

For one day in the summer of 1969, when I was seventeen, I worked as a chambermaid at a motel off Exit 5 on the Connecticut Turnpike (Interstate 95) in Greenwich, the moneyed Manhattan suburb where I was born and raised. On the afternoon I was hired, so were several of my friends. We were obviously not the debutantes who have made Greenwich famous. Our fathers did not commute to corporate offices in Manhattan; they had jobs in town. Some of them were employed by the town; mine was a building inspector. Other Greenwich kids, not us, belonged to private clubs—beach clubs, yacht clubs, country clubs, golf and tennis clubs. (Greenwich has fourteen of them.) We couldn't even afford to spend the summer at one of the town's public beaches. We needed to earn money, so we felt lucky to find the motel jobs, because they wouldn't require us to surrender our freedom completely. As the woman I'll call Mrs. Benson explained the system to us, once we finished cleaning the rooms she would assign each day, we were free to go. Of course, Mrs. Benson hired us en masse because she intended to cull us, and maybe we all understood that at the outset, but I don't think anybody anticipated the way I would make my exit.

Mrs. Benson was black. So were the women who stood folding sheets at wide, waist-high tables in the motel's basement laundry room while they watched me and the other white girls in cut-offs get hired. Mrs. Benson's son was there, too—a spindly kid of nine or ten. She brought him to work with her so he wouldn't get into trouble on the streets below their apartment in Port Chester, New York, just over the state line from Greenwich. Port Chester was an old factory town, where LifeSavers candies, among other things, were made. Twenty-five thousand people were crammed into its two square miles. While Greenwich was almost exclusively white, Port Chester was home to many other blacks besides the Bensons. I often saw them waiting at bus stops along Greenwich's Post Road (U.S. Route 1), on their way home from jobs as domestics in Greenwich. When I worked as a nurse's aide in Greenwich during another summer, virtually all of my coworkers were black women from Port Chester, and one of them, on her day off, was stabbed by her boyfriend and suffered a punctured lung. Many of Port Chester's streets were mean, so it was no wonder that Mrs. Benson felt it was better for her son to be with her, even though he was restless, bored, and spent his time following chambermaids from room to room.

In one of those rooms, out of earshot of others, he told me that when a chambermaid finished her work for the day she could swim in the motel pool.

A private backyard pool, in certain parts of Greenwich, is as common as a cold. Neddy Merrill, in John Cheever's classic story "The Swimmer," would recognize that world immediately as one like his own, "so generously supplied with

water" that it "seemed like a clemency, a beneficence to him." To me, however, those shimmering shapes of aquamarine seemed like a taunt, since I so rarely was invited into one. Naturally, then, I swam in a pool whenever I could. The next day, after I finished the unpleasant work of cleaning up after other people, I changed into my bathing suit and dove in.

I swam alone. No motel guests were around; and, having the habit of a quirky independence, I hadn't discussed the unexpected perk with any of the other girls. Nor do I know how many of them were given the same information by Mrs. Benson's son—or how many recognized it as the mischief-

GREENWICH

BEACH TIME

Jeanne Schinto

making message that it was. All I know is that, coming up for air, I saw Mrs. Benson at poolside (tipped off—guess by whom?). But she didn't look angry, only amazed. Calmly she asked me what I thought I was doing. I understood everything in an instant, but repeated what her son had told me. She laughed without smiling. "And you believed him?" I had believed what I wanted to believe, I told myself. Was I fired? I asked. "What do you think?" she said.

The next morning I picked up the paycheck for my one day's work, and went to a place where I was always welcome to swim: Greenwich Point Park—or Tod's Point, as the beach is known locally. I enjoyed a day or two more at the seaside before I got another job, at a grocery store, one that did require me to surrender my freedom completely: for no matter how well or how quickly I worked, I was doomed to eight hours of weighing fruits and vegetables, inscribing paper bags with prices in grease pencil. I had the whole summer to ponder what I had done: assumed something of myself that Mrs. Benson never would have assumed of herself or her son.

