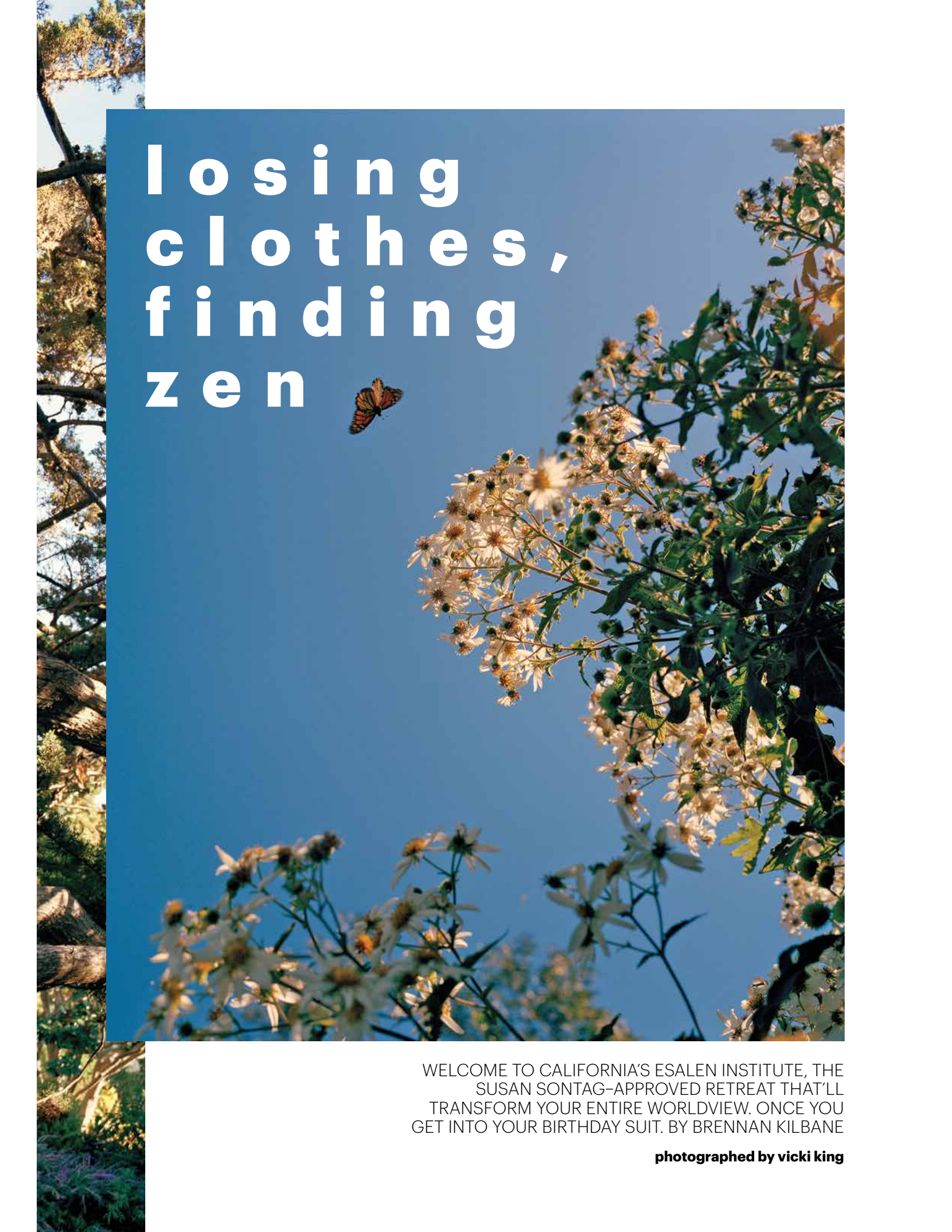




MODEL: ABRILLE STEDMAN



losing clothes, finding zen

WELCOME TO CALIFORNIA'S ESALEN INSTITUTE, THE
SUSAN SONTAG-APPROVED RETREAT THAT'LL
TRANSFORM YOUR ENTIRE WORLDVIEW. ONCE YOU
GET INTO YOUR BIRTHDAY SUIT. BY BRENNAN KILBANE

photographed by vicki king

Each and every pore on my body is flexed shut. My anatomy—I'll spare you the details—is visibly cold. I had thought November would be a mild month for Big Sur, California, and I was only half right: It was a beautiful and warm day to be naked outdoors among strangers, but by nightfall, freezing winds are blowing over the Pacific and into my bloodstream. Then I plunge my body into a hot mineral bath, and every cell in my body sighs.

