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Excerpt from Chapter 1 of My Not-So-Terrible Time at the Hippie Hotel

Although set in the present, My Not-So-Terrible Time at the Hippie Hotel was inspired by a long-ago vacation. The court had decided what my bickering parents could not settle for themselves: that my father was entitled to take his children on an annual summer vacation. This was circa 1972, before the days of joint custody. Dad took us to a big rambling house on Cape Cod full of other single-parent families. I don't remember much about that week, except that I missed my mother, and wished we didn't have to go to a special place for special i.e. broken families.

My book transforms that uncomfortable, long-ago vacation into an amusing coming-of-age story about fourteen-year-old Tracy Forrester. Tracy's parents are not-so-bitterly divorced. While affecting her deeply, their split does not define who she is. Her vacation among other single-parent families turns out to be about friendship, first love, and reconnecting with her musical talent.

We call this place The Hippie Hotel because it's run by Sharon, a tie-dye-and-Birkenstock-wearing woman whose gray hair is so long it almost reaches her butt. Dad took us-me, Emmy, and our brother Chris-here for "Together Time," when "Single parents and their children an old-fashioned family vacation among other families in a historic, rambling cottage-by-the-sea."

I think the idea is that if you get divorced kids together with other divorced kids, they won't feel so bad about being divorced.

So far it hasn't worked.

You should see the other "families" here. Aside from Sharon and Paul, and my Dad and us, there's just one right now, made up of Loraine, who talks and smokes all the time, her fifteen year-old daughter Beka-the one on the bed with Paul-and her six year-old twins Sammi (a girl) and Sean (a boy).

Since Beka and I are so close in age, you might think, as I thought before I met her, that there would be some friend potential. But there isn't. We're different. Way different.

First of all, she lives in New York and goes to private school. I live in the suburbs and go to a big public high school. Those two facts in and of themselves should tell you a lot.

Beka is one of those New York private school girls who's taken so many ballet lessons that she stands and walks with her feet permanently turned out in second position. She's punk, though, not princess. She's got the all-black wardrobe, the eyeliner, the jet-black dyed hair. She smokes too, which every New York private school girl-punk or princess-does, and which probably helps her stay as skinny as she is. She hates her

mother, and flirts with all the guys in the house, including my brother and my father, as well as Paul, even though Paul's the only one she really wants.

Beka, Emmy, Sammi and I had been sleeping in the "girls' dormitory"-Sharon's fancy name for an attic room with a bunch of mismatched twin beds, futons and squeaky cots-for three nights, but all Beka had said to me was stuff like, "There's no eating allowed up here, you know." As if she was the big rule follower. And, "Excuse me, excuse me, can I get by?" In a way that implied I was too big to walk around, which, while I admit to putting on a few pounds lately, is still a huge, mean exaggeration. And, "Brett Smith? You still listen to Brett Smith?" when she flipped through my CD carrier the first night without asking.

Okay. As you've probably gathered, I am not skinny. Aside from that, I can't dance. I don't smoke. I can't even talk to-never mind flirt with-boys my age. And yes, I listen to Brett Smith.

I listen to Brett Smith even though she is now one of the top-selling recording artists of all time. Even though some of her fans are as young as eleven. Even though you can't go for a twenty-minute car ride without hearing her on the radio, or watch TRL without seeing her latest video. I listened to her before any of this happened, back when I was twelve and my Uncle Steve bought me her debut CD to encourage me with my piano. And I'm not going to stop listening to her now, just because all these other people know how good she is, now that she's no longer got the cult thing going on, and now that she's rich. Besides, I happen to know that she gives a lot of her money away to shelters for runaway girls and arts programs in inner-city schools.

Beka prefers cutting-edge punk bands with cult followings.

I don't smoke. Not that I'm such a goody-good or anything. It's just that it makes me sick, literally. The first time I tried-at the beginning of eighth grade-I almost threw up, and the second time I tried-at the end of eighth grade-I did throw up. And so I haven't tried since.

Dancing I wish I could do, but I can't. This is not a low self-esteem thing. I really cannot dance. To begin with, I don't have a dancer's body. At least not a skinny ballerina dancer's body like Beka's. I'm not exactly fat. Though I've been close over the last year or so. Anyway it's not just about size. My friend Zann dragged me to one of her hip-hop classes, where there were lots of unskinny girls who could really move. I just can't get the music to come out my legs and feet.

Which is kind of funny because I'm pretty good at getting it to come out my fingers. I can play piano by ear. If I hear something a few times, I can figure out how to get my fingers to make the sounds on the piano. That's my one talent. I write songs, too, and I might be good at that. I'm not sure because I've only played them for my Uncle Steve, who says I'm very good, but who's obviously biased.

It doesn't matter right now because I'm on strike.

My dad and I used have this Saturday morning routine of bagels and coffee (decaf, with lots of cream and sugar for me) before driving over to Mrs. Finch's for my lesson. After the divorce, he tried to keep it up for a while, but he would get stuck in traffic, or have an important, sudden business meeting at his new job, and my mom would have

to take me early, so that she could get Chris to soccer, and I'd have to wait in Mrs. Finch's front parlor through two other kids' half-hour lessons and then take a bus home.

Nobody actually knows about the strike. I told my mom and dad and Mrs. Finch that I just wanted to take a little break, that the pressure of keeping up with piano was getting to me with all the added responsibilities of starting high school. Mrs. Finch freaked, and made me promise to come see her in September "to reassess." My parents both seemed kind of baffled, but they didn't inquire any further so they don't know that I'm on strike. They just think I'm making my own choices, which is a big part of their parental philosophy. Plus they've both been pretty distracted since the divorce.

So I haven't gotten a chance to make my demands, the way striking workers do. I'm not even sure what I would demand if I got that chance. It's not like things are going to go back to the way they were just because I stop playing piano. And "back to the way they were" isn't exactly what my first choice would be.