Tod's Point is a large neck of land shaped like the head of a golf club. Road access is possible only by means of a narrow causeway—the golf club's shaft, if you will. A half-mile of sandy beach, wooded trails, picnic areas, and a marina, it is 147 acres in all, with views of Long Island off one side and the Manhattan skyline off the other. But no New Yorker may use Tod's Point except as a guest of a Greenwich resident. All four of Greenwich's public beaches, established in the first three-quarters of this century, are restricted to residents who must purchase an annual beach card for a nominal fee and show it at the gate-

house on the causeway before entering, whether they arrive by car, foot, or bicycle.

But Greenwich has lately become the subject of a lawsuit designed to open those beaches to all the “billions of people who are not inhabitants of Greenwich,” in the words of Brenden P. Leydon, a twenty-nine-year-old attorney from neighboring Stamford, Connecticut, who initiated the case. Some of Stamford’s real estate is as pricey as Greenwich’s, but some, too, is merely “housing” and looks more like Port Chester’s. Many of its 1950s-style public-housing projects are barbed-wired and graffitied; the worst of them are in such bad shape, and infested with drugs and gang activities, that they are scheduled for demolition. And while Stamford does have three public beaches of its own, none is nearly as large or as nicely situated as Tod’s Point.

One of Leydon’s arguments is that Tod’s is not only a beach but a “public park,” which is legally defined as a “public forum” and so, under federal law, should be open to everyone. Restricting it to a certain segment of the population—Greenwich residents in this case—is “not the role of government,” Leydon told the *Greenwich News*; “that’s the role of a private club.” He also cites the colonial-era public-trust doctrine by which navigable waters—and the land submerged beneath them, up to the average high-water mark—are held in trust by the state. Which means that the wet sand is everyone’s, at least until the tide comes in. That goes for Tod’s, and it goes for the more than 94 percent of the state’s 458 miles of coastline that is privately owned; but in order to take advantage of the right, you’ve got to be able to get to the wet sand in the first place.

Beach-access lawsuits are not new. Over the last three decades, they have been brought—and won—in coastal communities in New Jersey, and lost in South Carolina. And in Massachusetts, where I live now, legislation introduced in 1974 was finally passed seventeen years later, making private waterfronts more accessible—but only somewhat. (The 1991 Beach Access Law mandates the establishment of “intertidal trail easements,” which are essentially public paths to the sea—between million-dollar homes, if necessary—but the first few have been established with difficulty, and battles for others are proving to be arduous as well.) Leydon’s suit is the first such legal challenge in Connecticut, however, and any ruling may affect other towns in the state with similar policies. And the great majority of shore towns do have them, though few are as stringent—or as strictly enforced—as Greenwich’s.

Town attorneys argue that a 1919 special act by the Connecticut General Assembly gives Greenwich the right to control its park and beaches in any manner it chooses.

But beach access is much more than a legal debate about land use, and more than an argument about private-versus-public property rights. It is a reflection of our national struggles with economic inequality and racial divisiveness, which seem to grow worse every day. The issue of who should and who shouldn’t have beach privileges in a posh suburban seaside town is especially worth examining in Greenwich, because there, as in many other places where race and class

conflicts arise, a third group complicates the picture: not the haves or the have-nots, but my own family’s class—the have-a-littles. It is they who will be most directly affected by a court decision that rules against the town, because they’re the ones who use those beaches most regularly. It is they who will feel most resentful, violated, and invaded (even if few of those “billions” of out-of-towners actually do take advantage of their new liberty). And it is they who cause my own feelings on the subject to be divided. My liberal self knows well which side I should be on; I should be applauding Leydon, advocating the opening of the beaches as the “right” thing to do. But another self sees it differently. If I came out in support of the opening of the beaches, I would feel as if I were betraying my family, my class, my roots.

