

“Braverman possesses a magical, incantatory voice and the ability to lift ordinary lives into the heightened world of myth.”

—*NEW YORK TIMES*

A GOOD DAY FOR SEPPUKU

SHORT STORIES

Kate Braverman



CITY LIGHTS

BOOKS

A GOOD DAY FOR
SEPPUKU

SHORT STORIES

Kate Braverman



This PDF file is the property of City Lights Books | San Francisco
CITY LIGHTS BOOKS, and may not be
reproduced, copied or used in any way
without prior written permission.

CITY LIGHTS

Copyright © 2018 by Kate Braverman

“What the Lilies Know” (published as “The Woman Who Sold Communion” in *McSweeney’s*, 2005 and *Best of McSweeney’s*, 2006.)

“Skinny Broads with Wigs” (published as “Mrs. Jordan’s Summer Vacation,” “Editors Choice” Carver Award, *Carve Magazine*, Volume 5, 2005)

“Feeding in a Famine” (published by Connotation Press online, June 2015)

“Cocktail Hour” (published in *Mississippi Review*, Volume 33 #1 & 2, winner of the Mississippi Review Prize)

“Women of the Ports” (published as “The Neutral Zone” in *San Francisco Noir*, Akashic Books, 2005)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Braverman, Kate, author.

Title: A good day for seppuku : stories / Kate Braverman.

Description: San Francisco : City Lights Publishers, 2018.

Identifiers: LCCN 2017043863 (print) | LCCN 2017046533 (ebook) | ISBN 9780872867222 (ebook) | ISBN 9780872867215 (softcover)

Subjects: | BISAC: FICTION / Short Stories (single author). | FICTION / Literary. | FICTION / Contemporary Women. | FICTION / Family Life.

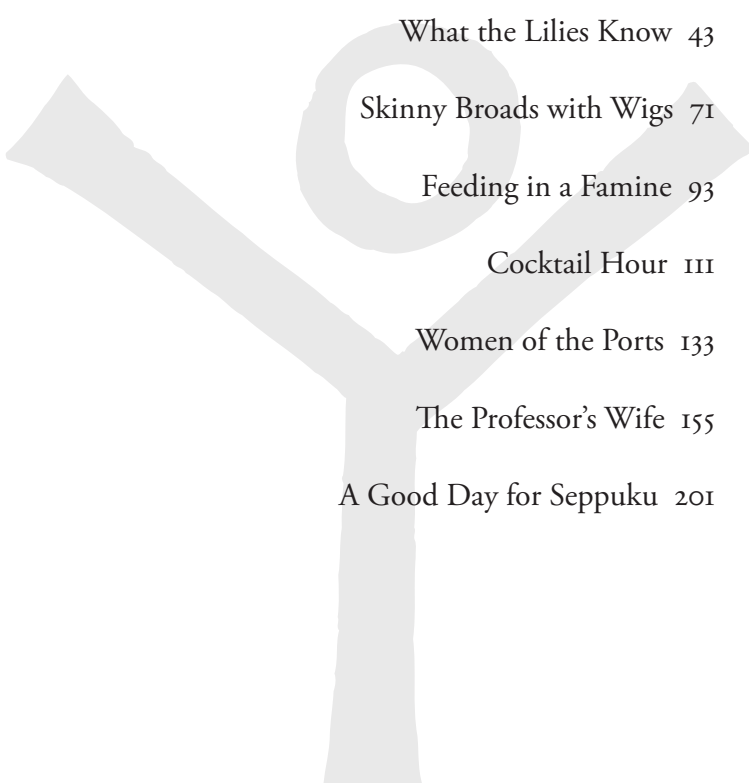
Classification: LCC PS3552.R3555 (ebook) | LCC PS3552.R3555 A6 2018 (print) | DDC 813/.54--dc23

LC record available at <http://lccn.loc.gov/2017043863>

City Lights Books are published at the City Lights Bookstore
261 Columbus Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94133
www.citylights.com

This title remains the property of
CITY LIGHTS BOOKS, and may not be
reproduced, copied or used in any way
without prior written permission.

CITY LIGHTS BOOKS



CONTENTS

O'Hare 7

What the Lilies Know 43

Skinny Broads with Wigs 71

Feeding in a Famine 93

Cocktail Hour 111

Women of the Ports 133

The Professor's Wife 155

A Good Day for Seppuku 201

This PDF file remains the property of
CITY LIGHTS BOOKS, and may not be
reproduced, copied or used in any way
without prior written permission.

CITY LIGHTS BOOKS

O'HARE

I love O'Hare Airport, with its unpredictable weather and constant gate and terminal changes. This is where I board my plane to Los Angeles. O'Hare is a zone with variables that can't be controlled. Cell phone service ceases and nobody can tell me no.

I wander corridors that end in cul-de-sacs where I sit alone in alcoves. Loudspeakers announce implausible destinations like Madrid, Prague and Tokyo. I pretend I'm someone else. I have a red or black passport, a different genetic code and a suitcase full with lace mantillas and hand-embroidered shawls. I'm subject to random acts of nature — lightning storms, tornadoes and lethal black ice. But that's at a distance so vast it's incomprehensible and irrelevant.

It's the summer of my 13th year and I'm supposed to make my decision. I must choose which parents I'll live with for high school and what foreign language I'll learn. I'm officially a teenager. I have a biological passport and carry tampons, lip-gloss and credit cards in my purse. My age has 2 syllables. And I count everything.

CITY LIGHTS BOOKS, and may not be reproduced, copied or used in any way without prior written permission.

When I live with my mother and Marty in Beverly Hills, my bedroom is entirely Gucci pink — the walls and carpets, the cabinets with my TV and CD player, even the interior of my clothing and shoe closets. My mother took her vintage spring purse to a paint store and supervised the replication of a color only I possess.

My bedroom opens onto a tiled balcony where I can see the tennis court and swimming pool that's lit even at night. Halogen globes make shadows in the water seem alive and insistent, as if urgently communicating in a language I will someday decipher.

It's a June of Hibiscus and Magenta Bougainvillea. Night blooming Jasmine from Madagascar turns my skin fragrant. Marty says money alters planetary orbits and renders footnotes unnecessary. He indicates the terraced hillside garden surrounding the swimming pool.

"*Race ipsa loquitur*," he says expansively, agreeing with himself.

"And you only need a sweater at night," my mother adds.

My mother drives me to school in the mornings, even though it's only 4 blocks away. She wears a tennis dress and matching sweatband around her forehead. Walking is *déclassé*, she explains. It's for latchkey children. Or orphans. Or children of maids and gardeners illegally obtaining a Beverly Hills school experience.

"Walking is for peripherals," she clarifies.

On Wednesdays we have our hair and nails done at Diva Salon on Rodeo Drive. In a curtained room dense with Philodendrons and musk incense, we're given identical terrycloth robes lined with peach silk. A miniature Purple Orchid like a severed crab claw is tucked in the pocket. A willowy woman bows as she extends the robes like an offering.

We select identical colors for our manicures and pedicures. We are lacquered with apricot or strawberry. Then we meet Marty for dinner at the Club or Mr. Chow's, where we have our own table permanently reserved for us. On holidays, we attend services

at Sinai Temple on Wilshire Boulevard with all the movie stars and industry executives.

