

Esta Spalding / Excerpt from FALLING ANGELS
(*THE SCREENPLAY*)

INTRODUCTION

As the story goes, the Fields family — the drunken mother, Mary, the tyrannical father, Jim, and the three daughters: rebel Lou, peace-keeper Norma, and sexually precocious Sandy — were first created by Barbara Gowdy in a story called “Disneyland.” In the story, Jim Fields promises to take his family to Disneyland, but instead he winds up building a bombshelter in the backyard and coralling his family into it for a two week “drill” to practice in the event of nuclear war. The story was so popular (it is both terrifying and hilarious) and the Fields so captivating that publishers urged Gowdy to keep writing about the Fields, and “Disneyland” became a chapter in Gowdy’s first novel, *Falling Angels*.

When I was asked to write the screenplay of *Falling Angels*, I agreed mostly because I loved the sequence in the bombshelter. But as I began to write the screenplay, I realized it was going to be very hard to use the bombshelter material. For one thing, that episode occurs when the girls are very young, and the movie had to be set eight years later, when most of the action in the book takes place. For another thing, the bombshelter sequence was long and claustrophobic; to render it with as much detail and horror as Gowdy does in the book, I was going to need twenty or thirty pages of a hundred page script. I simply couldn’t devote that many pages to scenes in the girls’ childhood — which require the audience to get attached to child actors — and then a third of the way through the movie begin the forward action of the film which involves the girls’ teenage relationships — and completely different actors. As a result, none of the original bombshelter material made it into the first two drafts of the screenplay.

But I missed it, and so did the director and the producer. And as it happened, we were looking for a better way to introduce the story of the girls’ dead brother — an infant, born before they were, who fell over Niagara Falls. By combining the bombshelter sequence with

Lou's discovery of a faded newspaper clipping detailing her brother's horrific death, I was able to make the bombshelter a vital part of the screenplay. Now it is used in flashback and culminates with Lou and Norma finding the clipping.

INT. FIELD HOUSE - NORMA AND LOU'S ROOM - (1963)
- NIGHT

All is quiet as the Girls sleep. Sandy sandwiched between Norma and Lou.

BANG. BANG. BANG. THEY WAKE WITH A START. THE SHRIEK OF A WHISTLE, AND -

Jim bursts through the door.

JIM

Move it! Let's go! Outside!

Backyard. Move it! Move it!

The girls jump out of bed and run out into the hall past Jim, disoriented and scared. Jim hollers.

JIM (CONT'D)

Hurry! Hurry! We're at war!

INT. FIELD HOUSE - BEDROOM - (1963) - NIGHT

Jim storms into the room, deadly serious, waking Mary.

JIM

Mary! Wake-up, hurry. We're at war!

Let's go. Outside. Hurry up.

He leaves the room. Mary jumps from bed, terrified. She pulls open the dresser, and pulls something out of the drawer. She shoves it into her purse.

EXT. FIELD HOUSE - BACKYARD - A BEAT LATER -
(1963) - NIGHT

Sleepy and frightened, Norma, Lou, and Sandy run onto the lawn in their nightgowns. Jim and Mary follow. Jim's whistle shrieking.

JIM

The Ruskies just launched the big one! Now move it! Into the bombshelter.

SANDY

What about our clothes?

JIM

Don't worry about them! Hurry up! There's radiation out here!

MARY

Is there really, Jim?

JIM

We have to act like there is.

Mary nods, and hurries the Girls towards the bombshelter hatch.

MARY

Come on, girls let's go. Let's be daddy's little girls.

JIM

Hup to! Hup to!

Terrified, Lou and Norma climb into the bombshelter.

SANDY

Mommy?

MARY

Come on. It's safe in here.

Sandy climbs in. Mary, clutching her purse and her mug, follows. Jim climbs in himself, reaching overhead and pulling down the Hatch.

INT. BOMBSHELTER - CONTINUOUS - (1963) - NIGHT

Mary, Sandy, Lou, and Norma stand in the dimly lit bombshelter. They're confused, disoriented, scared.

JIM

You each have a bunk. There's a latrine, you'll use it once a day -

Jim gestures as he speaks, pointing out the features of the claustrophobic space.

JIM (CONT'D)

Each day is organized with activities.

NORMA

Mom?

Norma looks ill.

MARY

(to Jim)

Each day?

JIM

There's the schedule. If we conserve - we've got enough food and water for two weeks -

LOU

Two weeks?

MARY

Oh, good lord.

Mary clutches her purse, tighter. Looks down at her Mug.

JIM

And coffee. We've got enough coffee,
dear.

Mary settles. Sandy notices their suitcases next to the bunks.

SANDY

What about Disneyland?

JIM

We're not going.

Sandy turns to Mary and starts to cry.

SANDY

But mommy, I wanna to go to
Disneyland.

NORMA

Mom?

On Mary's other side, Norma's clutching her gut now.

SANDY

(whining)

You said you'd take us.

MARY

You promised, Jim.

Lou tries to explain to Sandy.

LOU

We can't go to Disneyland. We're at war.

JIM

That's right. We're brothers in arms. We'll have a hell of a good time here.

Norma heads towards the latrine. Lou curls her nose -

LOU

It smells like something died.

Sandy wails, crying even louder.

JIM

There's plenty of good air. There are some rules. We have to conserve water and food.

NORMA

(from inside the latrine)

Lou -

Jim hears her.

JIM

Norma, out of the latrine. That's rule number one.

MARY

Let the child use the toilet, Jim.

Lou goes in the latrine.

IN THE LATRINE:

Norma looks up. She holds up two fingers, smeared with blood.

LOU
(calling out)
Mom, can you come in here -

NORMA
I'm sick.

LOU
It's the curse, you moron.

Mary comes into the latrine. Sees Norma. Sees the blood.

MARY
Oh, dear.

JIM (O.S.)
What the hell is going on in there?

Jim pokes his head in.

MARY
Jim, Lou just has to scoot up to the house for a sec.

JIM
Absolutely not.

MARY
She won't be a minute.

JIM

No, sirree. There's radiation out there.

MARY

There isn't really, Jim.

JIM

We have to pretend there is.

Sandy and Lou's mouths fall open.

MARY

Jim, Norma has become a woman.

JIM

What the hell are you talking about?

MARY

Ruby Keeler.

It takes a second to sink in.

JIM

Jesus Christ!

Norma closes her eyes, humiliated.

LOU

You lied! You said we were at war!

MARY

So Lou just has to scoot up and bring down some napkins. She'll be quick.

LOU

You're a liar!

JIM

You shut your trap.

Jim looks around, then swipes a sheet off the bed, RIPS it in half.

MARY

What are you doing, Jim?

He tears it again, and again, into strips.

JIM

Whattaya think the pioneers did?

He folds one and hands it to Norma. Lou scrambles up the ladder and heaves her weight against the door. It doesn't budge. She steps back.

There's a padlock on the latch. They're locked in.

LOU

No!

JIM

It's for your own safety.

Lou POUNDS on the HATCH.

LOU

Help! We're trapped! Help us!

Sandy WAILS. Lou continues pounding on the hatch.

Mary moves to a box of whisky and pours herself a drink.

Jim, oblivious to the screaming, rips the sheet into strips.