This is hour seven at the Esalen Institute, where I've elected to spend the weekend in the hopes of shedding inhibitions, self-consciousness, and clothing for a few days of totally nude R&R. (Vacations are a lot less stressful when you're not responsible for a beach bag.) I'm also devoting a total of nine and a half hours to unguarded self work with 30 strangers and two professionals who are also strangers. Annoyingly, I'm calling this "emotional nudity." Do you get it? There is basically one place on earth that asks you politely to share your innermost thoughts and feelings and fears and insecurities with a group of people you have never met before, and, yeah, if you use the pool or baths, would you mind also not wearing clothes? Thank you so much. Welcome to Esalen.

Protected by a menacing stretch of cliff and a BY RESERVATION ONLY sign, the Esalen Institute has been welcoming guests at or after their designated arrival time since 1962. (If you arrive early, you will be asked to check in later. If you ask where in the area you can stop and maybe get lunch, the parking attendant will laugh.) It was founded by Michael Murphy and Dick Price, Stanford grads who were inspired

by studies of higher health and peak experiences, and on Murphy's family land, which boasted healing hot springs and arresting views of the Pacific. In the last half century, Esalen has developed a luminous alumni list—

Henry Miller, Joan Baez, Aldous Huxley, and Joni Mitchell, among others. To this day, it may be the only thing that Susan Sontag and Deepak Chopra have in common.

Esalen cultivates a kind of cultish mystique. Mentioning the institute prompts one of two responses from people: effusive acclaim or furrowed skepticism. Esalen featured prominently in the Human Potential Movement of the 1960s, a belief system focused on inner development (one middle-aged men still employ today as an argument for swinging). The finale of *Mad Men* famously referenced the institute: Don Draper attends a workshop during a personal crisis and finds wholeness—along with an idea for a Coca-Cola ad. While the 1960s Esalen was extremely bohemian, the Esalen of today has modernized a bit. It has a cash bar and a Wi-Fi hookup (except during mealtimes). And last November, briefly, it had me.

My fear was that it was going to be, um, enlightened. When I arrived on Friday afternoon, my fear began, borrowing an Esalen term, to manifest: The first person I encountered, who checked in my car, was wearing a Sublime T-shirt. The second person I encountered, who checked in me, was an extremely kind white woman with a bouquet of blonde locs. What do you call those midcalf-length pants that are jersey and usually paisley, and you can only buy them at head shops? I saw 40 pairs that afternoon. My jeans and sweater felt like a tuxedo. For a miserable four hours, I was convinced I had made a terrible mistake.

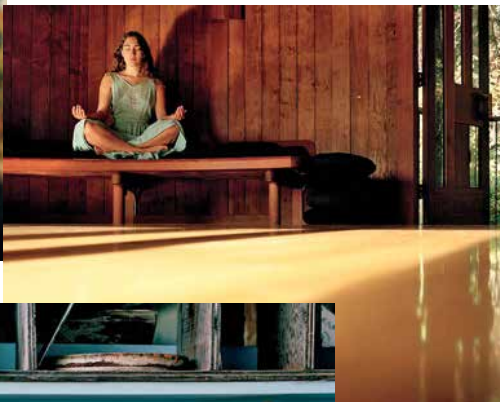
Then everybody else showed up. Businessmen barking their last business commands into FaceTime Audio calls (the campus has very spotty cell service), yogis wearing beanies, thoroughly bleached women wearing expensive premium sportswear, a haggard couple who, I'm not joking, arrived in a yellow Volkswagen minibus. One by one they spilled out over the grounds, which are, I cannot say it enough: stunning. Esalen is verdant—everything within campus limits is remarkably green, thanks in part to a sustainable irrigation plan that involves processing laundry water. The lodging is rustic with comfortable flourishes, like soft duvets and hotel furniture. Everything smells vaguely of lavender oil.

