

# NO CAMPING ON CITY STREETS

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The eviction notice arrives in the mail, just like any other bill or letter. There's no sheriff, no knock at the door, no sign posted for everyone in the neighborhood to see. The mailman just slips the envelope through the slot, and it sits in that little pile of mail on the floor until I come home from school, opening the door with the key I keep on a leather cord around my neck and calling upstairs to find no one home, then scooting up that long staircase to our apartment two steps at a time. I put the envelope on the kitchen table, next to a jar of pencils and pens. Later that night, when my parents have a spare moment, one of them will open the letter and read it and then read it again. It doesn't matter that they've got three kids and a broken-down car and Dad is only sort of working and sort of trying to be an artist; it doesn't matter that it's the middle of the school year and they've always paid the rent on time and kept the place relatively quiet and clean. It's just that the building has been sold, and the new owners want to live in the third-floor flat we happen to call home.

We visit courtrooms, stalling. My father does not have a suit or tie, so he puts on his least-paint-stained shirt and pants and takes one or two of us kids with him downtown to plead his case. But it's no use. Soon enough we are packing up boxes and loading them into the blue Ford pickup with the homemade wooden camper on the back. It's a sunny, cool June day in San Francisco. School just let out for summer, and the neighborhood is saturated with children and noise. Upstairs my mother is packing our belongings into boxes, which we kids will then carry down the stairs so Dad can load them onto the truck the right way, the way that doesn't waste space or break anything. We have moved several times now, but we are not getting any better at it. Mom is running behind with the packing, so Dad has to wait on the street with the truck double-parked. My brothers, who are six and eleven, and I, nine, sit on the stoop listening to the chorus of kid sounds emanating from the schoolyard: the *thwack* of the bat hitting a ball; the *thump* of the basketball against the backboard; the angry trill of voices arguing over fair or foul.

My father sighs and looks up at the traffic he's disrupting. "Why don't you go help your mother," he says to us.

It's not exactly a command, but neither is it a question. I run up the staircase, counting the steps for one of the last times. The carpeting is deep red, but faded. The wall is creamy white with a band of molding at my eye level that follows the curve of the stairs all the way to the hallway of our flat. In the

kitchen I find my mother working with newspaper and tape and marking pen, frantically emptying shelves of dishes into cardboard boxes.

"Is he ready for another one?" she asks, her face framed by thin bangs and feather earrings.

"Uh, yeah," I say, trying to sound casual. When Dad gets mad, Mom gets nervous. She moves faster, but accomplishes less. To preserve some semblance of peace, I've got to get boxes packed and down the stairs.

"Just shove that stuff in there, Mom," I say, piling plates into a box.

"But some of it is coming with us and some is staying," she explains. These boxes and our furniture — the kitchen table, the toy chest my father made, a few beds and chairs — will go to a friend's garage. Then we will load the rest, plus some camping gear, into the homemade camper and face the truck brazenly to the north, toward optimism. The plan is to cross the Golden Gate Bridge and look for Land — my father pronounces this word as if it were a proper noun — so we can get out of the city, escape the corner of Sixteenth and Sanchez, and live a better life in the country.

We kids don't know much about the plan; we're not supposed to ask too many questions. If we do, my father will sigh, take a drag off his cigarette, and look away, disappointed again. It's not clear how much of the plan even my mother knows, though surely they have discussed it, probably late at night after we have gone to bed. Perhaps it was these discussions that caused some of those muffled bangs and raised voices that seeped through the walls and into our bedrooms, infiltrating our dreams. We'd wake up in the morning to find a broken ashtray, the kid-size table turned upside down, chairs strewn about the living room as if left there by the tide.

My mother and I fill three boxes, and I carry one downstairs and hand it to my dad, who's leaning on the tailgate, smoking. My brothers have taken this opportunity to run off and play, and my father has chosen to ignore their disappearance. I yell for them, raising my voice above balls and bats and cars and children, and they come running back. Eventually we get all of our belongings into the truck.

The next day, after the boxes and furniture have been delivered to the friend's house, we kids are loaded into the back of the truck ourselves. We look out the camper windows as our city slips by us. The plexiglass distorts the houses and streets and mutes the colors and sounds, so it is almost like watch-



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ing a movie of our life. My father has outfitted the camper as if it were a child's fort on wheels, with pillows and foam and sleeping bags. He's even installed an intercom so we can buzz him and Mom in the cab to let them know who's hogging the blankets or not sharing the snacks. But before we have even crossed that great orange bridge over the thick, choppy water of the bay, my father has disconnected the intercom. When we bang on the cab window, our parents turn around and shrug at us, pointing to the microphone on their end as if to say, "It broke."