It’s not well known that Greenwich has a sizable population of “common folk” within its boundaries, and ever since the 1880s their “betters” have wrestled with the problem of where to let them go swimming. By then, European immigrants had started to arrive in large numbers, since they were readily being hired to build and to tend the big estates that were being carved out of the fifty square miles of farmland that Greenwich once was. The most exclusive sections of town were being developed in those years of the fin de siècle, including a two-hundred-acre spread of former potato fields and apple orchards on the waterfront. It’s called Belle Haven—a cluster of several dozen summer “cottages” set in “a private residential park” (in the words of an 1884 promotional pamphlet) that was established by a group of New York businessmen. (It’s also where one set of my Italian grandparents worked and lived in the early 1900s—as gardener and maid.) “Belle Haven was a counterpart to the elaborate villas that surround the Mediterranean,” John D. Barrett Jr., the son of an original investor, told an oral historian for the Greenwich Library in 1977. Barrett Sr. and the others also built a private club, which they called The Casino.

By 1926, when it was renamed The Beach Club (today it’s known as the Belle Haven Club), the town’s population had swelled to more than twenty-two thousand, due partly to the immigrants and partly to people like the Barretts, who had moved from 35 Sutton Place South and begun living in Greenwich year-round. Now men went by yacht across the sound to their New York offices or used the newly established New York–New Haven rail line, becoming the country’s first commuters, while their servants’ and laborers’ children—my parents and their siblings included—were growing up, going to school, and in the hot months, looking for places to swim.

Housing for immigrants—much of it multifamily—was being built on the west side of Greenwich, adjacent to Port Chester, in neighborhoods called Chickahominy and Byram. On that western waterfront, there was a bluestone quarry, owned by Silas D. and Willis M. Ritch. Town historian William E. Finch Jr. and others like to boast that, after the slabs were taken by schooner to New York, they were used to build many landmark skyscrapers, the base of the Brooklyn

Photograph by

Paul Kwilecki,

Decatur County,

Georgia, 1981.

From the series

The Flint River in

Decatur County.



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Bridge, and even the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty. By 1918, however, bluestone had become prohibitively expensive, especially compared with concrete; as a result, the Ritch brothers went out of business, selling their quarry to the town for fifty thousand dollars. Even when it was private land, many townspeople were using it as a place to swim and go clamming and scoop up little bay scallops in the eel grass; making it an official town beach seemed like the logical—the right—thing to do. After all, proponents of public beaches said, it wasn't only the privileged members of society who were entitled to sun and water.

But Byram Beach, as it was named, is relatively small, just a speck on Greenwich's twenty-seven-mile coastline. Another public beach was needed, closer to the center of town, where many of the immigrants who hadn't settled in western Greenwich—both sets of my grandparents among them—were moving into the newer multifamily housing. And that same year, again for fifty thousand dollars, the selectmen tried to buy another piece of property where an unofficial beach had been established, on Mead Point.

Called simply Sandy Beach, it wasn't much larger than Byram Beach, but that didn't bother those who wanted to continue using it. The trouble was that Mead Point was almost as exclusive as Belle Haven, and residents objected to the sight of working people streaming down their streets on Sundays; they didn't even like it when people rowed over from the harbor. Harriet Lauder Greenway, who owned a hundred-acre summer estate on Mead Point, called Kincraig, was so disturbed by the traffic that she bought a small offshore island—one in a chain of two dozen or so that are part of the Greenwich coastline—and convinced the selectmen to put the beach out there. She even agreed to buy a ferry to take people back and forth between the mainland and the four-acre Island Beach, as it was named. She could well afford her largess; her father was George Lauder, cofounder with Andrew Carnegie of Carnegie Steel.

