architecture is coordinated, though the presence of roaches is uniform. Faraway sirens and blaring early 2000s pop music are the only lullabies available not just on a Friday night, but every night. Worn shoes hang from above telephone wires, swaying gently from the ocean breeze. The shoes' owners – the citizens of Isla Vista – are the quintessential Californian dream: laidback surfers and skaters with year-round tans. Despite being a certified California Girl since birth, I can't even surf. I'm more cookie cutter and picket fence than college town. I'm also the Most Anxious Driver in America with a big fat failure in parallel parking. Isla Vista is my car's worst nightmare – the narrow streets

crowded with tossed electric scooters, rusty bicycles, and badly parked cars. From my third-story apartment window, I regularly watch people circle the block one, two, three times before finding an open spot. Even then, there's the looming threat of someone hitting your car's side mirrors or drawing crude genitalia on your dusty windshield.

Isla Vista is, clearly, not for the faint of heart. Yet here I am, faint of heart. But, in a shocking plot twist, I.V. – as people casually call it – and I get along just fine.

This content coexistence is, for the most part, a mystery. My California Central Coast heart is certainly part of it. So is the natural beauty and friendly community. And while I was born to be middle-aged, I fall under the Smells Like Teen Spirit spell of Isla Vista just like everybody else. There's an undeniable freeness present – mistakes made with seemingly less impact and time more easily wasted.

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That being said, I have never equated Isla Vista with home.

Home is another abstraction. Since going away to college, the definition of home has become less and less tangible. My hometown doesn't really feel like home anymore – at least not in the sense I felt when I was younger. Perhaps because I only go back to San Luis Obispo in smaller increments based around the college quarter system or because I moved there when I was twelve. SLO is still *a* home for me, but not the singular, all-encompassing Home I knew before college.

I'd like to say that Isla Vista doesn't feel like home because I haven't lived here long enough, but that just isn't true. The pandemic took away one year, but now I'm coming up on my third year living on Abrego Street, a handful of blocks from Del Playa Street and the ocean. I've

experienced every season here, but I still need directions to drive farther than Target. I don't know every street name or the number of blocks. I haven't been to all the restaurants crowded on the singular Pardall Road. I've never gone to a D.P. party or swam in the ocean here or attended a dayger or walked around casually in my bikini. I'm not I.V. material – not blonde, not a micro internet influencer, not a halfway decent biker, not a surfer, not a night owl. I need to go to bed at 10 P.M. or the next morning, I am a monster. I admire the people around me: the sorority girls in their coordinated date party dresses, the shirtless and bikini-clad folks playing drinking games outside, the surfers sitting amongst the waves, the texting-and-biking students. But it doesn't feel like I'm among them. Like I'm home.

This disassociation between Isla Vista and home is far beyond my black sheep mindset. A difference in personality isn't solely attributable to my disconnect. I think it's because – in my mind – home is the opposite of temporary.

Isla Vista is temporary to its very core.

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Isla Vista has no real locals. Goleta does. Santa Barbara does. Not Isla Vista. Instead, its blocks house a rotating mix of college students – a constant churning of fresh blood that excites local sharks and landlords alike. Out with the old, in with the new.

Even for a college town, Isla Vista stands out. Few places are made up of solely twenty-something-year-olds. Back in SLO – because apparently I only live in college towns – students live in neighborhoods intermixed with retired people and families. Their youth does not dictate entire streets or blocks. Youth governs Isla Vista.

This is not to say that people of other ages do not exist in Isla Vista. They do. Most are hidden in the crevices, not calling attention to their existence. The older graduate students and professors slink back into their faculty housing, careful to stay away from the hoards of drunken teenagers that wander at night. Those not associated with UCSB and SBCC are forced to move away, their rent skyrocketing higher with each coming lease. Those without leases, without homes, sit on I.V. curbs until they are brazenly ushered away by local foot patrol or left with an utter lack of resources or support. The message is clear: there is no place for them.

There is no place for anybody really, except the students who can afford it. Most students are forced to afford it more than they “can”. They must afford it *or else* – a lingering threat of not only housing but of education too. Once the diploma is in their hands, the college-life romanticization of paying upwards of a thousand dollars for a shitty apartment with black mold in the shower and five roommates quickly leaves their bodies. They pack up. They move away. They move on.

