

LIVES

Happy Meals

By Jan Ellison

Jan. 16, 2015

Tujunga is not one of those well-to-do Los Angeles suburbs. It does not have a quaint main street or rows of tidy houses with trim lawns or a view of the ocean. When I was growing up, there were boarded-up storefronts and chain-link fences surrounding monstrous pink apartment buildings. There were abandoned houses and empty lots overrun by weeds.

In the 30 years since I left home, not much had changed. We took a detour from our family road trip one morning and drove up the main drag, past auto garages and liquor stores and doughnut shops. I asked my husband to pull over at the fast-food restaurant where I worked in high school. It hadn't changed, either: the same beige stucco building; the small parking lot with a metal chain pulled across the entrance; the red-and-white sign announcing "Charbroiled burgers, Drive-thru." "Yuck," one of my daughters said.

It didn't seem yucky to me at 15, when I got the job. I started as a French-fry cook, juggling four metal baskets over a vat of hot oil that ruined my adolescent skin. Eventually, I was promoted to the cash register. Cars backed up on the street, and customers often grew irate over the wait. I had to work fast and make sure the cash box balanced at the end of the night. Once, when I forgot to charge extra for a slice of cheese, my boss pinned the receipt to the bulletin board with the error circled and my name written across it in red ink. But he also paid me well over minimum wage after my first year. One Christmas, he slipped me a hundred-dollar bill. He nominated me for a work-experience award that I received at my high-school graduation.

My family was often broke and always in debt, but we weren't poor. I was sent to Catholic schools. I did gymnastics. I was able to go to Stanford. The difference from the way my own children are being raised is that I was acutely aware of the financial burden of these pursuits, and I participated in paying for them. I won scholarships. I took out loans. And I made money of my own from age 11 onward. I had a paper route. I cleaned houses and swimming pools. I took clerical temp jobs, and I picked tomatoes in a field. I was a banquet waitress in a hotel, where I once accidentally dumped a tray of iced teas into a woman's lap.



Jan Ellison
Jay Blakesberg

I can't say that any of this was important work, but the act of doing it mattered. What also mattered was that it made me desperate for something better: not a life of leisure, or even extraordinary wealth, but work that nourished my mind, and freedom — for myself and for my own children — from that pinch of fear I felt as a child when a car broke down or the

refrigerator stopped working or I thought about who would pay for college.

But what if insulating my children turns out to be a mistake? What if I am depriving them of the very fuel that drove me in my own life? Tujunga will always be synonymous for me with the work of trying to make order out of chaos. But that challenge belonged to me, and I treasured it; that work felt like a shared burden, as much mine as my parents'. By working, I felt responsible for my surroundings and my future in a way I'm not sure my children feel.

But it's impossible to manufacture necessity. It was more than a choice to offer my children a different life; it was the whole point of the struggle, and to burden their childhoods with unnecessary worry would be to negate my own experience. I had my childhood; they have theirs. The one is the fruit of the other.

My family eventually abandoned Tujunga. My mother moved with my younger sister to a beach town. My father ended up in the Northwest. My older brother went to Europe. I graduated from high school and left for college, never wanting to return.

But that day I tried to see Tujunga through my children's eyes. As we sat outside the burger joint where I had worked, I asked them how they would like a job in a place like that. Two of the four said it might be fun; the other two said they would hate it. I took comfort in the lack of consensus. They view the world through individual lenses, and perhaps those lenses are shaped not so much by blessings or deprivations but by their own natures. As we drove off, I was grateful for what Tujunga was for me: a hometown I wanted so desperately to leave, but that taught me to work for the ticket that would take me away.

Jan Ellison is the author of "A Small Indiscretion," her first novel, published this week by Random House.

EMAIL submissions for Lives to lives@nytimes.com. Because of the volume of email, the magazine cannot respond to every submission. Share comments on this essay at nytimes.com/magazine.

A version of this article appears in print on , Page 58 of the Sunday Magazine with the headline: Happy Meals