

—❧ EXCERPTS FROM ❧—
THE BRAINFOREST

Written by the Students of
826 VALENCIA'S
2009 Summer Writing Camp

MY DAD TOOK ME TO COPENHAGEN, MY MOM TOOK ME TO PARIS

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San Francisco has always been a magical city to me. All the culture wrapped up in it, how you can go from neighborhood to neighborhood as easily as putting on a glove, and go from sipping lattes in the Castro to buying inexpensive makeup at a cute shop on Clement Street that has everything from handbags to school supplies. This is where I live. My parents and I live somewhere in between the Castro and Market in a cozy (just another word for small) house with lime green steps and peeling purple paint. Inside our house we have a living room with a tiny couch and threadbare pillows and a small TV right in the middle of the room, like a king (or something to that effect). The living room and the dining room are almost one room, separated by a door that marks my different heights as I grow. The living room has a wooden table in the middle a Persian rug (brought back from Turkey by my uncle on my dad's side). The table is a cheap one, found at a Goodwill in the Haight with scrapes on it but I think it has character.

Behind the table is an ornate cabinet of mahogany with intricate gold designs running up the sides of it. It was wedding present from my grandmother on my mom's side. After the dining room is the kitchen with a multi-colored gas stove, lots of cupboards storing cups, plates, and silverware. There's a tiny dishwasher and an even tinier sink. The kitchen is large and cuts off to a sunroom with a washing machine and dryer. To the side of the kitchen is an office. My mom's a journalist so we have an old Mac computer. The desk is littered with various papers. My mom's messy, and the drawers are always overflowing with papers. There's also a bed squeezed in the corner because this room also functions as a guest bedroom. Upstairs there's a bathroom, with my mom's hundred bottles of shampoo and conditioner and my dad's one bottle of resilient brown gunk. There is my parents room and my room. My bed is squeezed into one corner and my desk in the other. My room was originally yellow, but all the pictures

of friends and just random pictures I took with a disposable camera cover my walls. There's a Walgreens down the street where I can get them developed. I want to be a photographer; I think my pictures are good, and a few of my friends who have been in my room have told me they were.

"Petunia!" My mom shouts up to me in my room. "Dinner's ready."

"Kay!" I shout back. My real name is Petunia but everybody calls me Scooter. It's a story like the kind in movies where they do the whole flashback scene. My mom was pregnant with me and neither of my parents had a car back then (although my mom bought a used Volvo after I was born), but my dad had a scooter. So basically, I was born five seconds after my mom got off the scooter. We barely made it into the hospital before I was born. My mom also says that when I was only a few months old, my dad first showed me the scooter and I cooed over it (we had taken a cab back from the hospital). I definitely like the name Scooter better than Petunia. Petunia sounds like a sad old lady in a gray muumuu with two hundred cats. My mom named me after an old relative.

Everybody calls me Scooter, even my mom. Although she sometimes forgets and calls me Petunia, especially when she's pissed off at me. Like right now. When I get downstairs she gives me the evil eye and asks me why I didn't come down sooner. I just shrug and say, "listening to music." My dad walks in the door right as we sit down. He's a music teacher at a fancy private school, but it doesn't pay half as much as it should.

"Stupid fuckers," my dad says regularly. We eat quickly in silence. It's take-out from down the street. Neither of my parents have time or even know how to cook. After dinner, we go to the living room, usually to watch Jeopardy. This time my parents didn't turn the TV on. They sat beside me on the couch, leaning away from each other with me in the middle. I usually sit on the sides of the couch and they sit next to each other so it was odd to sit like this. My mom smooths a lock of brown hair behind her ear. I take after her with my light wavy chestnut hair and blue eyes, but I have my dad's go-with-the-flow temperament, his nose and his medium height (my dad is about 5'8 and my mom is 6'3). She clears her throat and finally blurts it out; my mom was never good at subtlety.

"Scooter, honey." Clears throat again. "Your dad and I, well we. Umm." She clears her throat for the millionth time, it seems like, and fiddles with her necklace.

"You're breaking up aren't you." I say it as a statement. Both parents looked relieved that they didn't have to go through the whole we-don't-love-each-other-anymore bullshit and how to tell your kids that without costing you a bunch of money for therapy. As soon as we sat down and my mom started stuttering, I knew it was over. My mom is usually very eloquent and their postures and mannerisms told me what was about to happen.

