ON A ROLL THE AUTHOR WITH HER HUSBAND, IAN, AND THEIR CHILDREN (FROM LEFT), CHARLIE, 7, AND BEAU, 9, IN GREENWICH VILLAGE.

FAR AND AWAY CAMPBELL'S MOTHER'S REMOTE CABIN ON THE BIG ISLAND OF HAWAII.

mommy greenest

When her mother left the family to live off the grid in Hawaii, **Lori Campbell** worked hard to achieve success in Manhattan. But who really has the better life?

Last year I visited the rain forest in Hawaii. I parked on an unpaved road, hiked a path made of hand-chopped lava rock, and made my way to a one-room cabin with no running water and no electricity. When I asked for the bathroom, I was handed a shovel and nudged out the back door, toward a swath of land teeming with so much vegetation it looked like a set from *King Kong*. Swinging my little shovel like a dull machete, I stumbled around, cursing the occasional fallen coconut that caught my sneaker. I missed New York, my three bathrooms, my light switches, all of which seemed much farther away than the 5,000 miles that separated me from them.

But it wasn't as if I could just jump on a plane. I'd come to this wild clump of Hawaii to stay with my mother, Didi. She and her boyfriend, David, had moved here 22 years ago with nothing but a pup tent and a Coleman stove.

Back inside the cabin I took in the sights—a sixteen-foot-by-sixteen-foot bare-bones structure with a corrugated-metal roof and a bathtub parked just outside the door. This was my mother's home. How, I wondered, did she ever wind up living here, completely off the grid on an island in the middle of the Pacific? And even more implausible, how did I end up where I am, with a four-bedroom apartment in a "white glove" doorman building in Manhattan, a country house, and two kids in private school?

If you'd told either of us in the seventies that these would be our respective lifestyles, we'd have said you were crazy. We hardly knew they existed. For most of my childhood, we lived firmly, dully, in middle-class Park Ridge, New Jersey, in a cookie-cutter ranch house painted burgundy, a color that's now extinct. On Saturday nights, while my parents whipped up pitchers of whiskey sours for the neighbors, the kids would head down to the basement with a box of Devil Dogs to watch *The Love Boat* on our vinyl couch. Park Ridge, like much of New Jersey, is the kind of place where people say, "I'm gettin' out of here!" and then move to the next town over. But for us, it was different. My parents divorced, and my mother and I did move. Far. It's as if someone shot a gun in the air, said, "Go!" and we ran in opposite directions as fast as we could for two decades. When I visited her in the rain forest, my husband and two children were with me, and while they were outside playing in the wild-pig trap, my mother and I helped ourselves to a few poha berries and sat down across from each other, me feeling ridiculous in a "this season" Burberry rain slicker and she quite comfortable in flip-flops circa 1992. With an awkward, unremitting silence between us, we attempted to come together, or maybe, at least for a while, stop running.

It was only the second time I had made the trip to Hawaii, and I looked around at the needlepoints and ornaments in my mother's home. We exchanged small talk, but the perennial elephant in the room loomed large—me feeling that her remote lifestyle was just a physical manifestation of the remoteness that had always been between us, and she, no doubt, thinking I was unwilling to respect her decision to choose this life. I looked at my mother, her long girlish hair now gray, with *up front >64*

Campbell: KEVIN STURMAN. Sittings Editor: Lisa Mosko. Hair, John Ruidant for Cutler NYC/Redken at See Management; makeup, Sara Glick for Dior at ArtMix Beauty New York; cabin: Courtesy of Lori Campbell.

RAIN FOREST RENEGADE

an orchid pinned above one ear, and I felt guilty. Guilty for all the exotic trips I'd taken with my family over the years, to every place, it seemed, but Hawaii. Guilty for having so much when she had so little, for gorging on life's luxuries as voraciously as she scrimped on its necessities. Guilty for not calling more, for not being warmer when she called me. And then I felt guilty for feeling guilty. Wasn't my mother the one who'd packed up those ornaments and needlepoints and left our family when I was fifteen?

As a child, I had never anticipated my mother would move out before I became an adult, but as I look back there were all kinds of clues. She'd married at eighteen and had three kids by the time she was 24. Growing up, I watched as she seemed to live inside her head, silently questioning why she'd so quickly become a mother and whether this was all her life would ever be. She was a fastidious worker, a constant whir of cooking and cleaning. Every day after school I'd be greeted by an olfactory salute of synthetic lemon and pine. Windex, Ty-D-Bol, Pledge: These were the products telling the world that things, at least on the surface, were not bad. Good, actually. Clean. I remember wishing she'd put down the vacuum and spend some time, one-on-one, with me. She started drifting away from the family, at first imperceptibly and then in increasingly obvious ways: a part-time job, a growing obsession with James A. Michener and Tom Robbins, a new look. One day in the late seventies, my mother, a slim, bottle-blonde beauty, came home sporting a small brown Afro and a pair of high-waisted, wide-leg jeans. I managed a "Looks good, Ma," but inside I knew it meant that the end of my parents' marriage was near. When I was fourteen, she announced she was no longer in the game, not with words but with piles of clothes and dust. She stopped cleaning for good. She decided to go to college, and there she met David, a man eight years her junior, a man with a beard and a Volkswagen bus. An opportunity presented itself to do something that in all of her 35 years she'd never been able to do: run.

