

The Town

PROVINCETOWN IS, HAS always been, an eccentrics' sanctuary, more or less the way other places are bird sanctuaries or wild game preserves. It is the only small town I know of where those who live unconventionally seem to outnumber those who live within the prescribed boundaries of home and licensed marriage, respectable job and biological children. It is where people who were the outcasts and untouchables in other towns can become prominent members of society. Until recently it was possible to live there cheaply and well, and it has long been possible for, say, two men to walk down Commercial Street holding hands and carrying their adopted Peruvian baby without exciting any unusual degree of interest.

It has been attracting refugees, rebels, and visionaries for almost four hundred years.

THE PILGRIM MOTHERS AND FATHERS

Provincetown's first settlers were, in fact, the Pilgrims, who sailed the *Mayflower* into Provincetown Harbor in 1620. They spent the winter there but, finding too little fresh water, sailed that spring to Plymouth, which has gone into the history books as the Pilgrims' initial point of disembarkation. Provincetown is, understandably, not happy about this misrepresentation of the facts.

The *Mayflower* arrived in what is now Provincetown Harbor after sixty-six days at sea. The Pilgrims' reaction seems to have been less than rapturous. One of them wrote that the landscape was full of "shrubby pines, hurts [huckleberries], and such trash." That winter, the *Mayflower Compact* was drawn up. A baby, Peregrine White, was born, and four people—Dorothy Bradford, James Chilton, Jasper Moore, and Edward Thompson—died. The latter three are buried in Provincetown. Dorothy Bradford went overboard and is believed to have committed suicide.

The *Mayflower* was a cargo ship, not meant for passengers, and so was available for relatively little money. The people we now know as the Pilgrims had first left England for Holland in search of religious freedom but had spent twelve years failing to find work there before deciding, in desperation, to sail to the New World. They were not Puritans; they called themselves "separatists," and while they were a relatively serious group, they were not as stern as Puritans. They danced and played games. They were not averse to a little color in their dress.

Only about a third of them were separatists. The other two-thirds were people the separatists referred to as "strangers," men and women who for one reason or another had failed to prosper in England and so came along on the *Mayflower* hoping to do better for themselves. The Pilgrims needed them to help pay for the boat. The majority of the Founding Fathers and Mothers were, from the very beginning, looking to make a buck. Less than a decade after its founding, the settlement at Plymouth was rife with robbery, alcoholism, and sex in all its unsanctioned forms. In his *History of Plymouth Plantation*, William Bradford, Dorothy's widower, complained about "incontinency between persons unmarried . . . but some married persons also. But that which is worse, even sodomy and buggery (things fearful to name) have broke forth in this land oftener than once."

Provincetown has gone as unmentioned in this particular chapter of the American story as have the habits and proclivities of the Founding Fathers. Every Thanksgiving innumerable American schoolchildren produce paintings, dioramas, and pageants about the Pilgrims' landing at Plymouth Rock, but it would be the rare child who has ever heard the name Provincetown. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the town fathers tried to rectify the situation by building an enormous monument to the Pilgrims.

They held a national design competition, but all the submissions were variations on an obelisk, which was considered too much like the Washington Monument. The

selectmen decided, for reasons that have not survived, on a replica of the Torre del Mangia in Siena, which stands in the Tuscan square where Dante once walked and where the *palio*, the chaotic annual horse race, is held. President Teddy Roosevelt laid the cornerstone in 1907, amid much fanfare; the tower was finished in 1910. It has become Provincetown's identifying symbol, the anchor of the town, though it has not had the desired effect of educating the general public about the *Mayflower's* first point of disembarkation on this continent. Few people have made the connection between an Italian bell tower and the Pilgrims' landing.

The Pilgrim Monument is visible almost everywhere, in town and in the wild. If you look at it from the proper angle—obliquely, from any of its four corners—you can see the head of Donald Duck. The top of the tower is his hat, the arches are his eyes, and the crenelations under the arches are his beak. The Donald Duck head is slightly difficult to see, but once you've seen it, you can't look at the Monument and see anything else.