Another Scotsman, J. Kennedy Tod, owned Tod's Point. A Glasgow native who got rich in banking and railroads, Tod liked to say that if one "d" was good enough for God it was good enough for him. And in the 1880s he and his wife,

Maria, bought up the property from the fishermen and squatters who had laid claim to it over the years and built their own sort of heaven. When the Tods were finished, they had a four-story, thirty-seven room mansion, with thirteen bathrooms (featuring marble bathtubs), walk-in fireplaces, and Honduran mahogany wall paneling; a nine-hole golf course; a lagoon for their yacht; a small zoo and bird sanctuary; and multiple guest houses. Tod called it Innis Arden, Scottish for "wooded island" (at high tide, until laborers filled in the causeway, Tod's was, in fact, an island), and commuted from there by train to Manhattan with his neighbor Edwin Binney, the maker of Crayolas, who had a seaside mansion of his own.

Tod died childless in 1925, and when someone suggested to Mrs. Tod that, after she passed away, the shore property would be a great beach for the people of the town, she reportedly said, "Well, when the poor inherit the earth, I hope I'm under it." Upon her death in 1939, she left it to New York's Presbyterian Hospital (now Columbia-Presbyterian Medical Center) for its vacationing nurses to use. The hospital archives has no record of the board's reaction to the gift; but, considering the upkeep such a place required (the Tods had employed an army of servants for both house and grounds), it's no wonder that the hospital put it up for sale the following year.

Greenwich was given the right of first refusal. By 1940, its population had jumped to 35,409—an excellent reason to buy another beach, some said. Tod's neighbors, however, didn't want a public beach out there for the same reason that Mrs. Greenway hadn't wanted one on Mead Point and that the Barrett family and some of their neighbors had paid one million dollars for an island off the coast of Belle Haven when they learned that someone was thinking of building an amusement park out there. ("There was a terror . . . it could have destroyed one's privacy totally," John Barrett Jr. told the Greenwich Library.) The crayon king's daughter, Helen Binney Kitchel, who had used Tod's Point as her own private beach in her childhood, was one of the most active opponents of the plan, citing privacy as well as environmental concerns.

The town debated the question for five years. Finally, the *hoi polloi* prevailed, thanks to the urging of at least one prominent Belle Haven resident, Samuel F. Pryor, a Pan American Airways executive, who had a private beach of his own but believed in the idea of public beaches. (Noblesse oblige was a Pryor family tradition; his wife had an international doll collection, which she invited groups to view—I was taken to see it with my Brownie troop.) And on January 15, 1945, by which time Tod's must have seemed like a beachhead, the town bought the land for \$550,000. A retired town employee who is a longtime friend of my parents remembers cutting the historic check. A few months later, faced with a postwar housing shortage, Greenwich divided the Tod mansion into thirteen apartments and rented them to returning G.I.s. Veterans and their families lived there until 1961, when the place, needing many costly repairs, was demolished. One of those families moved into the house

across the street from ours. Their first son had been named for his father; the second son was named for the beach: Todd (spelled with two *ds*).

Greenwich's former first selectman Griffith E. Harris told me recently that, during his time in office, 1955 to 1963, Mrs. Greenway's Kincaid went up for sale after her death, and he asked her family if the town could have the right of first refusal to buy it for yet another public beach, since the town population had grown to approximately fifty thousand (where it remains). He was lambasted by the local newspaper for stirring up that old argument with the Mead Point people again, and the acreage was sold to a developer, who built a string of minipalaces behind Kincaid's long stone wall.

While I was growing up in Greenwich in the 1950s and 1960s, I took the town beaches for granted; if I realized that local taxes paid for them, I certainly didn't know that the town refused state and federal money for beach maintenance and repairs, in order to avoid any equal-access requirements (it still refuses such aid). I did, however, understand that those beaches were where I belonged. There I saw people just like me—neighbors, friends, relatives: they were white, working-class, or, if middle-class, they were the ones who couldn't afford the country clubs (or maybe weren't admitted into them)—people, I later understood, who resembled those who jostled and splashed and bumped into Cheever's Neddy Merrill at the public pool of the Recreation Center, causing him to remember with longing the backyard pools he had traversed that day of his cross-country swim.