"No! John we discussed this. I'll be a better parent to her, you just go riding on your scooter, and can you even pay for her school?" My mom asks. I got a good scholarship to a private high school in the city. It was good, but my parents do have to pay a little bit.

"But Sarah I thought you wanted to work on your career?" Both of my parents start arguing, and loudly. This is not going to be an easy divorce.

5 weeks later

Basically what happened is my parents began to fight over everything from the couch (my mom wants it) to the china cabinet (my dad wants it) to me. Both of my parents wanted me mostly to spite the other one. They decided not to do joint custody mainly because whoever had me for the allotted time wouldn't give me back to the other one and that would mean trouble with the court. My parents want it to be my decision so I won't be too screwed up later in life because one parent forced me to live with them. Just because it's my decision doesn't mean my parents are going to fight fair. The Saturday they told me it would be my decision, my mom took me on a shopping spree, and when I came home, my dad had all my favorite foods for me. It began to progress further and further. First I got a computer, then a digital camera, and then a picture printer. I mean I loved gifts. Who wouldn't? I did have a problem with these for two reasons. First of all, my parents couldn't afford things like new computers and fancy stuff. Second, I would rather be given gifts because my parents want to give them to me, not just to bribe me.

When my parents told me they were getting a divorce (or rather I guessed) I was surprised. I mean, they seemed to love each other during most of my childhood, and suddenly now they couldn't stand to be in the same room with each

other. Luckily my questions were answered when I found two pieces of paper. My parents' therapist made them write lists of what they didn't like about each other and then they could go about fixing it (or in my parents case, not at all). My mom had written down that my dad's scooter annoyed her, with its rattle noises and chipping red paint. How he cut his nails while watching TV, the noise they made falling into the trashcan. How he was never responsible, forgetting to get me from kindergarten a few times. On my dad's list was how my mom worked too much, she never came to watch me in my sunflower festival in kindergarten, how he went but she didn't think it was that important. How her Volvo was always too clean as if no one ever used it. How she took showers that were way too long at night and got both of their pillows all wet.

While it might not sound like a reason to get a divorce, my parents have been married for a while and all those things keep adding up. I mean they were married for about ten years before I was born and I'm a junior in high school (or I will be this fall since it's summer right now). It seems odd having parents getting divorced when you're so old, like usually it happens to younger kids, not so much older ones, but my parents have been married to each other longer and have actually tried.

Well, they say they both want me, but I think whoever doesn't get me is going to be happy with having a single person's life again. And the one who does get me is going to be sad they can't have that and blame it on me and that's going to put even more stress on me besides having to apply for colleges. That's why I'm living with my grandma for now. She says I can live with her until college, and she'll help me apply and tour and get me a student loan. My grandma is only in her early 60's - late 50's (I have no idea how old she is, she won't tell me and she definitely doesn't look like she's 60). I definitely need to talk to my parents.

I'm sitting on the couch watching soap operas when my parents arrive at my grandma's house. "Hello, John and Sarah, you are looking well; although what you're putting the poor doll, as well as yourselves through, is just horrible. Scooter wants to talk to you, she's in the living room."

"Hi mom. Hi dad." I say when they sit down on separate ends of the couch. They both try to start talking, but I hold up a hand to stop them. "So I know

both of you are fighting for me, to have custody of me. I know you both love me but the reason you, both of you, are fighting for me is to spite the other one. But I know that whichever one doesn't get me is going to be perfectly happy with single life again. I mean both of you can have a dating life." I grimace at that. "But whoever does get me, well that's gonna make it a lot harder to date with a kid you have to provide for and deal with. I'm only sixteen. I'm going to be applying to colleges soon that's going to be stressful enough without having to deal with whichever one of you I'm going to make miserable." I pause and take a deep breath. This part's going to be the hardest.

"So I decided that I'm going to let grandma have custody of me until I go to college, and then I will be on my own." I finish. Both of my parents argue and it takes all night to come to an agreement: I'll live with my grandma, but both of them can come and visit me anytime they wish. I'll still be their daughter and love them, and they'll still be my parents and love me. I know this will be a better arrangement for everybody, and now all the stress I've had for the last few weeks has gone away. I'm finally content.