THE LIVING

Provincetown has been rambunctious, remote, and amenable to outsiders for as long as it has existed. It was originally part of Truro, the next town over, but in 1727 Truro disgustedly drew a line at Beach Point, and the resulting sliver of loose morals and questionable practices was called Provincetown, over the protests of its citizens, who preferred the name Herringtown. Being inexpensive and

loose, it has long attracted artists, who continue to compose a larger percentage of the general population than any other city or town I can think of. Eugene O'Neill lived there when he was a young, unknown alcoholic struggling to write plays; Tennessee Williams summered there when he was a world-famous alcoholic struggling to write plays. Milton Avery, Charles Hawthorne, Hans Hofmann, Robert Motherwell, and Mark Rothko have lived there, as have Edmund Wilson, John Reed, John Waters, Denis Johnson, and Divine. Norman Mailer, Stanley Kunitz, Mary Oliver, and Mark Doty live there still.

Among the less well known are Radio Girl, who walked the streets announcing the news she received from a radio in her head, and a woman who then called herself Sick, who lived in a treehouse she and her friends built in a big tree off Bradford Street and who kept her name but altered the spelling and pronunciation, to Sique (pronounced Seek) when she met and married the head of the art department at a big university and suddenly found herself transported from a life as a neo-hippie wild woman to one that involved giving parties for academics in southern California. Still today the Inside-Out Man, a citizen of sixty or so with a full beard and a tendency to dress for winter no matter what the season, walks along the East End of town, sweeping the sidewalks with furious concentration, wearing all his clothes inside out.

In summer the streets of Provincetown are as crowded as a carnival midway, and the people who make up the crowds are largely Caucasian. This is Cape Cod, a kingdom

of white people, and that is among its more problematic aspects. This strangeness has been heightened, recently, by the practice of bringing in Jamaican workers for the summers, mostly to do the low-paying kitchen work no one else is willing to do. Some of the Jamaicans who come to work in Provincetown for the summer have taken up year-round residence, and it seems possible—it does not seem impossible—that the following reversal is gradually taking place: the white gay men and lesbians, who for so long were the itinerants and outsiders, tend now to own most of the businesses and much of the real estate in town, and the Jamaican immigrants are establishing themselves as the new, marginalized, defiantly embedded population.

Among the strollers and shoppers on a summer afternoon, it is not unusual to see, within a fifty-foot radius, all of the following: a crowd of elderly tourists who have come for the day on a tour bus or have disembarked from a cruise ship anchored in the harbor; a pack of muscle boys on their way to the gym; a vacationing mother and father shepherding their exhausted and fussy children through the shops; a pair of lesbians with a dachshund in a rainbow collar; two gay dads in chinos and Izod shirts pushing their adopted daughter in a stroller; a dreadlocked and ostentatiously tattooed young woman who works at the head shop; a man dressed, very convincingly, as Celine Dion; elderly women doing errands; several closeted schoolteachers from various parts of the country who come to Provincetown for two weeks every year to

escape the need for secrecy; several weary fishermen coming home from their stints on a scallop boat; a bond trader in three-hundred-dollar sandals, up for the weekend from New York; and a brigade of furious local kids on skateboards, seeing how close they can come to the pedestrians without actually knocking one over, a stunt that is usually but not always successful.

After Labor Day the crowds diminish considerably, except for holiday weekends, and the town is gradually given over again to its year-round residents. For those who've decided to settle there, Provincetown is an impoverished mother, gentle and loving; an old ribald mother who's been through too much to be shocked by any habits you've acquired in the larger world and who will share with you whatever she's got, though she lives on little herself and can't keep much food in the house these days. Year-round jobs are scarce, and the ones that do exist tend to numb the brain. Most people work two or three jobs in the summers. If you work for wages in Provincetown, it's not unusual to find yourself cleaning a guest house in the mornings, taking an hour off, and then going to your waiter job until midnight. You get through the winters on savings and unemployment checks.