The executives wear suits and have their own yarmulkes. The directors are bearded; their hair is long and uncombed and their borrowed yarmulkes perch uncertainly on their matted curls and keep falling off. They wear sunglasses and talk throughout the service. They make rectangles with their index fingers and thumbs. It's a geometry meant to show camera angles and close-ups.

On long weekends, we drive to Palm Springs or the beach house in Malibu. In between, Marty is invited to concerts at the Greek Theater and the Sports Arena. We don't need tickets like peripherals. Marty's name is on *The List*. We sit in the first or second row and go backstage with our special passes. We eat petit fours and palm-sized pizzas from Spago's with the bands. I shake hands with Mick Jagger, who wears a purple bonnet, and David Bowie, who wears lipstick. Steven Tyler shows me how to play a tambourine and lets me keep it.

Marty knows everyone because he's a record producer with 22 Grammy nominations and 9 Grammy Awards. When he greets a performer, his smile is suddenly abnormally wide, his teeth are enormous and inordinately white, and his hand reaches out as if by a mechanical extending device. It elongates dangerously and I think of the trunks of elephants and ivory tusks, swamps, cemeteries and poaching.

I watch the news with my mother. A river is swelling beyond its sand-bagged banks and houses look amputated at ground level. They drift past like a square armada with chimneys and dogs on leashes barking, and porches of Wisteria still attached.

"It doesn't figure," my mother says, filing her fingernails.

"The flood?" I ask.

"Floods. Rivers. They don't figure. Corn doesn't figure. Trailer parks with the obese in bathrobes don't figure." My mother pats my shoulder and smiles. "You'll learn."

A soaking wet woman who has never been to Diva Salon holds a sodden cat and a chair frame. Storms took her house, her daughter's prom corsage, her son's purple heart, and her marriage certificate. She points behind her floral printed bathrobe and indicates wood slats and glass panes scattered in mud. She's obviously a peripheral.

One afternoon I hear my mother say, "It's untenable." She's talking to my father on the telephone. "Why?" My mother holds the receiver in front of her eyes and stares at it like it's an object of alien technology. "You're joking."

My father does not tell jokes. He's laconic and rations his syllables. I imagine stray birds lodge in his lungs. If he laughed without warning, flocks of finches, the pink and yellow of chalk would fly out. Then I'd gather iridescent feathers and line a winter coat for him.

It's the word *untenable* that catches my attention. I would have passed barefoot through the living room, with its floor of hand-painted Italian tiles and Persian rugs with authenticated stamped certificates Marty keeps locked in his office safe. I might have crouched behind rows of Cymbidiums in 42 cloisonné pots. But the harsh certainty of the word, *untenable*, stops me.

Untenable sounds ominous and ugly, like all the *un* words — *unlikely*, *unhealthy*, *unemployed*, *unfortunate* and *unhappy*. *Un* words are like pointed stakes in a field with **No Trespassing** signs.

"She'll be in high school this fall. We're talking educational sequences with profound continuity implications." My mother is drinking brandy from a bottle she conceals in a cloisonné planter. My mother is in AA and she's not allowed to drink.

"Listen, old pal," my mother raises her voice. Her mouth is tight with frustration as if it has wires in it. Her eyes are

cluttered like a pond overgrown with reeds and fallen red and yellow maple leaves like stained glass panels from a cathedral.

“It takes two weeks to wash the hillbilly off her. What about her interior? How’s that going to wash off?” My mother finishes her brandy.

At dinner my mother watches my mouth. Her eyes are magnifiers. From the shape of my lips, she’ll get an early warning. Selecting a foreign language has implications about character that last a lifetime like an appendicitis scar. Spanish is the language of the underclass. It’s for bus boys and their girlfriends who won’t get abortions because they believe God is watching. They’re peripherals who don’t figure. French, on the other hand, is the language of museums, fashion and money, style, diplomacy and ballet.

“There really is no choice,” my mother decides for me.

I leave for Camp Hillel every June no matter where I live. But this time I recognize it’s a definitive moment. It’s a punctuation I didn’t anticipate and don’t want. I thought I could avoid this entirely, sleep through it or disappear in O’Hare. I’m like Alpine denied clearance to land, condemned to repeat monotonous circles. If it explodes in a cornfield or trailer park, it won’t figure.

Marty’s taking my suitcases, sleeping bag and camping gear out to the car. My mother is envisioning me in an apartment overlooking the Seine. My split ends and curls are gone, and my braces have been cut off with metal shears. I wear a beret and contact lenses. In spring afternoons, I am inspired and sit in the Tuileries reading Sartre and Simon de Beauvoir.

My mother and Marty drive me to Camp Hillel. Apparently this is an occasion necessitating the Rolls Royce. The weight of museums, revolution, democracy, ballet and

existentialism ride in the back seat. As we enter Camp Hillel, counselors hold signs with **ARROWS** pointing to the dust and gravel pit designated as the camp parking lot. They salute as we pass. When our parents are gone the parking lot will return to its usual name. Sex Gully.

Marty slowly maneuvers the Rolls between Mercedes Benz sedans, Jaguars, Bentleys and SUVs parked at criminally dangerous angles. He steers with calculated deliberation like he's navigating a ship into a shallow inlet.

The parking lot is notorious. Fender benders and collisions are constant. Even small scratches require imported paint and take months to repair. There have been so many accidents, Dr. White includes a legally binding document promising not to sue in the Camp Hillel application package. You must absolve Camp Hillel in advance before entering the property.

Dislodged campers drag bedrolls and backpacks across gravel. Cameras slip off wrists and canteens fall from their shoulders. Fathers lean out windows exchanging business cards.

My mother hands me my purse which I'd dropped. "Monet," she whispers while I search for my assigned cot. "Degas and Camus." She continues naming famous French artists until a counselor asks her to leave.

I unpack my white Sabbath shorts and blouses. Chelsea Horowitz is taking German because her father is a Freudian psychoanalyst. I find a drawer for my jeans and rock band T-shirts. Jennifer Rothstein is pre-enrolled in Chinese because it's the most important language of the 21st century. Her parents are both cardiologists. Anything less than Chinese is a deliberate refusal to recognize reality. It's obtuse, like refusing treatment for a preventative valve or artery procedure.

I put my toothbrush and tampons in a basket in the bathroom. There are 3 toilets and 2 of them are broken. Tiffany Gottlieb already has an Italian tutor. Her parents own a designer in

Milan and a villa at Lake Como. They want her to appreciate opera, order from a menu with style, and not embarrass them.

Bunk 7 is named Golda Meir. It has torn screens on the windows and 2 showers marked **Out of Order**. The floor is cement. Somehow, I'd forgotten this. I place my pool thongs, tennis shoes and white Sabbath sandals under my cot. I inspect my mattress. Coils, orange with rust, unravel in multiples like fingers forced to repeat piano scales. They might be laminated worms and I suspect infection.

I cover my cot with an over-sized lavender sheet that belonged to my grandmother. Lilac trees bloom in 44 horizontal rows. It's been washed thousands of times and the cotton is softer than silk. It feels like skin. But it fails to stop the metal spokes that scratch my sunburn and mosquito bites.

Becky Fine is pre-enrolled in Russian due to her family heritage and the novels of Tolstoy. She has an appreciation for the Cyrillic alphabet that curls like waves in the Black Sea. Everyone's fallback is Latin.

Brooke Bernstein is committed to a Greek and Japanese double language program. She's sharing her cigarette with the rest of language-declared Bunk 7. I don't join them.

"What are you taking?" Chelsea Horowitz demands. "Canadian?"