While my mother planted mamaki, I worked day and night at my advertising job and spent most of my time in a boardroom

On some level, I understood that my mother needed to be free, even that I needed to be free of an unhappy mom, yet no one wants a mother to leave. It was devastating. As much as I could see that she was suffocating in her marriage, in an era in which women had few choices, her decision was a heavy blow to my already skimpy self-esteem. For a fifteen-year-old girl, the event of your mom's moving out quickly distills itself into one unspoken question: How bad am I that she needed to go? Hardly anybody was getting divorced yet, let alone leaving the kids to live with their dad (this was a full two years before *Kramer vs. Kramer* won the Academy Award), and I felt the kind of shame that made my throat close. The day she left, I hitchhiked three hours to seedy Monticello, New York, kicking off a two-year stint of hard-core teen rebellion—slugging blackberry brandy down by the brook, cutting school, smoking pot almost every day. And then came the real harsh toke: I discovered that my mother, compensating for her own lost youth, was doing the same thing. Seeing her living a life that looked to me like, well, mine triggered a case of reverse rebelliousness. "I'll show her. I'm going to be really responsible!" I spent my last year of high school working an office job in the afternoons, then coming home to help my dad, a high school English teacher, cook and clean.

In the mid-eighties, about the time I was getting my first job at a New York ad agency and renting a studio apartment, my mother was pitching her tent. After years of camping and backpacking around the country, she and David fell in love with the landscape of Hawaii as well as the cost of entry—they bought three acres of rain forest for $10,000, using the money they earned at flea markets, selling quilts out of the back of their Volkswagen. Perhaps because my mother had been born in Germany during World War II, had moved to the States as an eight-year-old immigrant who spoke no English, and had grown up in a cramped apartment on the Jersey side of the Hudson River, the chance to live self-sufficiently in a place as warm and welcoming as Hawaii was irresistible. It felt, she said, "like home."

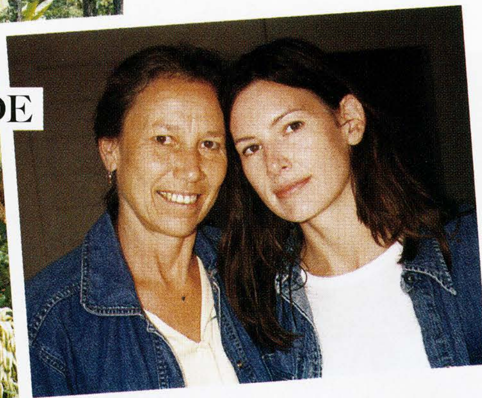
During the first six weeks, they lived in the tent. Without a single power tool, they built a three-walled wooden structure (basically a lean-to) in which they would live for the next five years, cooking on their small camping stove and using an ice-filled cooler for a fridge. At night, they read by lantern and candles. With a roof catchment system, they began collecting rainwater for drinking and bathing. In the pre-bathtub days they made do with a plastic bucket. Since her move to Hawaii, my mother's cost of living—including food, clothing, shelter, and travel—has remained steady at around $5,000 a year.

That anyone can survive on that amount in this country seems unbelievable, especially to a person who lives in New York, where $5,000 translates to something a bit smaller, like a Bottega Veneta bag. Besides being completely independent of all public utilities—municipal water, sewer, natural gas, electric power—Didi and David grow almost everything they eat, and with rainfall upward of 100 inches a year, all manner of things grow in the rain forest: pineapples, peppers, cucumbers, cabbage, spinach, guava, and broccoli. A fortress of lemon, avocado, and banana trees surrounds their cabin, and *Anthurium,* a foot-long, heart-shaped flower known for its thick, waxy leaves (also known for costing $10 a stem at my local florist), grows like weeds.

The plethora of exotic fauna exploding outside their home is in sharp contrast to the spartan existence within. Didi and David have a small collection of clothing, tools, kitchenware, and books, virtually all preowned. I had to press my mother for a list of things they bought new, and she finally came up with coffee, batteries, and underwear. "People are always updating, and they give us lots of stuff," she said. "Come to think of it, I have your TV and CD player." They now run a few small appliances and four lightbulbs with ten used solar panels they've acquired over the years. Recently they've added a propane stove and fridge, a phone, and another modern-day luxury—a fourth wall.