Where I did not belong was a place like Belle Haven, which I studied whenever I rode the ferry to Island Beach, a two-mile, thirty-minute ride right past it—past the Listerine heiress's estate, with its private beach; and the beach of the stationer W. T. Grant (whose gardener's daughter was in my class at school); and that of someone whose identity I never knew but whose private boat dock, a bit of expensive whimsy, intrigued me—it was a small-scale replica of a steel suspension bridge. Today Diana Ross lives in one of those Belle Haven villas, but Island Beach is not a place where you are apt to run into her or any other Greenwich celebrities.

John E. Meerbergen, the town attorney who is helping to prepare the response to Leydon's lawsuit, says, "[Leydon] thinks those beaches are for a bunch of aristocrats, but all he has to do is spend one day on Island Beach to know that isn't true." And he named as heavy users of town beaches the senior citizens from the housing projects for the elderly, and the kids from Greenwich's two low-income housing projects that were built in the 1950s, one of them near Byram Beach and another in my grandparents' former neighborhood, near the town center. Meerbergen says he's particularly knowledgeable about the island's regulars, since he worked there as a summer police officer while attending college and law school in the 1960s.

Some of those Greenwich beachgoers were black, but not many. I have counted up the number of black students

among the 670 seniors pictured in my 1969 Greenwich High School yearbook; there are 11. (Current Greenwich public-school enrollment is 3 percent black.) And Griff Harris told me he received indignant phone calls whenever he allowed "the nuns down in New York" to bring inner-city children to the beaches on certain days during his tenure in the 1950s and 1960s. "I would let them come in on Mondays, which wasn't a very crowded day. And I'd get my friends to kick in five bucks each, so the kids could buy hot dogs. And wouldn't you know it? Some lady would call me up and say 'Did you know there are *black* children at Tod's Point?' 'Yeah,' I'd say, 'and they're going to be at Island Beach *next* Monday. They're our *guests*.'"

The town's guest policy clearly allowed it: any resident could buy up to twenty-five guest passes per day for a few dollars each. And nobody had the right to question who those guests were. But those phone callers obviously felt threatened by people who, in their opinion, looked like they did not "belong."

In 1975, many more Greenwich beachgoers would have an occasion to feel the same way, during a series of demonstrations staged by Edward T. ("Ned") Coll, an activist from Hartford.

A sympathetic resident provided Coll with guest passes, and on three Sunday mornings in a row, beginning in late June, he drove a busload of black kids from Hartford's inner city to the gatehouse on the causeway at Tod's. He and the kids piled out of the bus and onto the sand, some of them carrying signs that said FREE THE BEACH and VETS DIED FOR FREE BEACHES and all of them chanting "This beach is our beach! Your beach is our beach!"

Town officials, who said they were acting under pressure from citizens, tried to foil Coll by abruptly limiting—and convoluting—the guest policy. Only eight guests per day per family would be allowed in; guests' names and ages could be requested in advance; and so could the posting of a \$250 bond.

So Coll arrived at Tod's by boat, at which time he was promptly arrested and charged with criminal trespass.

I no longer lived in Greenwich by then, but on visits home I learned how people felt. They wondered why Coll didn't storm the Belle Haven Club instead of Tod's. Why didn't he try to liberate *that* place instead of a beach for working people, which is often so crowded on a hot summer Sunday that every one of its fourteen hundred parking spaces is filled and the guard in the gatehouse doesn't allow anyone else in until somebody leaves? (In fact, Coll did demonstrate at the private Madison Beach Club, of Madison, Connecticut, a few towns up the coast, renting a plane for the day and arranging for a volunteer to parachute in. A man with few assets of his own, he had a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation to help pay his costs.) Or why didn't he just take the kids to one of the Connecticut state beaches, which are open to all comers? There are four—Sherwood Island State Park in Westport, Hammonasset Beach State Park in Madison, Rocky Neck State Park in East Lyme, and Ocean Beach State Park in New London—and each of them is handier to Hartford than Greenwich is.