I stare at her, flabbergasted. Chelsea Horowitz has dyed her hair platinum blond and it looks like a metal helmet glued to her skull. Stray pieces like starched straw jut out like errant stalks from defective seeds.

Chelsea Horowitz has a stress-induced amnesia. She's apparently forgotten last summer in Bunk 6, Esther, when she had mourning black dreadlocks and we were best friends. When she dropped her sleeping bag in the creek on our overnight, I gave her my extra blanket. We stayed up until dawn, shivering, and watching the stars make their singular circular transit.

After dinner we walked past the stables and into the Eucalyptus grove reeking of cough drops and confided secrets. Sometimes we held hands. Chelsea Horowitz swore me to eternal silence and told me the ethics committee had suspended her father. It was a harsh punishment for an unfortunate but essentially trivial episode with a bipolar Russian ballerina. Her mother had totally overreacted, and filed for divorce and bought an apartment in Haifa. She gave me her birthday opal ring. We wanted to become blood sisters, officially, but the cafeteria only gave us one plastic knife that broke immediately.

As soon as I wake up I go to the Health Center. Nurse Kaufman is a holocaust survivor. You could sever a major artery and she wouldn't give you a tourniquet. I loiter near the scale and jars of tongue depressors. Then I show her my abraded shoulder blades.

"This is a kibbutz, not the Four Seasons," Nurse Kaufman says. She gives me a band-aid, reluctantly. She's compromising against her better judgment and wants me to know I owe her.

In Bunk 8, *Delilah*, the Goldberg twins are in an experimental central European immersion program. They began in Hungary with blue-domed public hot baths and Klezmer recordings. They spent a night in a village of gypsies and interviewed them with video cameras. Each summer, they'll visit a different concentration camp and add another language.

I return to the Health Office. Nurse Kaufman glances at my puncture wounds. When she determines it's not stigmata, she loses interest. Golda Meir has dysfunctional screens and a division of mosquitoes has bitten me. I count 31 separate violations of my flesh. A spider walked across my back in 9 distinct bites. Nurse Kaufman dispenses 2 aspirin and a paper cup of tap water. She watches me swallow. She permits eye contact for the first time and writes a note on my chart.

Bunk 7 is sharing vacation photographs. Tiffany Gottlieb

wears a gold thong bikini, holds a beer, and waves from a boat on Lake Como. Chelsea Horowitz yells, “Yo, Canada,” as I pass.

Chelsea Horowitz has been encouraged to say whatever comes into her mind because it could contain analytically significant material. Still, sometime someone’s going to knock her front teeth out. I edge onto my cot. Soiled coils snap apart and jab my knee.

It’s lights out, including flashlights and matches. I leave Golda Meir barefoot. I’m breathing rapidly in uneven bursts. I need to stand outside in the dark and quietly count the occasional meteor streaking silver and exploding like a 747.

The sky surprises me. It’s a sheeted haze of monochrome gray like layers of smoke. In fact, it is smoke. The junior and senior counselors from UCLA and Stanford are lying on their backs in Sex Gully, chain smoking, passing joints, and pretending they’re in the Israeli army.

I’m late for breakfast. My eyes feel like barbed wire is implanted in 2 horizontal lines like train tracks or stitches. My mouth tastes metallic as if my braces are leaking. It’s lead poisoning. The Atlanta Center for Disease Control should be informed. They’ll want samples and a quarantine.

Nurse Kaufman lights a cigarette. The Health Center is the size of a walk-in closet. A real medical emergency is for Medevac. Red Cross choppers fly over camp 2 or 3 times a day, staying in practice in case Dr. White presses the buzzer he wears next to his Rolex. Hypochondriacal disorders are for our own psychiatrists.

The Health Center is the size of a closet because you’re supposed to walk in and walk out. Stray nests of ashtrays constructed from medical supplies sit on the counter between throat swabs and disposable thermometers. An empty jar has 4 cigarette butts mashed inside. It’s symbolically concealed behind rolls of gauze and gallon bottles of iodine. Nurse Kaufman

believes iodine is the universal solvent. If it doesn't hurt, it isn't working. You must feel the bacteria stinging as they die.

"Samples? Quarantine?" Nurse Kaufmann repeats. She expels smoke with purpose, forceful and direct like a bullet. Then she asks me if I want to talk to the Camp Director, Dr. White. I'll think about it, I lie.

Dr. White is head of pediatrics at Cedars Sinai Hospital where most of Camp Hillel were born. He's also head of child psychiatry. He's seen us in diapers and given us Rorschach tests. He's written our recommendations and testified at our parents' divorces. He definitely knows too much. He gleams, radiant with intimacies we'll deny under oath. All Camp Hillel avoids him. Everyone knows, if you're sent to Dr. White, you aren't participating effectively. Then your parents will be telephoned for a special conference.

Dr. White's office was equipped by the Mossad for global computer conferencing. He can talk to the Prime Minister in Tel Aviv and he can summon commandos. He can find your parents in Bali or Capri. He can force your mother to fill the screen with her hair wet from the ocean and her make-up washed into a blue smear. She squints through sun in another hemisphere, disadvantaged by the absence of contact lenses, sunglasses and lipstick. She stares blindly into the camera, confused and disoriented.

Dr. White can freeze the frame where a field of brown hair juts out above her lip like a just chopped crop and ground level stalks rise straight up. It's the guillotined field no one is ever supposed to see.

Dr. White can find your father and zoom in with one button. Your father seems isolated on a beach without a briefcase, stethoscope or towel. He is overly white and the size of an abandoned child. He's miniaturized and his tiny black eyes dart up and down the beach and then out to sea. He's

desperate like a small mammal about to be captured. He looks like an albino lemming.

Global conference calls must be avoided. Gangrene and a fever of 105 are better than a televised confrontation your parents will never forget or forgive.

Dr. White can issue an edict that sends you home. In the hierarchy of not participating effectively, this is number 1. Everyone watches your jetlagged parents load your suitcases, backpacks, unfinished crafts projects, bedroll and wicker baskets of tampons and hair conditioner into their car. The trunk slams. You're put in the back seat and your parents tell you to shut up. They don't remind you to put on your safety belt. They don't care if you're decapitated on the way home. No one waves goodbye. Your bunkmates offer vulgar hand gestures and a chorus of enthusiastic boos.

I've been to Nurse Kaufman's 3 times. A 4th visit generates an automatic interview with Dr. White. I'm on unofficial probation. I find my rock band T-shirts and count them. 14. I arrange them alphabetically, beginning with Aerosmith and ending with Zappa.

Jasmine Weiss already knows Portuguese. Her parents bought a piece of the rainforest in Brazil larger than New Jersey. They own whole villages, including dwellings, artifacts, crops, livestock and people. They're on the Green Peace wanted list. They own 2 hotels on the beach in Rio de Janeiro, but if they return to Brazil, they'll be arrested. Jasmine's uncle parachuted in, professionally disguised by Stephen Spielberg's personal make-up team, but he failed to get below radar detection. Now he's in jail and nobody can visit.

I'm on a prison track, too. Even though I left my personality in an alcove at O'Hare, and assumed the identity of a stranger with an embroidered shawl from Malta and ivory hair combs from Mozambique, my camouflage is unraveling.