The impermanence of Isla Vista dictates my experience. Every poster is hung with the knowledge that it will be taken down. Every pathway is remembered halfheartedly, knowing the information will be moot in a handful of years. It is a marked chapter of my life – one I flip to the end of, even though I’m currently in the midst of it.

But it is also the temporary nature of Isla Vista that made me decide to spend my summer here. When else would I do so? The previous summers were spent in SLO – the first due to COVID-19, the second due to a nine-month lease. Next summer, I graduate. Only this stretch of July and August weeks following my third year of college allowed an Isla Vista summer. Another one-off to add to this short chapter. Another fleeting experience.



Regret set in when I became acutely aware of Isla Vista's lack of air conditioning. I was perpetually in direct sunlight, sweat forming on my forehead at every hour of the day. For weeks, I failed to touch my bedsheets. Instead, I laid atop my comforter, my bare feet dangling off the side of the twin mattress. In desperate times, when my body became reddened with heat, I hugged the wall for its shallow coolness. Some mornings, I awoke with slivers of the wall's paint tattooed on my arms and legs.

Armed with only a rickety fan from the early 2000s – which I now realize could have been upgraded for a newer, more effective model – I resorted to closing the window blinds and laying on the cool hardwood floors of my apartment alongside my cat, who I had been copying in the first place. There, on the floor of my apartment, I spent an odd sum of early summer afternoons entertained solely by the sound of creaky U-Hauls and grumpy, complaining fathers as the populations of Isla Vista packed up and moved away.

In late June, my boyfriend moved apartments. In my mind, our long-distance relationship phase commenced. Before, we had lived on the same street – a happy coincidence and a minute's walk. Now, he was three streets away – an exhausting five-minute trek. I grieved this change until I realized that his new apartment's bedroom had two windows and thus a crossbreeze. Before living in Isla Vista for the summer, I had not known the value of a crossbreeze; I now understood it as a true luxury. In the coming weeks, I hibernated in his apartment, a wonderful place where I did not have to lie down on the floor to avoid heat stroke.

What I enjoyed more than the apartment's crossbreeze, however, was its larger, east-facing window that overlooked the 67 Trigo block. On particularly humid days, the ones

where my hair always remained slightly damp, I'd watch as a lazy hum overtook the typically crowded road.



Summer in Isla Vista – despite being ideal beach weather – was also its slowest season. Students vacated the premises as soon as their finals were turned in, their leases were up. They used the pot-holed roads as makeshift dumping grounds, abandoning broken refrigerators and soiled mattresses to creep into the streets. As quickly as they first appeared, the temporary locals cleared out. It went from college town to ghost town in mere days: empty streets, closed-for-summer businesses, and a dramatic decrease in the sound of sirens. It became rare to cross paths with more than five people while walking around Pardall's main strip. When the streets crowded on weekends, as touring groups and families flooded in, I became inherently suspicious. I crossed to the other side of the street, playing the part of a haunted figure in my ghost town.

The population dwindled, but Isla Vista's spirit remained steadfast. I had a front-row seat to proof of its prevalence. In all hours of the day, but particularly those of late afternoon, the playback of shitty stereos wafted in the ocean breeze. Most of the time, it was Weezer – which I found strange. Don't get me wrong, I like Weezer just fine. However, it was a concerning amount of Weezer being played, especially given their discography played concurrently on a handful of different stereos in different houses, being listened to by different Weezer fans. The opening of "Island In The Sun" circulated my ear canals so often that the ability to differentiate between if "Island In The Sun" was actually being played for the eighteenth time or if it was simply stuck in

my head went out the window. I seriously mulled over – more than once this summer – the likelihood of Rivers Cuomo or another Weezer band member having infiltrated Isla Vista.

Something almost as ubiquitous to Weezer this summer was, fittingly, the Endless Summer poster. If you think that you haven't seen the poster that I'm referring to, you are wrong. You have. It hangs in the living room of every apartment inhabited – in some capacity – by a college guy. It is an oversaturated pink and orange mass that overtakes my eyelids every time I close them. I'm sure that surfer poster is hanging somewhere in your subconscious too.