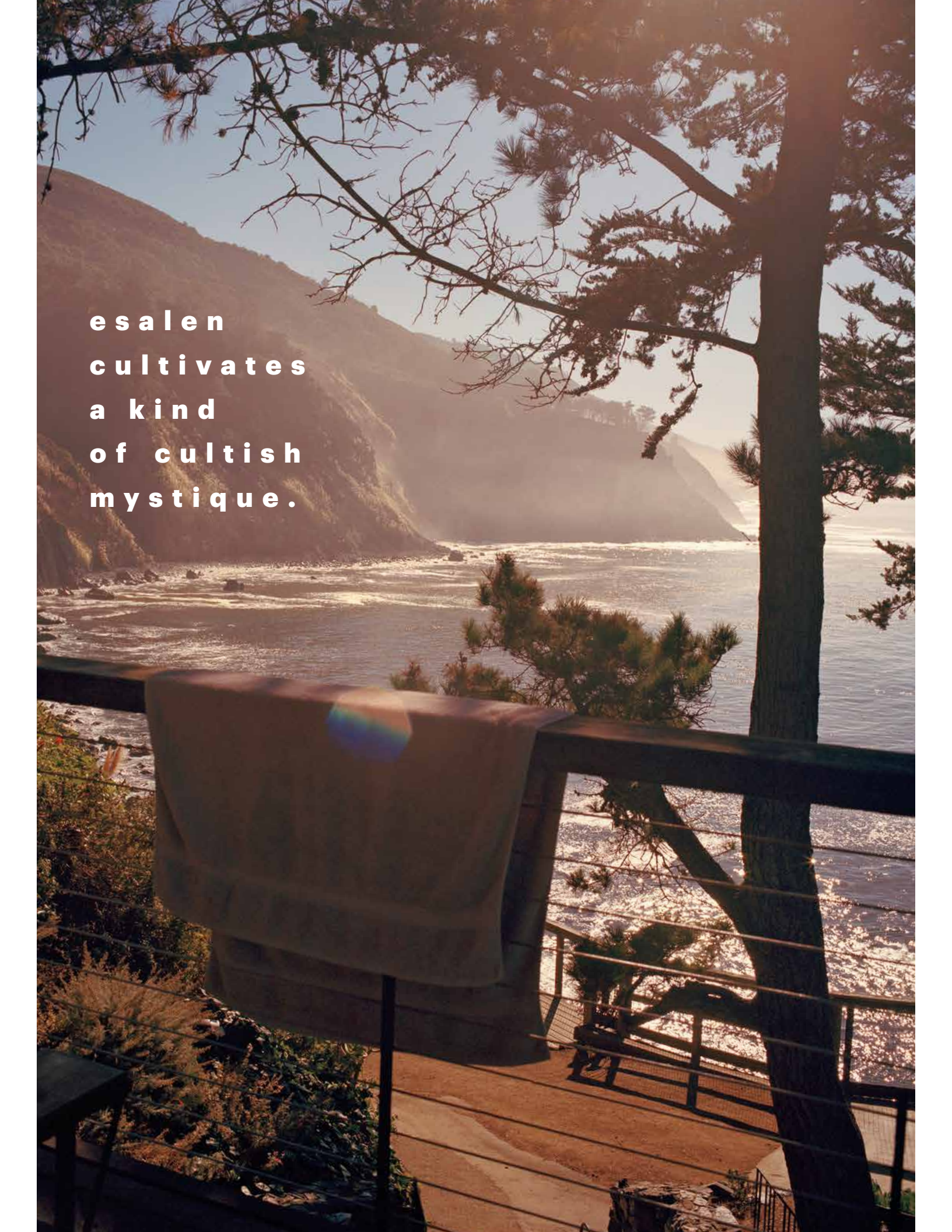
My assigned roommate, James the nurse, is instantly my best friend. We are inseparable for two hours, until he goes to his workshop ("Esalen Massage: The Basics") and leaves me. When he comes back to our room, an hour after I have already been here *waiting for him*, I furiously interrogate him about his whereabouts.

"I got out late!"

James, revealing himself to be a pathological liar, is no longer my best friend. Bonds are forged and destroyed at breakneck speed here.

My workshop, "A Different Perspective: Reframe Your Life Using Play, Embodiment, and Humor," begins at 8 P.M., but I arrive early. Most of the conversation I overhear is from people who have already been here, who would love to give you, verbally and specifically, an itemized list of the last times they were here, plus other details that are riveting. Before one of my workshops, two Esalen regulars animatedly argue about which side of the room the instructors will instruct from. "A month ago, they started there," one says, pointing to the southernmost corner of the room. The opposing counsel shakes her head. "It's over there," she insists, gesturing to the door. "I know. I've been coming here for years." This goes on for



A scenic view of a coastline, likely in Oregon, featuring a wooden deck in the foreground with a white towel draped over the railing. A large, dark tree stands on the right side of the frame. In the background, a steep, forested cliff meets the ocean, with waves crashing against the shore. The sky is a pale blue, and the overall lighting suggests a warm, golden hour atmosphere. A small rainbow is visible on the towel.