My mother and Marty will be forced to go to Family Therapy with me. My mother will have to cancel her tennis lessons, Diva Salon appointments and even the gardener. Then she'll have to change her colonoscopy and mammogram appointments. If rogue cells develop during the delay, if an atypical aggressive tumor appears like a volcanic island out of nowhere, metastasizes and invades her lymph nodes, it will be my fault.

Marty will have to abandon his mixing boards in the midst of a crucial, fertile chorus. He's generously shared his philosophy of song writing with me. Hook lines are like capturing wind in a sail. It's a triangulation that happens only once. It's like getting liquid and putting it all on the line. Then God throws you a 7. Marty's got his first 7 but Dr. White has ordered him to leave the casino.

His new band from Australia, the Wellingtons, who are actually from Sidney and attending a community college in Santa Barbara, won't get a Grammy nod. They won't even get an invitation to a party where the Grammy's are shown on a big screen in a restaurant in Malibu. They'll probably lose their green cards and get deported.

Orange coils spring open in my mattress at knee level and ricochet down to my ankle. Bull's eye. For some reason I think about Surtsey, an island off of Iceland in 1967. I consider how much of the Earth is still unknown. I limp and wrap a damp towel around my forehead. A forest fire burns between my eyes but it doesn't show in the mirror. I don't even think about Nurse Kaufman. It's a conflagration iodine won't put out. 23 Eucalyptus trees surround Golda Meir. They probably planted 24 saplings, one for each hour, but one died. And it wasn't replaced. I count the Eucalyptus again at dusk, searching for subtraction. I rub their purported, but unsubstantiated, medicinal leaves on my forehead. I stumble across a hollowed out scrub oak trunk. I trip on a branch. It's a bark carcass and I crawl

inside with my flashlight and canteen, and try to telepathically transport myself to O'Hare.

I don't bother looking at the sky. Even Mars is gone, hidden by sheets of forbidden cigarette smoke like lead clouds at tree level. I close my eyes and let the glued horizon fall over me.

After martial arts and gymnastics, we have nature hiking with the botanist. The botanist is usually a graduate student from Santa Cruz or Davis, who reiterates, with each brittle leaf, desiccated seedpod, and severed insect leg or wing, that she isn't a certified expert. A wall of silence immediately encases her. We're a kibbutz and we don't indulge neurosis. We asked about bugs, not her existential crisis. We walk ahead, fanning out from our mandatory single line, and leave her behind, alone. She made herself a peripheral.

I am mute in the Main Hall at lunch. Horseback riding and swimming are next. My horseback privileges are suspended due to my undiagnosed limp and I've stopped swimming. Chlorine inflames my mosquito and spider bites. My thighs are yellow with scabs like colossal cellulite deposits that should be drained and I have no declared foreign language.

Chelsea Horowitz and the Goldberg twins occupy 3 of the 3 chaise lounges. They've been there for hours, painting their toenails fungus green. Chelsea Horowitz removes her gold-framed Prada sunglasses to stare at me.

"Can you say 'contagious' in Canadian?" she asks, voice loud and abrasive. The twins laugh on cue.

I avoid the swimming pool and spend afternoons in the crafts room. It's in the Rec Center basement and there are no windows. The ambience is discouraging. A sullen senior counselor on punishment detail rations art supplies. It's a bunker for the shunned and disfigured and campers with weight issues.

I sit near Lauren Silverberg. She has cerebral palsy and a portable flesh-colored oxygen tank protrudes from her spine like an extra appendage. Obviously she's a mutant. Lauren Silverberg shouldn't even be in Camp Hillel, but her father donated Citrus Hill. It used to be a mound with 2 hunched lemon trees. It was a conceptual homage to the Israeli citrus industry. Then Dr. Silverberg made it rise in tiers of trucked-in citrus trees and threatened a civil rights lawsuit.

Lauren Silverberg has trapped dozens of lizards in a plastic bag. They're still alive. She removes one at random and skins it with an art blade. Then she glues the band-aid sized scales onto a rock.

I decide to sit alone. I make papier-mâché masks of girls who removed their faces and hid them in airports. I've made 9 so far.

I sit with my bunkmates in the Main Hall. The chicken is passing my table as Dr. White appears. He's the cameo no one wants. Silverware stops moving and everyone sits up straighter. We remember our posture, our manners, and the value of small paper napkins.

Dr. White informs us that it's a thinking cap lunch. He pantomimes a triangular hat with a chin string that ties. Today, after lunch, we'll have Spiritual Discussion.

Spiritual Discussion is an unplanned activity, a back-up in case of rain or a heat wave with malpractice implications. Spiritual Discussion is the only time we see the rabbi, who is also still a student. The practice rabbis are stupefied by the weight of their responsibilities. The magnitude of post-historical interpretation and synthesis stuns and numbs them. They avoid Sex Gully. They swim but do not tan.

Dr. White assembles us into a co-ed group with four bunks. I'm in Golda Meir with a mattress filled with landmines and 11 linguistically pre-approved 13-year-olds who no longer

share cigarettes or photographs with me. Chelsea Horowitz accused me of taking Canadian for my foreign language and I didn't refute her. I'm exposed, vulnerable, and deficient. I've made myself a peripheral.

Scotty is in Bunk 8, Shimon Peres. He comes to Camp Hillel every year, too, but he's been an undifferentiated part of the mosaic — the thin green medicated air above the stables, the partial shade of Eucalyptus leaking their chalky medicinal smell, and the chlorine lingering like a toxic eye pollutant.

We march single file to the foot of the terraced grove of lemon and orange trees that Dr. Silverstein's vision made manifest. The oranges and lemons look stapled onto scaly branches. We are told to sit there. We sit.

Our topic is the philosophy of the 10 Commandments and how they might be reinterpreted based on our unprecedented historical circumstances, which are global, technological and post-modern. We were given a typed copy of the 10 Commandments at Orientation, but I keep confusing them with the 12 steps of AA.

My mother and Madeleine are both in AA, but only part of the time. I wonder if the 10 Commandments are subject to relapsing. If you fail in a Commandment, if you've been intimate with farm animals or purchased false idols, if you've sacrificed your children to the wrong gods, if you've mortgaged your Beverly Hills house and jet time share to throw it all on the line for a 7 and crap out, can you go to rehab and return to meetings again? Can you go back to Sinai Temple?

I read the 10 Commandments during Study Time. I curl on my side on my cot and twisted iron springs dig into my thighs. Thou shalt not kill. Thou shalt not steal. Thou shalt have no graven images. Thou shalt promptly make amends. Do not covet your neighbor. Thou shalt admit you are powerless over alcohol and narcotics. Thou shalt honor thy mother

and father, even if they're divorced, you're their only child, and they're trying to claw you apart.

Every summer my mother and Marty take me to a circus on the Santa Monica Pier. It's an annual family ritual. I'm afraid the Ferris wheel will leave me stranded at the top while Marty rocks the seat back and forth with his elongated arms. My mother and Marty hold hands as they walk. They eat French fries, despite the calories and saturated fat. I stagger behind them.

My parents laugh as a woman in feathers and gold stilettos is sawed in half. Don't they see she has the feet of a child, toes the size of grown-up teeth? Then the spinning cups promising the loss of limbs, and the miniature cars like metal coffins. Finally, a drum roll while a girl in pink sequins sinks into a spotlight. She smiles, wide and invitational. A man with pouches of blades takes her cape and tosses it aside. Then he straps her ankles and wrists. The wheel slowly spins. She's the object of knives and hatchets, and flaming darts like miniature spears. Everyone applauds when she survives.

