



# Double Teenage

## Joni Murphy

a novel

SECOND PRINTING

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*Friendship is not about having everything illuminated or obscured, but about conspiring and playing with shadows. Its goal is not enlightenment but luminosity, not a quest for the blinding truth but only for occasional lucidity and honesty.*

—Svetlana Boym

*It was very early in the morning.  
Like radios, opiates, the groin's endless currency and surreptitious edge,  
buildings torn out of earth and forgotten.  
Light could be tasted, had an odour like a tin can.  
Girlhood is a landscape.  
Across the morning earth, the pangs of a dying economy.*

*It was 1993.*

—Lisa Robertson

**1.**

**No Country for Young Girls**

1.

In the valley ran a river. Their small city grew along one stretch. It was the river that made life there liveable, that let ancient people grow corn, squash, and beans for food and let others later grow cotton, chili, and pecans for cash. On one bank lay the edge of a rich country and on the other the edge of a poor one. Around the river was all this desert, a frayed cloth.

Theirs was a small city of inner endlessness without a center.

Three red crosses on a yellow background made the official city symbol. The crosses appeared in many forms, on the newspaper's masthead and as a little logo on the envelope of the water bill. In the downtown plaza three towered in rusting steel as so-called public art her mother hated. A sullen boy in after-school art class told Celine it was the symbol because conquistadors had lined colonial roads with crucified Indians.

"That's not true," her mother said, but even so the image fixed itself in Celine's head.

Sometimes sun reflected off car windows even as rain fell, and when the clouds opened for real, flash floods dug arroyos. Still the drought was entering its twentieth year. Neither

mushrooms nor moss grew here. Life never sopped. Barbs guarded the smallest shoot. The most common plant was creosote bush, which looked the same dead or alive.

Water was status symbol. Turquoise kidney pools dotted subdivision backyards. Kids on swim teams screamed for fundraiser car washes in parking lots. They sent hose sprays down storm drains while the arid air dried their tropical-print towels in an instant. Rich growers flooded their pecan orchards in spring. This was a land of all nuance or none, it was just hard to tell which.

“We’re actually better off than the East Coast,” said Celine’s mother. “A humid heat is so much more oppressive.”

Native animals lived by their quickness. Doves and quail fluttered. Desert rats and squirrels scabbled and bit. Jack and cottontail rabbits quivered. They ran in their heads even while standing still to chew a cactus pad. It appeared to Celine that most of these animals met their end in her backyard, ripped apart by cats, or coyotes, or hawks. With horrible frequency, she found little entrails full of half-digested green and decapitated heads nestled beneath the pine tree next to the pool.

“Don’t be sad,” her mother counseled. “It’s just part of the natural cycle.”

Once when Celine cornered a horned toad against a stone wall, it shot blood from its eyes. The strange streaks remained on her T-shirt, even after washes.

“It’s just that creature’s defense mechanism,” her mother explained.

Celine’s mother was a priestess who practiced rituals of creams and ointments and aloe leaves split open so that the jelly innards could be rubbed over burns, cuts, and scratches.

Celine felt the desert was a science fiction. This landscape didn't appear in the real world or on TV except as the setting for alien planets and Westerns.

"Be sure to put on more sunscreen," reminded her mother as the sun burned and burned.

2.

Celine's father had been born in the same place and in the same year as the atomic bomb. Her grandfather had been a member of the military industrial complex. The Cold War arms race paid for her father's braces and family ski vacations. The underlying angst of annihilation was not discussed over cheerful dinners. For residents of her father's hometown the mushroom cloud was not an emblem of destruction but of great intellectual and technological achievement.

Celine's mother, when she was young, arrived to the desert as a freshman on scholarship from back east. She'd grown up with nuns at school and first generation white-collar Irish at home. Her universe was a track home with rose bushes and pastel appliances, school uniforms, and parental rage that fizzed up after the inevitable one-too-many Old Fashioneds. At eighteen her mother left steel-mill drab for turquoise fantasy.

The desert offered Celine's mother an emotional blank slate. It was for her an overexposed sandy stage on which to act out Zane Grey purple-sage passion plays accompanied by soundtracks of Dylan and Ronstadt and Hendrix. Catholicism fell away under the influence of dorm-room peyote. She made ceramics and studied womyns history.