Other than noticing its popularity, I had never given the Endless Summer poster much thought. Avoiding it gave me an edge in interior decorating – at least that's what I told myself. The truth was less flattering: being left out of the pop culture zeitgeist and too lazy to look it up. I didn't know what it was advertising or if it had been given out for free at a college orientation that I somehow missed. But this summer, as I stared at it hanging in my boyfriend's living room – courtesy of his new roommates – I wondered if Endless Summer had something to do with Isla Vista. A quick Google search proved me wrong – it was a 1960s surf documentary with an insanely high Rotten Tomatoes score – but I maintain the synonymousness, especially after spending an entire summer here.

Regardless of season, Isla Vista is perpetually an endless summer. Sunny, SoCal weather and year-round beach days are not just qualities of the town, but the foundation of its culture, its defining personality traits. This is even more true during the actual summer months. The sun doesn't dip past the horizon until late evening, when the mosquitoes are already feeding and the day itself has felt everlasting. Hours filled with humid skies and lessened responsibilities lead to an abundance of free time.

Free time is undefined, differing from person to person. It is fair to say, however, that those existing in Isla Vista's Endless Summer have free time down to perfection. They play beer pong and other drinking games on their front lawns. A vague repetition of bass throbs through worn speakers as players' bare feet burrow in yellowed grass. They sunbathe in uneven driveways. They march through empty streets, holding their oversized blow-up floaties like souvenirs brought home from war. They lay beach towels atop dead weeds to read and to vape. They make their pilgrimage to the beach cliffs for sunset, a medley of oranges and pinks that resemble the Endless Summer poster exactly. They do it all again the next day. And the next. And the day after that. And so forth.

And so did I. Well, not the drinking (my Zoloft) or the vaping (my asthma). But I did the sunset walks, the suntanning, the outdoor reading, the Weezer listening. I walked around the perimeter of I.V. until my legs went on strike. I swam in my apartment complex's pool whenever I felt feverish. I played Mario Kart with my boyfriend and his roommates. I watched the birds flitter outside the window with my cat. I bought overpriced lattes from Cafe and had to start budgeting my personal assistant wages. I went through stacks of books and bottles of aloe vera.

The days faded into one another, becoming not a series of individual days, but a conglomeration of one, very long day. I forgot the days of the week, what I did yesterday, what I was supposed to do tomorrow.

This is all a very long way of saying that when asked what I did this summer, there is one conceivable answer: nothing much, I just stayed in I.V. for the summer.

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Actually, I lied. There's another acceptable answer: I became deeply involved and invested in the lives of local stray cats.

The outdoor cats of Isla Vista flock to me; I am their shepherd. I give them extra wet food and kibble that I can tear away from my greedy, slightly overweight kitten. I leave out fresh water. Give them flea baths. Let them rub their dusty heads into my jeans. In some cases, I even drive them to the local humane society to check if they are chipped, if their owners are anxiously awaiting them. In every case this has occurred, the cats have been chipped. But their owners don't pick up the phone when the Santa Barbara Humane Society calls.

One of my boyfriend's roommates told me my shepherd experience was not unusual. That a lot of Isla Vista dwellers abandoned their cats here before moving away. Maybe to avoid pet rent. Maybe because their post-graduate finances are lacking in cat food money. Maybe to move into a pet-free apartment. Or maybe because the cats are seen as temporary as their geographic location—treated more like a college story than a long-term commitment.

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In the fleeting, infinite days of my Isla Vista summer, I became stuck in its temporary-yet-everlasting limbo. Days of June, July, August, and September melted and warped together, but felt overwhelmingly endless. I was not the only one affected – it permeated the entirety of the Isla Vista summer dweller population. I imagine the limbo halts after moving away. But the remnants of college students – of youth – remain in Isla Vista oblivion: the abandoned pets, the stained mattresses left curbside, the worn shoes hanging from the telephone lines, the faded sidewalk graffiti, the broken beer bottle shards glinting on split pavement.