"Remove the contrived pain from your face," my mother whispers.

Marty leans in, hearty. "It's show biz." His teeth are like glaciers. "Strings and mirrors, honey."

"Not like your home village," my mother points out. "You've got a real pillory."

"When is witch dunking season?" Marty asks.

"May through October," my mother tells him. "There's a hiatus for bow and arrow deer butchery."

"If they don't drown, they get barbequed." Marty shrugs.

Drowned and barbequed women must be peripherals to begin with. They're born that way. The 10 Commandments don't specifically mention circuses, but they're a subtext. I can't

separate the 10 Commandments from the 12 rules of AA. Thou shalt carry the message to all suffering drunks and drug addicts. Thou shalt not do things to animals, particularly sheep, or sniff cocaine, one day at a time.

Then I'm back at O'Hare again, where, depending on conditions, regional aircraft fly me to Pittsburgh, Buffalo or Erie. I'm pretending I'm on route to Hong Kong or London. But my flight is delayed, departures are changing gates and TV monitors offer sequences of shifting instructions. Somewhere tornados blow roofs off houses and flood highways in small cities in regions of no consequence.

My father and Madeleine are waiting in the Pittsburgh airport. We'll have hours of two-lane roads with stretches of gravel and no light back to our farmhouse. I smell earth and shoots of what will be Tulips, Freesias and Iris rising to the surface like the red tips of infant fingers. Then we're on the dirt driveway to our house inside an apple orchard. Acres of wild grasses, shoulder high Mustard and Thistle grow between the barns and pond. Darkness is dimensional and primitive and I fall asleep immediately.

From my bedroom window, in my room of wood where nothing is painted, I study the Maple forest. It stretches for hundreds of miles in all directions like a secret undiscovered inland sea. Wind pushes through leaves like currents. There are fluctuating hieroglyphics in how Maple limbs swing and twist, purposeful and suggestive. This is also a language I will eventually comprehend.

Madeleine takes me on a morning tour of the farm. An apple tree has fallen in a snowstorm and lies on the ground as if sleeping. She shows me patches of strawberries she planted the season I missed, and where Dad repaired the gate and water pump. Then we bake pies in the old kitchen that has its own fireplace. We drive to Blue Heaven and pick buckets of

blueberries. We can tomatoes, and peel and boil apples one wicker basket at a time. Madeline pours white and brown sugar, vanilla and cinnamon into the simmering pot. It's barely autumn and we're already preparing our winter larder. My father is in the main barn with his marijuana plants and magic mushrooms, his drying screens, plastic bags and scales. Then my yellow bus arrives on cue and I'm back in Alleghany Hills Middle School.

I don't wear my clothes from Beverly Hills. I leave them in my Gucci pink closet. I don't describe my bedroom with French doors opening onto a private terrace. I don't mention eating Italian cakes with Paul Simon or Madonna giving me a bouquet of yellow Orchids from her dressing room. They felt like lamps pulsing in my hands and I understood illumination then and how it's possible to see in the dark. I don't mention this either. It's just another detail that accrues to someone with a red passport and a parasol with hand painted Peonies and cranes on it.

I ride the school bus down Maple Ridge Road, but I'm really still in O'Hare, alone, watching passengers board airplanes bound for India and New Zealand. If I leave enough of myself in O'Hare, I'll continue traveling, watching islands rise and gathering phenomena without names or explanations. I won't become a teenager after all. I'll put my life on pause and remain a preadolescent for centuries.

We wait for Spiritual Discussion with our best posture and T-shirts tucked into our shorts. There's an intense heat wave, and Nurse Kaufman wanders gravel and pine needle trails with a canteen of Shabbat grape juice. The senior counselors are equipped with army issue binoculars. They're on fainting-watch.

When the Santa Anas blow and it's 103 degrees, malpractice

and reckless endangerment law suits take precedence. What if a camper passed out and received a head trauma with IQ implications? Or a fracture with dental involvement? What about a visible facial impairment resistant to corrective plastic surgery?

We form a circle beside a plaque indicating Citrus Hill with an arrow. Our practice rabbi, Just-call-me-Jeff, asks for opening comments. His forehead and cheeks are stained reddish, as if he's dotted with birthmarks or branded. It's iodine from the Health Center.

I begin counting pebbles and clumps of unnaturally rusty pine needles that remind me of old nails in a barn after a rainy season. Or the bellies of green snakes my dad finds under rocks in our creek. But these pine needles seem to be crawling.

Jeff leans into a Eucalyptus trunk. He has 3 band-aids on his wrist and iodine stains on his hand. I'm sure it's the residue of a suicide attempt. No one makes eye contact. No one responds. Then Scotty Stoloff, who is lounging on the cement hard pine needle throttled grass as if he's really comfortable says, "I have a problem with the commandments thing."

"A problem?" Jeff repeats.

"Yeah. If you look up the word 'commandment' as I have," Scotty produces a sheet of notebook paper from his pocket, "you'll notice words attached to 'commandment' include to tyrannize, oppress, dominant, inhibit and restrain. That's unconstitutional."

Scotty Stoloff's black hair is streaked with green and copper dye. His eyes are green, too. I stop counting pebbles and consider South Pacific lagoons, angel and clown fish, groupers, and lemon sharks. And swarms of miniature blue and yellow fish I snorkeled through in Bora Bora, parting schools of darting filaments with my fingers.

I feel like I'm back in O'Hare where seasons do not exist and all rules are suspended. I'm back in a region where codified

laws, black ice and tornadoes don't exit. I press the pause button on my life and everything stops.

"Also the thou shalt not steal part. The dude in *Les Misérables*? 20 years in jail for stealing bread?" Scotty offers from his deceptive lounging position. His body is tense and alert.

"I see," Jeff says. He rubs his eyeglasses on his shirt, presumably to clarify his perspective. "Interesting point, Scott."

Our next round of Spiritual Discussion will be improvisational, Rabbi-just-call-me-Jeff says. He'll ask a specific question and we'll answer, one by one, going around the circle. Everyone will be called upon and, yes, a response is mandatory.

I'm sitting in the accidental middle with my ribs and shoulders bruised, and my thighs sacs of yellowing scabs. Scotty is in his one-elbow faux meditation position on the far left. If Rabbi Jeff proceeds clockwise, Scotty will have the last word.

"Imagine you're going to another planet," Jeff begins. "And you can only take three things with you. What would these three things be?"

Tiffany Gottlieb, who is slated to appreciate Italian opera and not get lost in Milan, says she'll take her family, her cat and her Walkman. Tiffany hates her older brother, Max. He has brain cancer. His head is shaved and black magic marker arrows indicate radiation sites. He is the city being bombed. And Tiffany Gottlieb wouldn't take him, with his bandages, catheter, IV tubes, monitoring devices and emergency oxygen tanks anywhere. He's terminal, a condition even worse than peripheral.

Brooke Bernstein's right hand fingernails are garnet; her left are iridescent blue. I assume this refers to her double language choices of Greek and Japanese. Her unmatched hands spread out like a fan on the thighs of her denim shorts. She's taking both her families since her parents are divorced, her dog Justice, and her diabetes medications.

Brooke Bernstein doesn't have diabetes and she doesn't

reproduced, copied or used in any way
without prior written permission.

have a dog. She loathes her new stepfather. He's in the Russian mafia and slaps her mother on the face and pushes her against walls. Brooke keeps missing soccer practice and may be dropped from the team.

