

17

I've never met a summer I didn't like: The constant smell of suntan lotion, switching to a wallet just big enough to carry some cash, a driver's license, and an ATM card, and wearing polka-dot mules that would never work in my buttoned-down, school-year world. Mostly, though, there's the ocean.

My birthday also happens to be in the summer. This year, five kids gave me a gift that was rare and sweet because they were clueless about having given it and decades too young to understand it. They let me visit them in the most ephemeral of places, those days just past childhood and just before adulthood.

Summer contrasts vividly with the other nine months of the year, when parents and kids inhabit intersecting but different worlds. They're out the door to school and sports, and we work, and work at raising them. I listen to a classical radio station, and they listen to unclassifiable music. There are no polka-dot mules in that world. It's filled instead with wrestling matches and report cards and conference calls with the client.

This year, our Cape Cod summer household included three teenagers and a couple of middle-schoolers—two of mine and three of my brother's. We drove to jobs, sailing and theater classes, the mall, and over and over again to CVS. Teenagers go to CVS shockingly often. We actually spent lots of time together outside the car, too. Some nights we sat on the beach till it got too dark or too cold to stay. The kids laughed at me when it took me eight passes to make the dock tie-up in the motorboat. I laughed at them when it took eight changes of clothing to find the absolutely right outfit for the dance. I was smart to avoid skim-boarding, at least while they were around. Instead of just hearing giggled, third-hand stories about them, I actually witnessed girls flirting with my nephew on the beach. My daughter, niece, and I gave each other manicures, and then we did the same for my 90-year-old aunt. Classical music on the car radio doesn't cut it

in the summer, and I'm grateful that I became acquainted with Maroon 5, Linkin Park, Outkast, JoJo, and lots of others.

Don't misunderstand. I never lost sight of my responsibilities as a mother and aunt. I gave clear instructions about not drinking alcohol at the dances. My niece never called me "girlfriend." But all the same, it was summer, and it was so much fun. I was included in conversations and confidences that I'd never hear at other times. And in a way that seemed to flow more easily in the summer air, the older ones talked about the fragile, fuzzy aspirations and sharp disappointments that are unique to that time on the edge of adulthood. They let me enter that world with them. I listened to their stories and remembered my own. For a time, I was 17 again. That was their precious and unknowing gift to me.

I'm staring out the window at trees whose leaves are just starting to turn crispy. I turned a number way past 40 this summer, but it was fun visiting 17 with five kids I love dearly and remembering the feeling of standing impatiently on the brink of something huge and glorious and unknowable. Some cold day in early November, after I've switched back to my winter wallet, I'll need a place to sit at a soccer game. I'll open one of my canvas beach chairs. There will be a handful of sand in the seat, and I'll remember 17.