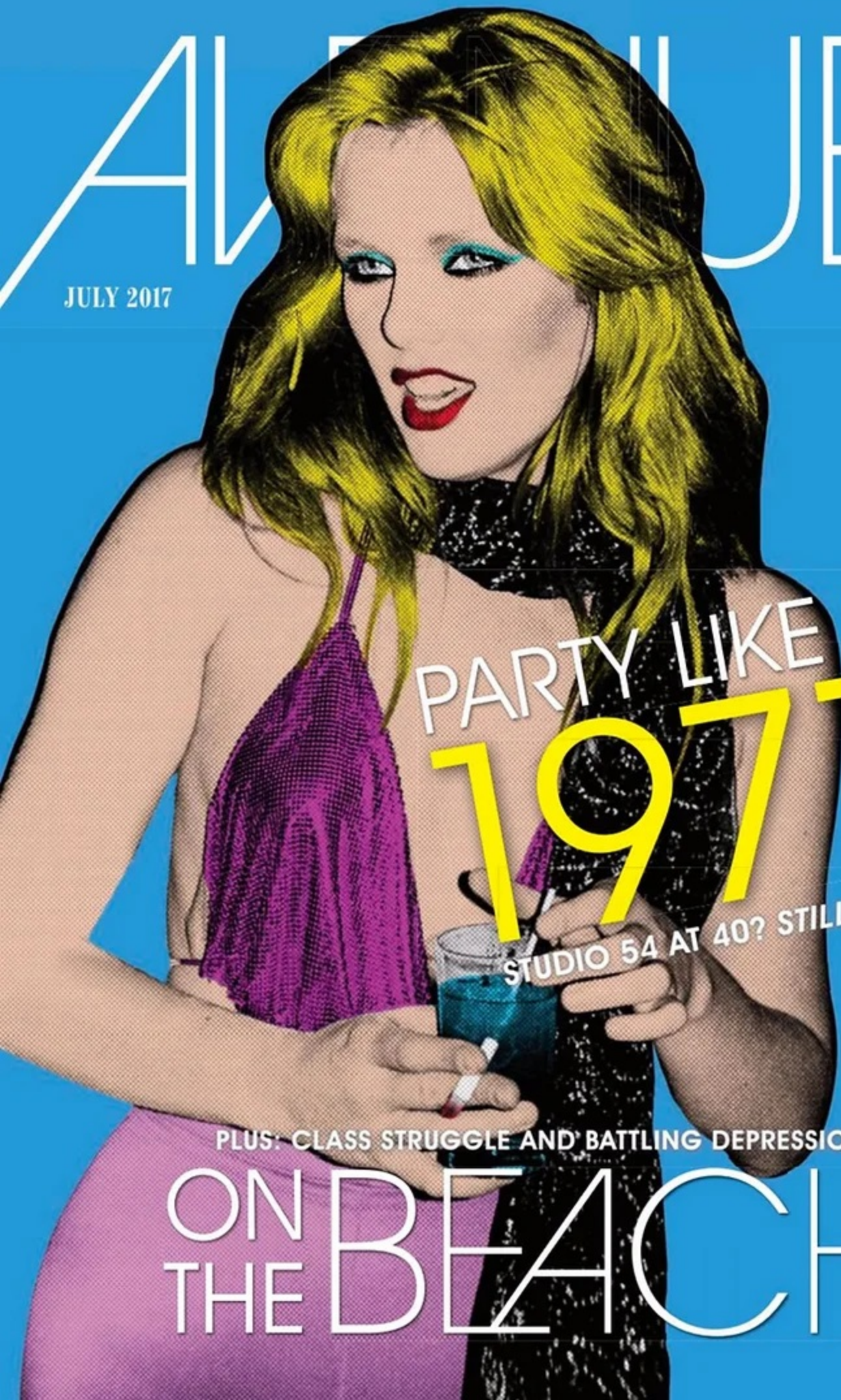


AVENUE

JULY 2017



PARTY LIKE IT'S
1977!
STUDIO 54 AT 40? STILL FABULOUS.

PLUS: CLASS STRUGGLE AND BATTLING DEPRESSION

ON THE BEACH





Social Surfing

AUTHOR HOLLY PETERSON RIDES THE SWELLS OF THE HAMPTONS HIERARCHY

by Holly Peterson

SUMMER BEGINS WITH AN infinitesimal tilt of the Earth's axis, letting direct sun warm our days. For people who grew up on the tip of Long Island, "summer" is a noun. For a New Yorker who rents or owns a second residence in this beachfront community, the word is more often used as an active verb...as in "we summer in Southampton." That's where the trouble begins.