"The desperation of old women," Brooke revealed, summarizing her family catastrophe during a flashlight share and bond session. Obviously, it's her mother's fault.

Bruce Tuckerman, in Moshe Dayan, says he'll take the family Benz, in case there are roads on the other planet. He notes the importance of transportation historically, particularly the Erie Canal linking New York and Chicago, making Buffalo the 3rd largest city in the country. Barges are underrated, Bruce reminds us, reciting highlights from his history-of-taming America final report. We've all written this report, of course, and share his affection for barges. Then Bruce says he'll take a suitcase of seeds to start agriculture, and the family videos, so they can remember how things should be. Agriculture and personal history can fit in the trunk.

Everyone is taking their families, pets and Torah. Chelsea Horowitz is packing the classic pre-war Oxford dictionary, and the collected works of Freud in the original German. She has a duty to preserve their ambiguities and contradictions. She's also taking a sub-zero down sleeping bag and flashlight. That's at least 5 items, rather than 3, but no one notices. Then it's my turn.

"I'll take O'Hare Airport," I hear myself say. Each of its four separate syllables sounds strange and hangs in the hot-chalk lemony air. I offer only 1 item instead of 3. I can justify my 1 by the monumental amount of cement and engineering involved. By pounds alone, O'Hare should count for 3. Then I realize no one is listening. The Goldberg twins are asleep. Nurse Kaufman passes with a basket of damp hand towels. She takes pulses and gives out band-aids. Then we come to Scotty.

Scotty Stoloff's had nearly an hour to prepare his improvisational response. I hold my breath and my mouth fills with yellow air that's thick and vaguely citrus sweet. I can't see his green eyes because he wears aviator sunglasses. He has a gold hoop earring in his left earlobe and his nose is pierced with a gold stud shaped like a miniature bullet.

In the flickering sunlight between Eucalyptus trees, his hair is streaked with bronze and red feathers. On a vision quest, he would find his guide as a hawk or golden eagle.

"I'd take a kilo of cocaine, a Tec-9 with a sling of clips, and a Cray super computer." Scotty informs us, removing his sunglasses. He glances at the circle of half-asleep liars with generous indifference. There's no calculation in his green eyes or strain at the edges, no contempt or hostility.

Scotty inhabits an alternative region. We're remote and marginal to him. It's a kibbutz, not a four-star hotel. Nobody gets life support here.

I'm a 13-year-old without a declared foreign language and 37 infected mosquito bites who lost her face in O'Hare. It occurs to me that Scotty Stoloff may not come back to Camp Hillel next summer.

The dinner bell rings and Spiritual Discussion is over. Rabbi just-call-me-Jeff and Dr. White have to rethink the format. During dinner, there's a rumor bunks Golda Meir and Shimon Peres are not participating effectively.

Bodies have on/off switches and mine is jammed awake. Scotty isn't in any of my activities. In fact, he sits in the lotus position in the empty Rec Center basketball court practicing calligraphy in his journal. Sometimes he plays drums and shoots hoops.

I leave my papier-mâché mask of a girl who removed her face before an Aloha flight to Honolulu. Her name is Lily and

she hid her face in a potted Fichus tree next to an exhibit featuring states and their most significant minerals.

Scotty is in the lotus position writing in his journal. I sit on the warm wood near him. “Your answer was so cool,” I say.

“I liked yours too,” Scotty Stoloff replies. “Though O’Hare wouldn’t make my short list.”

It’s a floor of wooden boards like puzzle pieces. I begin counting lines in the grain and the nubs of nail heads. 74 nails and 12 separate lines of grain in each board.

“I prefer Asian airports. Chaos impresses me.” Scotty Stoloff closes his calligraphy book.

“What about an Aloha Airlines flight to Honolulu?” I ask.

“Hawaii is just another American state,” he explains. “It’s the next flight I like. Bangkok maybe. Or Hong Kong.”

“In Hong Kong the umbrellas have red Peonies and birds painted on them,” I tell him.

Scotty considers this. “Parrots?”

“No,” I say. “Cranes.”

Scotty nods. He opens his calligraphy book and writes **Hong Kong=Cranes**. Then I ask him what his foreign language is. I sit cross-legged. My yellow thighs’ sacs and infected scabs make me feel like a reptile.

“Spanish,” Scotty replies, determined. He lowers his voice. “It’s the language of drug deals and arms smuggling,” he reveals, whispering. “Want to move contraband, learn Spanish.”

When he asks what I’m taking, I say, “Canadian.”

In the burst of our laughter, I feel yellow as Orchids from Madonna’s dressing room.

Then we’re in the brutal glare of the dusty parking lot, waiting for our parents. We have our suitcases, backpacks, crafts projects, sleeping bags and pillowcases of dirty clothes in scattered piles. My crafts projects require an extra 2 cardboard boxes. I’ve made 16 papier-mâché masks of faces, and glued

sequins and feathers on them. I've drawn black lines with arrows on their foreheads, indicating where the radiation should go. I suddenly realize my masks have no mouths.

Cameras, binoculars and Walkmen fall randomly on the gravel. Batteries and tubes of lip-gloss lay abandoned on bleached stones. I see my mother's red Jaguar approaching and run to find Scotty.

"Are you coming back?" I look down at my sandals and count gray pebbles in the gravel. 46. I can count the brown ones next.

He shakes his head no. "I'll be in Bolivia by next summer," Scotty reveals. In the sun his gold earring looks like it would burn my fingers if I touched it.

Unexpectedly, he produces a sheet of notebook with his address in a script like calligraphy. He extends it to me and I take it. Then Scotty snaps my picture and says, "Hey, stay in touch."

I can't see his green eyes through his sunglasses. There is just his black Sex Pistols T-shirt and how he enters a dark SUV and vanishes.

My mother and Marty begin their interrogation. They talk and I fill in the blanks. It's a multiple choice test. Camp Hillel exists to enhance me. Precisely how have I been transformed? My mother demands the first and last names of my bunkmates, in case she knows their parents. And the activities I selected? What new physical and artistic skills have I mastered?

Marty asks if I can make a horse jump over a fence. My mother wonders if I learned to play the flute. Was I invited to a villa in Lake Como? Am I going to the Brazilian rainforest? Did I try hard enough with the Goldberg twins? Will I be going

to Cannes on their yacht? Most importantly, did I distinguish myself in a manner resulting in a certificate or plaque they can put in a frame?

My mother moves directly into the decision aspect. Am I going to stay with them? Of course, I'm going to choose Beverly Hills High over Alleghany Hills High, which doesn't even have a computer lab, or audio-visual or theater arts electives. Girls are required to take Home Economics and demonstrate proficiency with meatloaf preparation, which is a blatant example of retrograde gender oppression. Not to mention the fact that they don't even offer French, German or Latin. Chinese is not even on the horizon, not in my lifetime. They don't offer Spanish either, anymore, because Mrs. Burdick is pregnant and taking a year off. I don't mention this.

"English is a foreign language there," Marty says, driving. "Grammar is considered exotic."

"Like teeth. Know what a compliment is there? Nice tooth," my mother says. She doesn't smile.

I look at my sun blistered feet but there are no pebbles or pine needles to count. I begin adding up the number of lines in the leather floor mats. Then I start to count the small beige stitches.

"Look, darling," my mother begins, voice soft. She turns around from the front seat to face me. She unlocks her seatbelt and leans closer. "Isn't it time to get serious about your life?"