In the beginning of their relationship, Celine's parents traveled up north and down to Mexico.

They camped in high and low deserts, in different kinds of western forests. Drank Tecates beneath pinions and various pines. Ate thumbnail-sized wild strawberries that grew beside Indian paintbrush and columbine. They traced paths around yucca and clumps of threadgrass, chaparral, and barrel cactus. The altitude let them see a distant hawk. They climbed hills and saw coyotes, a burrowing owl, and some white-tailed deer. Sometimes they caught sight of the border fence in the distance, at some points just a wire-thin line beside a dirt road. They passed their water bottle back and forth, and the hazy space of the Americas blurred.

Once they had Celine they bought a house on the outskirts. Homes in that neighborhood were containers for obscure Baby Boom dreams. Snowbirds with an extra-large RV and a gun case in the den lived across from the engineer and his dental hygienist wife. Bumpers stickered with Jesus fish and "In case of the rapture, this car will be unmanned." Down the road a pair of French university professors had a tennis court they played on daily. Across from them a pack of dogs ran laps inside a chain-link square. Further down, hippie retirees hung handmade flags above their geodesic dome.

At the end of the block was the empty, half-burned house. On the night of the fire that took that house, the children had been away at a sleepover. The family dog saved the mother but not the father. Robert Fountain died of smoke inhalation. Loretta Fountain moved to Dallas with the insurance money and grief, the neighbors said. No one bought the property though, so the house sat with a black hole where the roof had been and an empty pool out back.

Despite that property-devaluing mark of this tragedy, the neighborhood was solid middle class. Celine's mother said to her father more than once over granola, which meant it was true.

3.

While other mothers wore their hair sprayed and their sweaters twinned, Celine's mother cultivated the style of a character from an Altman film: long straight hair, loose denim shirts, heavy turquoise bracelets. She smelled like lavender oil, black tea, and smoke. She navigated feminist waves of thought and taught her daughter it was not just right, but necessary to do the same.

She held the romantic ideals of the 1960s. She held these ideas in the 1980s when hippie revolution was neither style nor anti-style. As a mother she spoke of revolutions in education, of each child as a special flower or a light beneath a bushel basket. A flowery light. She preached the gospel of Summerhill. She aligned children and mothers with all the vulnerable people who struggled on the underside of history. She spoke about all this in PTA meetings in the fish-stick-smelling cafeteria of Celine's school. Heady parents and teachers nodded while others looked at the ceiling and thought perhaps the local university was to blame for this kind of talk. Theory, they sighed.

Even when she was too old for it, her mother read books aloud. It was because Celine was dyslexic, or as her teacher called her, lazy. Celine's mother fought for her daughter like she herself hadn't been fought for as a child.

The books were classic girl fictions: *Alice in Wonderland* and *Anne of Green Gables* and *Emily of New Moon* and all the *Little*

*House* books and *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*. As if she had been there, Celine's mother spoke about prairie fires and scarlet fevers, initiation rituals and torrential downpours, family betrayals and corset-induced fainting spells. Her voice moved like a wagon. It moved like feet in leather moccasins padding through dust and starvation. Her voice lost children to fever. As her voice moved she stroked her braid with her free hand. Her knuckles like drought ground.

"Death is not getting to tell your story," her mother said. Her mother said the women she described were famous, but when Celine mentioned them to kids at school they didn't know who she was talking about.

"Women's role in history is repressed," her mother explained. "But don't let them worry you. Remember all stories are about survival," said her mother.

4.

Celine first met Julie at the auditions for the holiday production of *Peter Pan*. Celine had been in children's classes so she acted like an expert. Julie had just showed up because she was bored.

Julie was cast as the Lost Boy Nibs, while Celine got to be Unnamed Lost Boy #3. They were members of a gaggle of kids cast to populate Neverland scenes with motion and war whoops.

From the outside, the theater's architecture was so banal it might as well have been the DMV. But despite exterior modesty the interior was a series of enchanting spaces the girls came to adore over the course of rehearsals.