

## Imminent Hipness

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I only see him in brief flashes, the man who looks like Santa Claus, and never more than once a year. Each time he's riding a moped, shirtless in tiny black shorts. He only appears at the height of summer, when the air is so hot and thick it feels like it could crush me with its weight. I look up and suddenly see him: the jiggly flesh of his middle, shorts fluttering around his legs, white hair lifting off his back as he motors away. Each time, I tell my husband, "I saw the naked guy on the moped again," and each time, I get the same ironic look. Chris might pretend not to believe me but guys like Moped Santa are why we live here and a big part of why we're married.

Chris and I met in 1998, one year after the *Utne Reader*, a left-leaning magazine out of Minneapolis, named Davis Square one of The 15 Hippest Places to Live. I'd moved to this area of Somerville, Massachusetts the year before. When the list came out, I thought, *Really?* The Someday Café, with its sagging couches and 70s funk, was a good place to read the *Boston Globe*; the Somerville Theater played second-run movies; and Mike's Pizza was okay for pasta and red sauce on a Styrofoam plate. But otherwise, the plain brick buildings and tired-looking storefronts had the feel of a 1940s time warp.

I was new to the area but it felt instantly familiar. My mother, sister, and I moved to a neighborhood much like this after my parents' marriage broke up. Mom found our new home in Providence, Rhode Island and took to it as a sort of refuge. In 1976, to fail at marriage was to fail as a member of respectable society. She moved us out of Connecticut as quickly as possible after she and my father decided to split. Providence provided a place with no past, no departed husband, and no former friends worried about how a divorced woman might lure away their men.

Our neighborhood had the bones of better times and the decay of decades-long neglect: Moderately sized homes with tall ceilings and ornate bannisters; overgrown yards and unpainted two-by-fours in place of rotted-out porch railings. The paint on our garage doors rolled off in voluptuous waves. In the way that anything is more than one thing, this neighborhood was my mother's disgrace and her rebirth. Here she became the person she'd always wanted to be. Even when I was 13, I knew this. I remembered happening upon her standing alone in our Connecticut house, hugging herself by a window while my father was at work. In Providence, on summer

evenings, she and her friends carried our kitchen table out into the backyard and played poker. She dated with no desire to marry. For Halloween, she got dressed up as a forbidden fruit.

Few people cared about our neighborhood then. We had a sort of freedom that came from being invisible, or at least believing we were. Our short block connected Brown University's dorms to its athletic fields. We lived one block away from Thayer Street and I wandered up and down it endlessly with my sister, looking into the shops and watching movies at the Avon Cinema.

I enjoyed an undisciplined freedom in Providence but was often embarrassed by the rundown state of our house. The crumbling plaster and milky plastic Mom stapled over the windows each winter reminded me of a respectability we had once had and then lost. Each spring, some boy would inevitably knock on our door, point to our dandruffy shingles, and say, "I could paint that for you."

"Talk to them," I'd say, pointing across our driveway to our landlord's well-painted house and slam the door as the boy trotted off looking for summer work.

We survived our social status by embracing it. When a piece of plaster as large as a matchbook fell out of our kitchen ceiling, my mother and I bought a toy astronaut and hung him by one foot from the hole. We dubbed the ring of water damage around him the moon. The lack of rules and sturdy walls made room for creativity — in fact demanded it. Rather than accept the image of us as poor, I put my own teenage spin on our social status. I started shopping for clothes in thrift shops and dressing like a gypsy.

We lived in that house for six years and then our landlords, an elderly couple who owned all three houses on our side of the street, sold their properties to Brown. I had graduated from high school the year before and was thousands of miles away. My mother and sister had one month to move. When I returned, the two of them were squeezed into a small apartment on the other side of town.

Which brings me back to Davis Square. For a price that seemed outrageously high at the time and has since become ridiculously low, my husband and I bought a house here in 2001. Our neighbors made a point of telling us they knew what we'd paid for the place. Some of them grew up here, got married and raised their children here. The triple-decker across the street from us contains three generations of the same family.

The neighbor behind us asked point blank if we were rich yuppies, making it clear he did not welcome our arrival in his territory.

As homeowners, Chris and I repaired our new home with money and authority my mother didn't have as a renter. The house, built for immigrant workers in the late nineteenth century, was caving in on itself when we bought it. We replaced the support beams, put up drywall, and installed a new kitchen. In the yard, we planted rose bushes and fruit trees.

Despite our neighbors' early suspicions, Chris and I both felt like we fit here. We saw ourselves reflected back in the people on the street: a woman wearing a clothes hanger like a necklace; members of the Society for Creative Anachronisms jousting with the air; Santa on his moped. People I dated before Chris used to look at people like this and call them freaks. I always took these comments personally — if you think she's a freak then I'm a freak too. Chris finds the same sort of familiar comfort living among outsiders that I do. And so, while Providence provided a haven for my mother to carve out a life as a divorced woman, Davis Square has provided us a place to carve out our married life. Not the married life of my parents, with its prescribed roles and obligatory cocktail parties. But one where we can make up the rules as we go along, much like my mother, sister and I once did.

I rarely return to our old block in Providence. The house is freshly painted and looks nothing like its old self. The half-rotten fence around the back yard is gone. The tree that shaded half the yard, the table where we played cards, Mom's vegetable garden have all been replaced by a parking lot. I'm struck by how little I feel when I drive past it. When I imagine myself anytime between the ages of 13 and 18, it is within the walls of that house, but the place where I grew up no longer exists.

The same thing is happening in Davis Square. We were in the first, maybe second wave of this neighborhood's gentrification, and then we wanted the gentrification to stop. Of course it won't. While some of the old-timers are fixing up their houses and deciding to stay, others have moved on. Newly vacated houses are snatched up by nameless, faceless developers and within a matter of months the old buildings are transformed into high-end condos. In the mean time, Davis Square has become the 2015 version of hip: heavily bearded, knit capped, and overrun with expensive artisanal restaurants. Because we own our house, there's less chance we'll be forced to move. But our original sense of belonging, the surprised joy of spotting Santa on his moped, is becoming a relic of our past.