Her hair is dyed blonder than usual. She wears her blue contact lenses with Aegean blue eye shadow and Adriatic liner. Her lipstick is called Millennium. I have the same one in my backpack. It's red with a sheen that sparkles when lamp or match light touches it. It's a special imported blend that resists water and retains its minute glowing silvery flecks like recessed lanterns.

“I know your father told you things. And you probably told him we’ve become Republicans. That would inflame him. I understand the young automatically betray. And your father no doubt told you we ‘sold out.’ My mother laughs now. Her head swings back on her neck. “We didn’t sell out. We bought in.”

“My father didn’t say that. About selling out,” I tell her.

“What do they call it, then?” my mother presses.

“They say you found the right life for you,” I reply.

“Sweetheart, this is the right life for everybody,” Marty says. “Moses would throw his tablets down to come to this party.”

I write Scotty that night. I tell him I’m going to O’Hare soon, and I have to make my decision. I explain the history of my parents’ band, how I was born, and then my father, who played guitar and wrote songs, fell in love with Madeleine, the other singer and songwriter. And my mother, who played keyboards, fell in love with Marty, the bass player. The band lived as a commune and my father and Madeleine are the last ones left.

Marty became a producer and lawyer in Beverly Hills. I tell Scotty my father grows pot and Psilocybin Mushrooms under high intensity lights from Sweden in our barn in the Alleghany Mountains. Everyone in town thinks he runs an organic gardening business, but he actually sells drugs. I live in two places, but only feel at home in O’Hare.

I am suspended between mutually exclusive possibilities. I navigate encampments from tree level. I’m the girl on the high trapeze. My wires are disguised and I have my own gravity, rules and variables. I’m expected to cross regions with no bridges, diagrams or candles, no drum rolls or spotlights. And somehow I do in seizures of vertigo and fevers no one notices.

If an event can be explained, its mysterious origins and

destiny wash away. It's diminished and insignificant. I store details in unmarked Mason jars I hide — my parents' divorce, my Gucci pink closet just for shoes, my father's magic mushrooms in beds of dirt like babies in suspended animation, Marty's gold framed album covers and mechanical accordion arm.

If I don't connect the dots, circumstances remain weedy and intangible. They have no longitude or latitude. They move electrically through time, which is like a river with ports and Lilac branches strung with votives and orangey paper lanterns. You can't find this on a map and it has no landing strip.

Scotty immediately answers my 9-page letter with a special delivery envelope. At the end of his calligraphy letter he's added a **PS** in plain block letters. **YOU'RE NOBODY'S CHILD.** We write each other almost every day.

I've come to the final week when my decision is due. My choice will shape my destiny. The farm is a squalid cul-de-sac, a village of peripherals. I am to go back to my father and Madeleine and pack my necessary mementos and then return for school in Beverly Hills in September.

Of course I can visit my father and Madeleine whenever I want. I can spend my vacations and summers there, if I prefer northern Pennsylvania to French Polynesia or Italy. It's just the matter of school, of being settled, on track and participating effectively.

At night, the swimming pool is implausibly turquoise, as if painted and starched. It looks glutinous, like you could get stuck in it. I walk in and out of rooms, turning lights off and on, off and on. I count the crystal vases in the living room, 11. In the kitchen 18 copper pots hang from their antique copper rack. There are 29 rows and 19 columns of hand painted Italian tiles in the entrance hall below 5 skylights and 14 Fichus trees.

I watch my mother and Marty play tennis. I'm suddenly

afraid of the pool. I count my mother's prescribed 50 laps. She actually does 34. The gardener subtracts 3 scorched Pink Camellias and adds 5 Hibiscus bushes in their place, 3 yellow and 2 red. He loads his truck with 6 different sized shovels and 3 green hoses coiled like ropes or creek snakes. I memorize his license plate.

Marty is in his office with the 22 framed record covers of the bands he's produced hung on the creamy white wall behind his back. His 6 platinum record plaques hang across from his desk. He wears white tennis shorts and stares at his just-delivered FAX machine. He looks stunned.

I try to remember the 10 Commandments. "Do you bear false witness?" I ask.

Marty is surprised. "I'm an attorney. My license obviates such distinctions. I've never had a contract seriously challenged."

That night, my mother is stretched out in a chaise lounge by the pool. She's drinking cognac disguised as root beer. I sit next to her. We wear identical tropical print bathing suits and I realize our legs match precisely. We have thin ankles and our tanned flesh adheres seamlessly to the bone like some newly invented millennial clay was poured over them. My mosquito and spider bites have gone into remission.

"Do you steal?" I begin with my mother.

"I would never steal." My mother doesn't hesitate.

"What about the Millennium lipsticks you took?" I ask.

At our last Diva Salon appointment, when her stylist wasn't watching, my mother took 3 lipsticks from the shelf and slid them into her purse. Later she gave me one.

"That's not stealing." My mother smiles. "That's called slippage. I'm a regular customer. They expect established clientele to take samples."

“But is it wrong?” I want to know.
“Stealing? Of course it’s wrong.” My mother bites her lower lip and a dent forms in the red gloss.

Marty drives to the Malibu house for what may be my last weekend of the summer. He’s tan and wears a Dodger baseball cap. The convertible is down so I yell through wind.

“Do you steal?” It’s the only Commandment I remember.

“My pen is heavier than Pete Townsend swinging a guitar. It has more force than an enraged diva with her mic at max.” Marty’s eyes are on the Pacific Coast Highway. My mother is already in Malibu with Maria preparing the house.

“I don’t draw up contracts, honey. I devise war plans.” Marty shows his ivory teeth. “I really build prison camps.”

“But you did steal.” My voice is raised, competing with the salty wind. There are 5 of what my mother terms real restaurants and 8 traffic lights between Santa Monica and our house on stilts in sand. The night beach glistens with mica like tiny shattered stars.

“You mean the commune days? Sweetie, those are times no one remembers, including me.” Marty is driving his birthday Porsche. He passes a house, swerves, and pulls over to the shoulder of the road. He stares at a house and his mouth is half-open.

“Geffen’s having another party,” he says. His voice is a mixture of anger and stunned admiration. Perhaps that’s called coveting. That’s against the law.

“You grew drugs with my dad. You traded drugs for guns and sold them to the Weathermen. You and Dad robbed an armory,” I point out.

“That’s hearsay and inadmissible,” Marty replies. “We

needed Marshall amps. Madeleine had Stevie Nicks' dress designer on retainer. Retainer, no less. It's ancient history. The rules were different then."

Marty's words are spaced with precision like a mathematical equation proving the existence of gravity and why you can't go faster than light, not even in a Porsche. Marty can say anything, with his stretched wide lips and teeth like infant tusks. He can take a lie detector test and pass it.

"What about the dude in Les Miserables? 20 years in prison for stealing bread when he was starving," I remark.

"He's got a malpractice action against his attorney. No question," Marty decides.

At the beach house, I walk along the lip of the ocean counting stray pebbles and pieces of damaged clamshells. Later, I'll count beads of mica like miniature fractured mirrors beneath my feet. This is how you learn to walk on glass and not get cut. After dinner, I'll carry a calculator and count sand particles.

"Tell us your most memorable Camp Hillel experience," my mother begins. Maria has prepared her special salad with avocados, crab and pecans. Marty cooks steaks on a grill on the terrace just above the slow slapping waves.