A man from Forest Hills, New York, in a letter to the *New York Times*, had some questions of his own, and some answers: "Is Ned Coll really seeking 'freedom of the beach'? Why then does he use black children? Why not white children or adults? . . . The reason is that Mr. Coll knows that black children make a big splash on the white beaches of Connecticut. If anyone questions his motives, he can hide behind the children by saying he was helping them. Here is another white man using black people for selfish political purposes.

"If he frees the beaches, who's going to drive the children to them? Certainly not Mr. Coll; he'll be off on another ego trip."

Even the Greenwich chapter of the NAACP was upset by Coll for his failure to consult with them, but the man had his own agenda. After being barred from the beaches, he demonstrated at the Greenwich railroad station, berating commuters on their way to work for being discriminatory; he also tried to get rich people to invite inner-city children to their homes for the weekend. He was trying, he said, to appeal to "their better instincts."

But Coll didn't pursue it much further, and eventually slipped from sight, at least from Greenwich's sight; and the beach season was uneventful for the next twenty years. During that period, Coll underwent a change. Today he is still an activist, but now if he carries a sign, it's apt to say something about Jesus. Wearing a suit jacket and tie, and with his over-size rosary beads and a large lapel button that says "God Activism," he looks like a preacher, one Flannery O'Connor might have conjured. And when reminded of his protests in Greenwich, he laughs impishly and, it's clear, with pride, though he also admits he has become less confrontational, more spiritual. "I've changed my approach."

Born of working-class parents in 1940, Coll grew up in the south end of Hartford, but says that "we always knew about those beaches down there." He graduated from Fairfield University in 1962, then worked in public relations for the Phoenix Mutual Insurance Company of Hartford. After John F. Kennedy was assassinated, he quit his job and began his life of activism, founding the Revitalization Corps, "America's Citizen Peace Corps," as its letterhead states (it also lists the Reverend Daniel Berrigan as a member of its advisory board). Even at the time of the beach demonstrations in the 1970s, Coll says, his message was spiritual. "I've always been a spiritual person, a practicing Catholic." But after a series of mystical experiences in the 1990s, he became "less judgmental." He hesitates. "I'm very clear about those beaches. They should be open. But you've got to watch out that you don't start thinking you're God Almighty. I'm pleased that somebody is looking after that issue," he adds, referring to Brenden Leydon, whose lawsuit he has followed, "but see, where I'm coming from now, that is small, compared to the rest of the work we have to do."

And so the self-described "activist blessed with mysticism" works toward solutions to strife between races and classes by trying to "elevate spirituality"—to open hearts, not beaches, with prayer. He also rails against TV.

Brenden Leydon is uncomfortable with labels, but when I asked him to describe himself he settled for “mostly conservative,” because “most people would characterize me that way.” He has rollerblades and a black belt in judo; and has just bought a nice-sized boat with two friends. He would not, in other words, be mistaken for Coll anytime or anywhere.

He says he didn’t have a lawsuit on his mind in the summer of 1994, when he tried to jog into Tod’s from a friend’s Stamford condominium a couple of miles away and was rebuffed at the gatehouse. The son of the vice principal of the Stamford public high school from which he graduated in 1986, he had used the beach other times in the past, but always in the off-season, when beach cards aren’t checked. And he says he could have understood being barred entry if he’d been driving, but he couldn’t understand why the town wouldn’t let in a nonresident *pedestrian*. (Leydon’s own Stamford bars nonresidents from parking at its town beaches, but allows them to walk in.) Maybe, too, he felt entitled somehow, the way I felt entitled to that dip in the motel pool.

In the fall, at the start of his final year of Rutgers Law School, Leydon enrolled in the Constitutional Litigation Clinic. That is where he learned about the successful beach-access lawsuits brought by New Jersey’s Office of the Public Advocate in the 1970s and 1980s. And no, he wasn’t “assigned” by his professors to sue Greenwich, he says whenever he is accused of it; but he did use the suit, which he filed in Stamford Superior Court on February 6, 1995, as an independent-study project, for which he received an A.