Uncountable numbers of young or no-longer-young people have gone there to escape situations they could no longer tolerate—addictions or dead-end jobs or discouraging love affairs, whatever questionable fate they seemed to have made for themselves—or simply to take a break from their tolerably difficult lives and dwell for a while in

peace. People often move there after their patience, their energy, or their greed have been exhausted elsewhere. The woman who makes stained-glass Christmas ornaments and sells them at crafts fairs may once have been a corporate attorney; the man laboring over his poetry and working nights in a restaurant may once have been an advertising executive. Provincetown's hierarchies of class and status are more liquid than they are in most places. The girl who cleared your table at the restaurant where you had breakfast is seated next to you at the dinner party you go to that night.

Although it is as difficult to live anonymously within the borders of Provincetown as it is in any small town, it is one of the places in the world you can disappear into. It is the Morocco of America, the New Orleans of the north. While the people of Provincetown are capable of holding grudges with Olympian fervor—your sins may be forgiven there, but they are rarely forgotten—it is ruled fundamentally by kindness and a respect for idiosyncrasy. Bad behavior is frowned upon; unorthodoxy is not. A male-to-female transsexual may stand in line at the A&P behind a woman trying to manage her three unruly children, and no one thinks anything of it. They are both buying the same brands of cat food and yogurt.

You are safe in Provincetown, in just about every sense of the word. In the literal sense it is almost entirely free of crime (with the notable exception of a thriving bicycle-stealing industry—if you leave your bike unlocked overnight, you have more or less already sent it to any one

of a number of unknowable used-bicycle shops up Cape). In a subtler way, at least in part because Provincetown has not thrived since its whales were slaughtered, the town at large attaches no outstanding sense of shame to those who break down or give up; who cannot cope or don't care to cope; who decide it would be easier or simply more fun to stop going out in daylight or to grow a chest-length beard and wear dresses or to sing in public whenever they feel a song coming on.

Most people who come looking for respite stay a year or two or three and move on, because they've gotten what they came for or because they can't take the winter silence or can't find a decent job or because they've found that they brought with them the very things they'd meant to escape. Some, however, have settled in. Some of the elderly sitting on the benches in front of Town Hall were once young criminals or outpatients who thought they were coming to Provincetown to regather their energies in a cheap apartment with a water view, maybe try writing some poetry or music, catch their breath, and then move on.

Apart from the descendants of Portuguese fishermen, who have been there for generations but keep very much to themselves, almost everyone in Provincetown is a transplant. I have rarely met anyone who was born there, though I know many who consider it their true home and who treat their earlier lives either as extended mistakes finally made right by moving to Provincetown or as prolonged periods of incubation during which their

genetic strands were gradually stitched into the fabric of character needed for them to be born as themselves, fully formed, right here. Provincetown is, in this regard, an anomaly—it is a village every bit as distinct and habit-bound as villages in Sicily or County Kerry but one that routinely accepts newcomers and grants them unequivocal rights of citizenship.

Among its transplanted residents Provincetown tends to inspire the sort of patriotism associated with small struggling nations. Those who live there usually defend it ferociously to outsiders and complain about it only among themselves. It is cantankerously devoted to its quirks and traditions, and like many places in love with their own ways of doing and being, it has predicted its own downfall almost from the day it was founded. In the mid-1800s, when a wooden sidewalk was built along one side of the sand road that eventually became Commercial Street, it aroused such dismay over what it portended about the loss of Provincetown's soul that a number of citizens refused to walk on it and trudged resolutely through the ankle-deep sand all their lives. In the twenty-plus years I've been going there, I have heard the town's imminent demise predicted over and over again. It is dying because its waters are fished out. It is dying because it has no jobs. It is dying because artists no longer live there in sufficient numbers. It is dying because it is beginning to prosper but at the hands of the wrong sort of people—rich people who live in cities and want to use Provincetown only as a summer refuge. It is dying because

its soul is exhausted, because its schools are no good, because so many have been taken by the AIDS epidemic, because no one can afford the rents.