Classes and cultures collide in the Hamptons, where the rich storm in for a few months and crash into real life with their wake. They bump up against the local population who, amazingly enough, live in one residence all year long. Vintners, gardeners, contractors and land surveyors all service a group for whom "have a job" often means owning, running or being the majority stockholder in a multinational conglomerate. The currents between these groups churn with more force than the crashing waves of the Atlantic we all share. There are cultural clashes just as powerful: old money people who grew up sipping Southsides on their tattered couches try to mix with new money people who have purchased 12-foot Jeff Koons balloon dog sculptures for some whimsy on their lawns.

As a novelist, I know that if I'm lucky enough to wrestle this awkward friction onto the page, the energy will drive a narrative along faster than the Friday afternoon 4:09 cannonball train careening from Jamaica station in a straight shot to the Hamptons.

And so, I penned a book about these opposing forces.

This strange cocktail of classes is shaken up in each establishment in town: at Tutto il Giorno, a local couple is having a special anniversary lunch date next to a bunch of 14-year-old girls who were versed in burrata varieties by age 4 and think nothing of charging a \$318 bill to Daddy.

Or, a self-made titan might compete in a member/guest tournament on the famed tennis courts of a private club, but never be considered for membership. Both winners know this as they share sweaty glances over the silver chalice their names will be engraved on. One partner will point it out in a glass case to his kids as they attend the daily club camp, but the other winner can only hope for scattered lunch invites and trophy sightings over the summer.

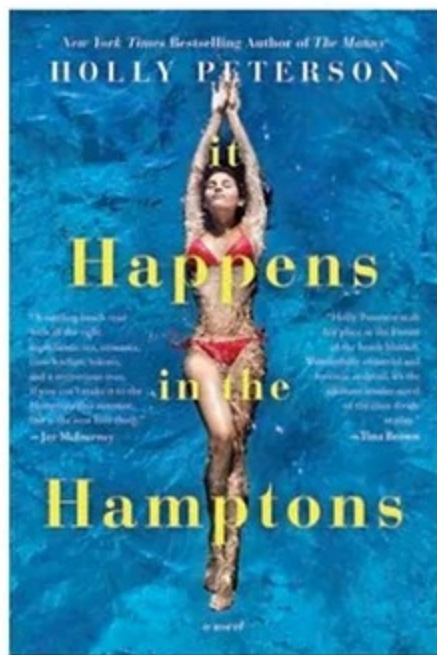
I was raised in the group for which “summer” is an active verb. I’ve learned that even saying “the Hamptons” is a dead giveaway for an invader from the city. The local people say Southampton and East Hampton, for these are towns people grew up in, not a Technicolor seasonal resort with gemstone-colored wagons and produce.

My mingling with very different groups started when I took up surfing. The camaraderie born in the rough riptides with the mostly local surfers turned into lazy afternoons on the sand. Many of them were full-time Southampton teachers, architects and artists. Once bonds that transgressed financial lines were formed in the equality of the sea, we built family friendships with homemade pizza dinners and travels to Mexican surf breaks, close relationships for me and mentors for my children that have thus far lasted a decade.

That first summer I hosted a lobster bake for the entire surf camp—and invited every instructor, parent and student. The families from the city were unfazed by the catering and service. The instructors played along, but considered the shellfish spread and signature drinks a bit over the top for a Tuesday night in August. As the sun set, and the bonfire and haystack circle were produced on cue, a waiter handed my instructor Java a well-made, preprepared s’more. Java turned to me and said, “Isn’t the whole point of s’mores to make them on your own?” I remember a news executive friend whom I’d excitedly invited to meet my new posse sitting a safe distance away from all of us on a blanket on the sand, asking his wife, “Remind me, why are we here?”

As the summers tore on, and I learned to master the confounding and ever-changing waves, I found many soul mates. Our friendships meant more mingling between divergent social groups in the Hamptons... and yes, the triggering of awkward moments that would fill a novel. My landscaper, also a fellow surfer, would step off his John Deere in my backyard, wash off, and then join my Wall Street veteran father for dinner. “Tell me about your ROI,” my father would ask, trying to find common ground. The conversations were a bit off-kilter, though everyone tried hard to pretend they were smooth sailing. We shared some authentic laughs, but I’m not willing to say the conversation flowed with the certainty of changing tides.

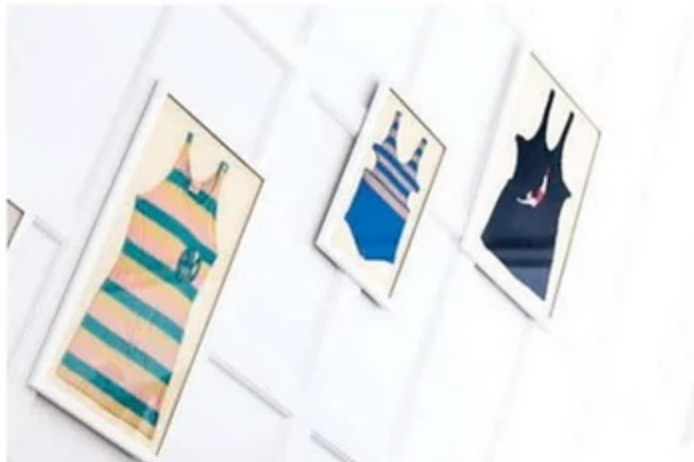
At my annual summer dancing party, which mixes all incomes, ages and backgrounds, this blending is intense and fraught. I sit the blushing socialite next to the surfer, the Riverhead cabinet maker next to the five-



borough developer, and all ages at every table from teens to octogenarians. On the dance floor once two summers ago, a Supreme Court justice twirled around the local bombshell who works in retail. The justice’s popping eyeballs at her minidress suggested he was not able to cite a precedent of equal perfection.