The reaction in Greenwich has been fairly predictable. Leydon has received a few pieces of hate mail and some harassing phone calls; but in September 1995, he also received—and accepted—an invitation to speak at a Rotary Club luncheon at the Greenwich Harbor Inn. I can’t imagine Coll having been given, in his day, a similar opportunity. In fact, the overall response this time has been comparatively tame, perhaps because everybody knows how slowly the courts work; there’s no need to get excited yet. Letters and columns in local papers have a different timbre, too, reflecting a civility that was not extended to the more confrontational Coll. One *Greenwich News* editorial writer hoped that Leydon would lose his case but that it would prove “an excellent learning experience” for the young attorney, who is now a litigator doing corporate and commercial work as well as arguing personal-injury lawsuits for the Stamford law firm of Tooher, Puzzuoli & Wocl.

Indeed, between his job and his preparations for the Greenwich suit, he says he must work nearly constantly in order to keep up with it all. For that reason, even if he does win, he may feel a little like Neddy Merrill at the end of his day-long swim—“so stupefied with exhaustion that his triumph seemed vague.”

I think a victory may seem “vague” for other reasons, too.

A few months after Leydon’s suit was filed, in July 1995, swimming was banned at Byram Beach because of pollution from an unknown source of sewage. As of this writing, the

source has not been found, and the town’s chief engineer, David Thompson, says pollution could become a problem at Tod’s, too. If it does, there will be no swimming by anyone—a development that could be viewed as comeuppance for parties on both sides of the issue.

As for me, since I spent three weeks last year at the old homestead in Greenwich, you might expect that I would be more inclined than ever to defend the town’s position; and I probably would be if, at the same time that I was rekindling familial feelings, I hadn’t noticed radical changes in the town and its population. Everywhere there are signs that, as the income gap widens nationally, Greenwich will no longer be quite so hospitable to the have-a-littles as it once was. F. W. Woolworth’s on Greenwich Avenue has been demolished, for example, and Saks Fifth Avenue has gone up in its place; I don’t think my elderly Aunt Mary, on her fixed income, will be shopping there. Neither she nor my parents, with modest earnings all their lives, could afford to move into town today. The small, two-story Cape Cod where I grew up was built in 1952 for \$12,000 by my father and his brothers and friends; it would sell for more than \$300,000 in the current market. And in Greenwich, \$1,000,000 is much closer to the norm for a house. In February 1995, two Belle Haven houses sold for \$3,425,000 and \$10,900,000 respectively. The former Pryor estate, complete with private beach, is currently on the market for \$7,950,000. People like the Pryors never used Tod’s; but in their way they did care about it. It’s likely that the new residents of that seaside estate won’t give the public beaches a second thought.

One of my friends or relatives would gladly have taken me to the beach as a guest during my stay in town, but I didn’t go once. It was summer, but I had work to do, family obligations and social responsibilities to perform. On another weekend visit last winter, however, I drove into Tod’s with my out-of-state license plates, and, because it was the off-season, nobody stopped me. It looked the same as always, except that there was snow on the sand, and people rollerblading around the parking lots and cross-country skiing in the picnic areas. I saw an elderly man in a VFW ball cap strolling along, and, farther down the beach, a stylish woman in a long mink coat gazing out across the water at Long Island, and I wondered if hers was the face of the future.

On the way back to my parents’ house I drove past that motel where Mrs. Benson’s son had been able to fool me with his prank since he knew so well my place in the world—knew it better than I myself did. And I thought about how unfair it seems—how wrong—to count on the goodwill of the have-a-littles, who are being asked to share their beach with strangers in order to disguise the ever-widening gap between the haves and the have-nots. It may seem cold-hearted to deny children like Mrs. Benson’s son access to Tod’s; but, unless all of our cold hearts warm, a day at a suburban beach will be the least of what those kids don’t have, no matter what happens in Greenwich. ■