Some members of the P-town population (it is, by the way, perfectly all right to call it "P-town") live according to a central simplicity as absolute as creed. They prefer earnestness to irony, the local to the immense. Provincetown lives at a bemused distance from the rest of the country. It does not quite consider itself American, and in this regard it is probably more right than wrong. Last summer I found a pair of quotation marks at the flea market in Wellfleet. They had come from a movie marquee. They were eight inches high, glossy black; they had a bulky, elderly symmetry. I gave them to Melanie, believing she'd know what to do with them. She was on her way to California then, and she took one pair of quotation marks with her, to leave behind in San Francisco. She keeps the other pair in Provincetown.



ALTHOUGH IT'S BETTER known for its gayness than for its heterosexuality, Provincetown is home to a considerable quotient of straight people, and everyone lives pretty much in peace. Just as the Log Cabin Republican not only can't ignore the existence of stone butches but buys his coffee from one every morning, straight people and gay people are all passengers on the same ship and couldn't remain separate even if they'd like to. At its best

Provincetown can feel like an improved version of the world at large, a version in which sexuality, though always important, is not much of a deciding factor. For several years, long ago, I played poker every Wednesday night at the home of Chris Magriel, a woman in her seventies who lived in a den of paisley shawls, embroidered pillows, and elderly stuffed animals. I was coming out then, unable to broach the subject with my family, and when I told Chris I thought I was gay, her milky blue eyes deepened in thought and she said, "Well, dear, if I was your age, I'd want to try it, too." She didn't embrace or console me. She simply treated it as the matter of small concern I'd hoped it might be. I told her about the man I was dating. She said, "He sounds very nice." Then we started laying out food for the other poker players, who were due to arrive at any moment.

In summer the straight tourists are generally as amused by the more flamboyant members of the population as they are meant to be. It's common to see someone taking a picture of his mother, a champagne blonde in jeans and Reeboks, with her arm cheerfully around the shoulders of a man dressed as Cher. Last summer in the West End I passed a drag queen who was flyering for a show (*flyering* is a nonverb you hear frequently in Provincetown—it refers to the act of distributing flyers that advertise a show, often involving costumes to excite interest in same). The man in question, an extremely tall man wearing Minnie Mouse eyelashes and a blue beehive wig that made him just under eight feet high, stood before a raptly attentive

boy about four years old. "All right," the man in the wig said, "but this is the last time I'm doing it." He lifted his wig off his head and showed the child the crew cut underneath. The child fell into paroxysms of laughter. The man replaced his wig and walked on.



PROVINCETOWN'S LARGE, DISORDERLY party of transients, émigrés, tourists, summer homeowners, et cetera goes on at an almost total remove, in every sense but the geographical, from the generally more settled lives of the people who were born there and who are mostly the descendants of Portuguese immigrants from the Azores. When the whaling industry was annihilated by the rise of petroleum oil in the mid-1800s, Provincetown became a fishing village, and the population came to be dominated by the Portuguese whose families had fished for centuries. They thrived there until recently, when the waters around Provincetown were almost entirely fished out; now many of the Portuguese American citizens live in several small enclaves on the far side of Bradford Street. The more prosperous among them run most of the operations that require year-round residence. They operate the gas and oil companies and own or staff the banks and markets and drugstores. When, in her 1942 book *Time and the Town*, the only book I know about Provincetown, Mary Heaton Vorse referred to them as "Dark faces on the streets, beautiful dark-eyed girls who love color and

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who make the streets gay with their bright dresses and their laughter," I suspect she meant it as a compliment. These "colorful characters" are now the old guard, the town's most respectable and conservative citizens. The same names, some of them Anglicized more than two hundred years ago, appear over and over again on the tombstones in the town cemetery: Atkins, Avellar, Cabral, Cook, Days, Enos, Rose, Tasha, Silva, Snow.