In these colliding worlds, people who started out with nothing and hit the jackpot, say, in the hedge fund arena, know nothing about boundaries. Their trajectory has gone from a cop’s son in Bay Shore to landowner with a staff in matching khakis and white polo shirts. This has skewed their worldview, or, more accurately, fried any sense of reality in their brains.

Derivatives and collateralized debt obligations they can handle, but limits in



daily life are not something the richest of the rich can calculate: *No, honey, you can't invite the contractor to lunch: he made the shelves too shallow for the plates we bought in Capri, and I'm furious.*

Most of the people with gargantuan checking accounts who sit atop those oceanfront dunes are living differently than

they did when they were starting out. They are making it up as they go. And so these people are unclear about friendships, and people on the receiving end confuse kindness for kinship. And, deliciously...vice versa. These scenes were the lifeblood for my novel, *It Happens in the Hamptons*.

For those who went from \$30,000 annually to \$30 million after only a decade in the work force, life has been quite limitless. Many of these men don't understand that their Niagara Falls rush of cash only flows to .00001% of this country.







hour after the lesson, everyone knows the “sandwich” cost more than the instructor clocked all morning. But the rich guy is insistent he’s just being generous by serving it. He’s too tone-deaf, too sure he’s still that Fordham student inside. He doesn’t get that his gargantuan, incomprehensible mounds of cash makes people hugely uncomfortable.

Before hedge fund bonanzas, being rich used to be a more codified position, with set behavior and rules. The staff were separate and in uniforms, not chomping on fried rock shrimp tempura the new chef copied from Nobu.



One used to mimic the manners of those who came before you. One’s wife had to entertain like the JP Morgan people with Nana’s candelabra and a punch bowl from Daddy’s Yale regatta. Now a man named Gates or Thiel can skip college and “make it.” A top Wall Street chief can move into a condo next to Russian oligarchs,

because he wants to say “screw you” to an uptight Fifth Avenue co-op board looking for transparent financials.

People who made their money telling people to piss off rather than inheriting it know less about rule playing. They, in fact, revel in breaking them. In addition, if one is self-made, and grew up waiting on tables, one is less likely to look down on people doing so. That’s again where things get messy: *The people at the restaurants who serve your drinks and at the club are not your friends because you did the same to put yourself through school.*

After all, the fabulously wealthy guy was simply good in math, earned a business degree from Fordham and landed on a trading floor in his twenties. Timing and a magnanimous boss who recognized talent and drive put him in a position to make enough money to own a few homes by age 30. The stock market upswings and hedge fund two and twenty rules enabled this police officer’s son to earn dozens of millions by his late thirties. Now able to support three homes and three kids with ease on just a portion of the interest his money is churning out, he has lost touch with how it feels to take home \$450 a week after tax.

This über rich guy has forgotten those sleepless nights worrying about college loan payments before he met that boss. Part of him feels anyone could do what he did if they just tried a little harder. He doesn’t think of himself as a creature from another planet, but still one of the guys. That’s the reason the friction between Hamptons’ classes stays steaming with tension.

So the rich guy offers the landscaper a brew from the garage fridge and thinks he’s a new buddy. Or, he takes a surf lesson from a cool 40-year-old local sculptor and wants him to come for lunch. When the Loaves and Fishes \$100-a-pound lobster stuffed into each hot dog roll is served an



It takes generations to learn how to turn people into invisible objects, to feel superior in one’s bones, which is one reason stone-cold reptilian WASP matrons are pretty good at it. They keep their housekeepers in uniform even though it looks like an anachronism from the 1950s. Their beach clubs are formally delineated with a rope from the cabanas to the shores, literal (and safe and awkward) lines drawn physically in the sand.

For me, transgressing those lines has meant intense friendships born in the sea that roils with rips and sudden, unpredictable tidal flows. Like most authors, I wrote a book about what I know. We move forward and back, sometimes best friends, at other times facing an awkward moment when a bill must be paid

or a tip is in order, mimicking the jolting of that Long Island Rail Road car. Clashing cultures invading my own real life, indeed. ♦

Holly Peterson’s new book, *It Happens in the Hamptons*, was released on May 9.