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15 minutes, which only seems like a short period of time.

Then it begins. "What we discuss in the seminar must stay in the seminar."

By 10 P.M., after hours of [redacted], the workshop lets out. Some seminarians head to bed. Since the mineral baths are open 24 hours, I break off, hoping to bathe under the stars. This is where the nakedness starts.

It is not where it ends.

During the day, you can see clear over the sweeping grounds to where the mineral baths are, and if you squint, you can make out a spectrum of flesh-colored sunbathers on the edge of California. At night, you cannot see a sumo wrestler painted neon: The grounds are entirely dark, peppered with lamps that are a mean joke. It takes 15 minutes to walk across campus, but I spent nearly 40 ambling through the pitch. I consider returning to bed, but I remember my editor's advice—"Man up and drop trou." Plus, I want James to think I am cool. After journeying for all of night, I reach the baths. Reader, I dropped trou.

Being naked outside is terrific. And not because it hearkens back to our primordial form, although I'm sure there are some people at Esalen who find that theory particularly appealing. The wind on your bare thighs feels sensational already, but under the painted cliffs of Big Sur, beneath a night sky drawn in sprawls of entire galaxies, it feels sublime. You are laying yourself bare—literally—if you choose to sunbathe. I spend every free daylight hour not reserved for rigorous self work at the baths, hot yellow sunlight drenching my face and butt and et cetera. My towel, a security blankie at first, is quickly discarded in favor of full-frontal.

The mineral baths date back thousands of years, to when Native Americans of the Esselen tribe would gather and—I assume—get naked in a ceremonious way. The appeal of these baths is not revealed to me—the water smells terrible, and a link on the Esalen website promising "more information on the hot springs water and its healing properties" leads to a series of reports that include specific mineral content. I don't know what 18 micrograms per liter of aluminum is doing to my skin, but it feels amazing, even if it smells like hot onion water. The three or four other people in the bath do not seem to notice me. They are chatting among themselves about San Francisco's astronomical rents. And in no time, I'm chatting, too.

That, I think, is why people flock to this place. Not for the mineral baths or the workshops or the cafeteria-style meals or the post-bohemian rustic accommodations, although all of the above is pretty great, but for the people. Every single person on campus grounds is a walking magnet for your best self, pulling out your most emotionally generous impulses with every interaction. Fraternity is the oxygen of Esalen. Fires are discouraged on the grounds—this is California, remember—but a campfire sensibility burns through the atmosphere. Except instead of an annoying guy in a flannel playing "Wonderwall" unprompted, it's a guy with a ponytail playing the bongos. Unprompted. Also in a flannel.

Most of this camaraderie is forged within Esalen's classes, which span from technical workshops to tear-soaked share sessions. And I swear to Goddess I am a

different person from who I was on day one. Over the course of a weekend, I crawled like a baby into the arms of a near stranger, who held me for five minutes while we rocked. I shared things with people that I would hesitate to tell my therapist. I filled to bursting with joy and clapped my hands numb when a new friend gave a rave improv performance. I cried at a poem. A poem! In two days, I transformed from the kind of person who is put off by a Sublime T-shirt to the kind of person who cries at the poetry of strangers.

That is a kind of nudity, I realized, although it hadn't clicked until one of the workshop's instructors summed up the kind of work we had been doing through movement and sharing: "We're standing naked at the contact boundary," he said, as my fellow seminarians wiped away tears and quietly side-embraced so as to honor the circle we were sitting in. I wondered about the context of nudity at a place like this, a place where you're invited to take off your clothes and then bare yourself. I felt more naked in this room, wearing a metric ton of fabric (I was cold), than I did wearing nothing at the baths.

Victoria became my new best friend—we gushed over photos of her granddaughter and my baby niece. Our only common ground seemed to be that we both personally knew a young baby, and even so, we exchanged numbers and discussed meeting up when she was in New York next. Jacqueline and Penelope and I embraced and wiped tears from our eyes, thanking one another for being there, for

lending ourselves. We all talked about coming back, but with the acute awareness that this weekend would never happen again, and that we were bound by this unique experience. We had seen each other at our most naked. It was altering, unforgettable, and a little chilly in November. Pack a sweater.