"Spiritual Discussion. Scotty Stoloff said he'd take a kilo of cocaine and a 9-millimeter gun to outer space." I'm wearing my Millennium lipstick. My mouth is encrusted with camouflaged metal discs. If the wrong person kissed me, my lips would make them bleed.

"That's disgusting." My mother puts down her fork in slow motion. She looks like she's just accidentally discovered gravity.

"I'm calling the Camp Director now." Marty stands up. "That's absolutely unacceptable."

This is the property of
CITY LIGHTS BOOKS, and may not be
reproduced, copied or used in any way
without prior written permission.

“I’m shocked,” my mother decides. She stares at her fork. She has what appears to be a glass of orange juice near her plate. I know she put vodka in it.

“Don’t call the Director.” My voice is too loud. I glare at Marty and add, “I mean it.”

I want to leave the table, but I don’t. I finish dinner. Then I go to my room, close and lock my door, and begin packing. I wrap all 16 masks separately and take an extra suitcase.

My father and Madeleine wave to me in the corridor of the Erie Airport. We run to embrace each other. When we walk, I’m in the middle. My father holds one of my hands and Madeleine holds the other.

My dad’s gray van is like the skin of winter. It’s made of rain, clouds and wind. It’s a hot summer night. Even though the moon is nearly full, the stars are astonishing, strewn like confetti, and more abundant than mica in sand. The stars aren’t broken pieces, but separate entities, each in its appointed place, spinning and burning. Dad plays a U2 tape. It’s *Joshua Tree* and Madeleine sings the chorus.

“In Spiritual Discussion, I met a guy named Scotty,” I begin.

“Did you fall in love?” Madeleine inquires.

“I think so. Practice Rabbi Jeff asked what we’d take to another planet. Everyone lied. They all said they’d take their parents and dogs. But Scotty said he’d take a kilo of cocaine and a Tec-9 with extra ammunition.”

Madeleine laughs. “Sounds like someone we know.”

“Not me.” My father isn’t amused.

“You at 13 maybe,” Madeleine amends.

My father turns up the volume and Madeleine knows all the words. They don’t ask me what my plans are. Or talk about

the most important thing in the world, participating effectively. They don't want distinguished certificates suitable for framing. They don't want me to go to the rainforest the size of New Jersey. Or Lake Como, not even if the Goldberg twins take me on their yacht.

I leave my suitcases at the front door and sit on my bed in the wooden room and look out at the Maples. Even in the dark, they're relentlessly and unapologetically green, as if no circumstance can alter their condition. Later, they'll be burgundy and magenta, claret and bronze.

I mail Scotty an O'Hare Airport postcard. I sit on the porch, eaves entwined with Wisteria and abandoned finch nests. I watch the mail truck come and go. 8 pick-ups pass on the dirt road. I walk to the creek. I stand at the well. Then I follow the perimeter of the property and return to the house.

Madeleine is in her music room. It was the attic the band used as its official rehearsal space. My father turned it into a real music room for her, one slow refinement at a time. He glued acoustical tiles onto the walls and put skylights in the ceiling. When Madeleine plays piano and writes songs, she can look out the thermal paned glass windows and watch the forest run through its seasonal progressions.

Maples have scales and melodies. Wind sounds differently in red and yellow leaves than it does in green. It's more like horns and brass. When leaves turn burgundy and magenta, the forest is fragile and tinny, like it's filled with clusters of miniature cymbals. Winter is drums and castanets and all forms of percussion.

Madeleine is playing guitar, sitting on the floor, her back leaning against the wall. She's lit incense and cranberry scented candles, but I know she's been smoking pot. I determine this by how her body is inordinately airy and receptive to sway, even though there's no wind in the room. She could float away but won't. Her hair is long and falls across her face, streaked with a

gray that resembles currents of silver. Her hair is a smoky mirror. I can watch her head and know what she's thinking.

"Do you steal?" I ask.

"Everybody steals," Madeleine says. "We all dip from the same trough, dear."

"So you steal?" I press.

"It's unconscious. Sounds and images live inside. They mutate. When you write a song, you don't even realize the palette you're really using." Madeleine puts her Martin acoustic guitar across the pillow near her leg. She gestures for me to sit beside her. I stand where I am.

"I mean things," I say.

"Things?" Madeleine repeats.

"Like clothes or lipsticks or boxes of candy." I stare at her. "Or guns."

Madeleine says, "No."

"Why not? Because it's wrong?" I am tall above her. I'm a sapling, intrinsic to this forest. I have my own dialect of shadow and metamorphosis.

"No," Madeleine replies. "Things you can buy don't interest me." She picks up her guitar.

"Why do you keep writing songs?" I demand. "Mother says it's ridiculous. There are no 40-year-old unknown singers. Zero." I make my fingers form an **o**. I hold this **o** in the air between us. I move my **o** up and down and jump from one foot to the other. "You're never going to sell anything!" I scream. My voice bounces off the tiled walls.

"I'm not trying to sell anything," Madeleine says.

"So why do you do it?" I need to know.

"It brings me pleasure." Madeleine strums a chord progression. A minor, G and F. Then she plays C, F and G. She plays it over and over, at least a dozen times. "Those are 3 chords you could build a world on. I'd take them to another planet."

I walk outside through acres of shoulder-high wild flowers and into the big barn. My father wears his white lab coat and washes Psilocybin Mushrooms in the sink. They're veined with purple, as if they're organs, pulsing and alive, waiting to be transplanted. The marijuana plants are eight feet tall. Soon my dad will cut them down and hang them up-side-down to dry from ropes strung between the rafters. As they cure, resins accumulate in the buds. He'll sort the buds by size and quality and vacuum-seal them. The leaves are compacted into bricks, weighed and packaged in plastic and canvas.

"Mom and Marty are Republicans now," I reveal.

"So what?" My father runs water over the mushrooms and places them on the drying mesh. His hands are steady and nothing spills.

"Don't you hate Republicans?" I'm confused.

"I don't hate anyone in particular. I'm an anarchist." My father spreads mushrooms across the mesh in even rows, none of them touching.

"Why didn't you go back to school when the band broke up? Like Marty?" I decide this is a good question, even though it isn't directly connected to the 10 Commandments.

"I was happy as I was," my father says.

"But you could have made lots of money. You could have been important," I point out.

"I'm important as anyone," my father says.

My father dries his hands with a towel. He crosses the dirt floor to where I stand. He wraps his arms around me and holds me pressed against his chest. I hear his heart beating, each individual increment of pump and flow, and I do not count them.

"Do you steal?" I finally ask.

He releases me from our embrace and stands an arm's length away, examining my face. It reminds me of when he looks in a mirror, shaving. Then he says, "No."

“Why? Because it’s wrong?” I’m not wearing my red lipstick with the dangerous disguised stars embedded in them. My mouth is stark and small. It’s a winter mouth now.

“There’s nothing I want,” my father says.

It’s the cusp between summer and autumn. It occurs to me that transitions can be crossed by trapeze. The grass beneath my bare feet is a soft half-asleep green like pond water. Deer are sighing and pawing between Maples. It’s the end of blueberry season. Apples redden in baskets. I hear squirrels and fox, finches and owls, crickets and frogs. There are more sounds than I can count, but I just want to listen by the pond until all the stars come out.

This PDF file remains the property of
CITY LIGHTS BOOKS, and may not be
reproduced, copied or used in any way
without prior written permission.