Today, my mother's alternative lifestyle is called *green* and *fashionable.* Throughout the eighties and nineties it was mostly described with two, different words—*cheap* and *poor.* However much embarrassment I felt after she moved out *up front* >66

RAIN FOREST RENEGADE



LAY OF THE LAND THE VIEW FROM DIDI CAMPBELL'S PORCH. MOTHER AND DAUGHTER IN MONTAUK, 1996, RIGHT.

of our house in New Jersey would only intensify year after year as I was forced to confess to whomever had the unfortunate luck to be seated next to me at a dinner party that my mother lived in a lean-to and went to the bathroom in her yard. The harder my mother worked to stay off the grid, the harder I found myself scurrying in the rat race, cementing myself as solidly as I could right smack into the middle of literally the world's biggest grid. While she planted mamaki, I worked day and night at my advertising job, started my own company, and spent most of my time in a boardroom. I secretly felt that the more successful I was, the more right I was and the more wrong she was for abandoning me for the rain forest. I longed for her to be proud of my accomplishments: My name was on the door of an advertising agency that was voted best small ad agency of the year; we won a Lion d'Or at Cannes. Likewise, she always hoped I would embrace her choices and understand her need to be "one with the land." Still, it seems my mother and I have spent most of our lives in a poker game of rejection, with one of us upping the ante on each round. She moved out of our house in New Jersey; I distanced myself from her. She rejected the establishment and society; I organized political fund-raisers. And on it went. The physical distance between us, our intensely disparate lifestyles, and our seemingly unbreakable habit of heading in opposite directions has so often left us without much to talk about.

And then, seemingly overnight, things began to change. With the awareness of global warming suddenly taking hold in the minds of much of the population, as well as the economic crisis the country is facing, my mother has come to be seen as progressive and forward-thinking. She is leading what could truly be called the good life—eating locally, rarely driving, recycling everything, spending little. Even the dilapidated Volkswagen bus is put to use—as a guest cottage. My dinner-table confessions are now met with curiosity and respect. Does she really grow almost everything she eats? She drinks the rainwater? She warms her bathwater with a Paloma heater? Cool! And with her ultra-sustainable lifestyle, my mother now finds herself in some good company, as everyone from concerned families to Hollywood celebrities races to burnish their green credentials. Eco-friendliness has reached virtually every aspect of society—museums, classrooms, Laundromats, weddings, furniture design. It's even penetrated that last bastion of resistance: me.

I can't say what it was that tipped the scale for me—the recent IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) report stating with 90 percent certainty that humans are responsible for global warming, a sea change in the attitude of Americans, or the thermometer's hitting 67 degrees in January in New York. But last year, I finally woke up and looked at my family's size-large carbon footprint and my very New York habit of consuming, consuming, consuming. A fluorescent lightbulb went off inside my head, and I realized I didn't just need to act, but to act swiftly. I took the usual measures—walking or taking mass transit, using stainless-steel reusable water bottles instead of plastic. Then, in a move that surprised no one more than me, I started a global-warming-awareness group called Parents for a Cool New York, kicking it off with a campaign to eliminate excessive catalogs and plastic bags.

When it comes to preserving the planet, my sacrifices are small, minuscule, compared with my mother's. But in another sense, they're enormous. For the first time, I can look at my mother's life objectively and appreciate it. I can stop asking myself, How bad was it with us that a primitive shack in the middle of nowhere is better? Maybe some of that newfound acceptance comes from being a mother myself, and from reaching a point in life where I recognize that we either come together now or we most likely never will. Embracing my mother's lifestyle will never mean I can forget the hurt that transformed my life, but if helping the planet is just about the only thing we have in common besides our DNA, it's a path I'm going to take. I can spend the rest of my life ruing that her heart led her away from me, or I can embrace the fact that it led her to a decent place.

Near the end of our trip to Hawaii, my husband and kids wandered down a bumpy trail to gather broccoli for dinner, and I snuck off by myself for a walk through my mother's garden. Everywhere I turned were amaryllis, azalea, bamboo, mango plants, flowering ferns. Birds of paradise, hundreds of them as thick as candles, reached out as if to shake my hand. I'd hardly noticed them at all the first time I came here, angry and frustrated, stuck on why my mother was tending some silly garden when I had an important Life to be acknowledged. And now I grabbed those birds of paradise and shook them right back: Nice to see you. As hard as I'd worked to surround myself with beautiful things, so, in her own way, had my mother. I finally allowed myself to gawk openly at the care and tenderness, the mothering that had gone into each plant. I'll always wish more of that mothering had been directed my way, but at least it had found an outlet. Right here, in the trees, flowers, rocks, and soil—the Earth. A good place, as it turns out, to find some common ground. □

From left: MITCH EPSTEIN; Courtesy of Lori Campbell.