Our first stop is a cold, foggy beach. My brothers and I are released from the truck like air from a tire, and we scatter to

find driftwood for a campfire. We help pitch our five-person tent behind the dunes and out of the wind. Then we tighten the hoods on our blue sweat shirts and go to play tag with the thick, foamy surf. Signs warn of riptides, undertows, and sneaker waves, but we don't need signs to tell us we are not supposed to enter this water. Its danger advertises itself: thick gray wedges curl into sharp peaks before smacking with a loud *pop* against the sloping beach. A chaos of churning white foam rustles through the pebbly sand and sneaks high up the beach. We run up, up, and away to the dry sand, where the thunder of the surf subsides, and we give in to gravity and geography and emotion, dropping onto that dark, pigeon-colored sand,

faces to the sky. Back at the campsite, our parents are starting the stove and unloading food from the ice chest. We have no place to live, and no one, not even my father, knows where we are going next. But we have maps and sleeping bags and piles of comic books. We have flecked metal dishes — a different color for each of us — and a bulky can of kerosene. We have yelling and kicking and whispering. We have an intercom that sometimes mysteriously stops working. And we have this plan of my father's, to find Land.

And so we smile, my brothers and I, not at each other, but at the benevolent gray sky above us. And we move our arms and legs in slow, deliberate arcs through the sand, etching out the West Coast version of snow angels. Then we try to get up without smudging our wings.

**T**he next morning we head inland, where it is warm and golden, just like the summer we have read about in books and seen on TV, and we begin the long search for a place to live. We sit in the wide, fancy car of a real-estate agent — Dad up front, three kids and Mom in back, the man in the suit glancing in his rearview mirror as we kids pinch each other and push the buttons to make the windows go up and down, up and down. We spend a day, but not the night, at a commune with real hippies, who swim naked in the creek behind their house while we city kids keep our bathing suits firmly on. We look for maps and pay phones and FOR SALE signs and little colored markers that show the edges of a piece of property. We park the car on the side of the road and trudge into the blackberry bushes and poison oak, into the mass of trees and brush that would have to be taken down somehow to make room for a house.

We stay as long as they'll let us at a campground on a warm, shallow lake, where my father teaches us to fish and my mother teaches us to swim. Standing in the lake up to her belly, she has me lie back in her arms as if I were a baby. "Relax," she says. "Breathe." Her voice, not quite a whisper, is soothing and authoritative at the same time. My body complies: it softens and stretches out as if lying on top of a mattress. Inch by inch she slips her arms out from under me, going from hands to palms to fingertips and finally letting go, but hovering close by in case I panic. My brothers are playing nearby, but the world seems hushed, like that time we went to church at the cavernous Spanish mission on Sixteenth Street.

"Good," she says. "Keep breathing."

The water comforts and cradles me. My mother, still within reach, smiles. And there is the miracle of floating face up to the clouds while the thin green water somehow keeps my body aloft.

The following morning my brothers and I wake up early, as usual, unzip the tent flap, then zip it back behind us, leaving our parents sleeping. We put on sweat shirts and navy blue knit caps, get out our enamel mugs and bowls, and make cereal and cold hot chocolate. Then we carry those mugs, which we pretend are beer steins, to the picnic table of the empty campsite down the gully from ours. The beer steins make us

think of gangsters, and so we start calling each other "Mugsy" and "Bugsy" and "Moe." To feel more like criminals, we pull the knit caps down low on our foreheads, until we can barely see out from under them.

"What's the plan, Mugsy?" my older brother asks me.

"I don't got the plan, Moe. I thought you had it."

"I do have it," he says, reaching down to the ground and picking up an old metal fork from the dirt. "I was just testing you." He uses the fork to etch a few maplike lines onto the picnic table. Bugsy and I lean in close to inspect the details.

When we've finished our cocoa, we raise our mugs and slam them down on the table. Then we get up and rove the area, looking for any loot previous campers may have left behind. The sun is up, though not enough to warm us, and the campground is beginning to come to life. Crows and Steller's jays squawk at each other, and thin curls of smoke rise from resuscitated campfires. After we've canvassed an empty campsite for several quiet, serious minutes, my little brother's voice beckons from the fire pit.

"Look," he says in a stage whisper, and he holds out his treasure: one of those aluminum pie pans filled with popcorn that we have seen on television. The popcorn bursts through the lid like confetti when you heat it. We know from the commercials that you can cook the popcorn by holding it over a campfire, but we have never dreamed that we would actually possess such a thing. Now the littlest, blondest, luckiest of us is holding in his outstretched hands a completely unpopped pan wrapped in shiny foil, the tantalizing blue-and-white cardboard label intact.

"Whoa," we older two say, instinctively reaching for the silver package. It is all we can do to wait till nightfall so we can scavenge wood and start a fire and cook our popcorn just like we imagine all the other families do on camping trips.

*(end of excerpt)*