

Katherine Taylor

Mother's Summer Vacation

My mother never stops speaking before the answering machine cuts off. "It's hot," she says, "and I am so bored and I'm in the car, we're in the desert and Daddy is going potty and I'm hot and there's nothing to look at." We have asked her not to phone before 11am, but she does. My brother has told her, "People like us do not get up before 11am."

"Unemployed people?"

"Bartenders, mother."

We punish her by never picking up the phone. She punishes us by phoning again and again.

Sometimes she punishes us by not phoning for weeks, and though my brother and I are relieved when this happens, we panic sometimes and know, she has told us, we'll be sorry when she's dead.

When she visits New York, she visits for weeks at a time. "I hate Fresno," she says. "I hate that hell hole." She has lived in Fresno for twenty-three years. For twenty-three years she has said, "I hate this hell hole."

"Go on and do what you would do if I weren't here," she says after the second week of her visit. "I can read. I'll clean the closets."

"Don't clean my closet," Ethan says.

"It's a disaster," Mother tells him.

"Don't clean my closet."

"Why?"

"Gay porn," I say. "He doesn't want you to find his gay porn."

Mother says, "That is not funny, Julia."

I am not being funny. Ethan knows I am not being funny. He nods and shrugs. "Clean out my closet," he says. "And clean underneath my bed, too."

Mother gets a line down the center of her forehead. "I'll read instead," she says.

My father always implies we have nothing to say to one another. When I phone and he answers, he says immediately, "I'll let you speak to your mother."

"No Daddy, I'll talk to you."

"I'll just get the gossip from your mother."

"Don't you have gossip?"

"Your mother fired the gardener again. I can't talk, darling, I'll get the gossip from your mother."

My mother takes the phone. "I'm depressed," she says.

"Why?"

"Because I have wasted my whole life in this town and your father always leaves me alone."

The two of them, now, have decided to build a house in Michigan. Mother has pinned all her hopes on this house and on the little town where everyone chipped in to buy a swimming pool for the local high school. My father thinks the house will make him poor.

"I'm coming out to see the architect," Mother says, "and I think I'll come see you kids for a while too."

My mother refuses to go to the dentist in Fresno. She has not seen a dentist for twenty-two years because, she says, "I don't want the whole damn town gossiping about my teeth." The only time my mother swears is when she uses the phrase "the whole damn town."

"No one's gossiping about your teeth."

"You don't know, Julia. What it's like in this town."

"Who cares. You hate everyone and you hardly leave the house anyway."

"I have to get work done and I don't want everyone talking about it."

"What kind of work?"

"Embarrassing work! Reconstructive dental work. I don't want you talking about it either. Please just make me an appointment with a dentist in New York."

I made her an appointment with the dentist of my friend Bill. Bill is the only person I know who has ever talked about his dentist out of context. Also, Bill has very nice teeth.

"I made an appointment for you. Bill says this dentist is very good about having no pain."

"Is he gay?"

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"Bill is gay."

"The dentist, Julia!"

"I don't know, Mother, I didn't ask the receptionist."

"I don't want a gay dentist."

I hung up the phone. Ethan had been listening. "Did she ask if the dentist were gay?" he said.

I told him, "This is a woman who gets out of bed once a week and is afraid that people are going to gossip about her teeth."

Ethan phoned her immediately.

"Mother, how long are you staying? Well, can you give me vague dates? Thank you, Mother."

"What did she say?" I asked.

"She says she's staying from April through September."

"Your mother doesn't understand how hard I work," Daddy said over Christmas as we sat together at the kitchen table for breakfast.

"She understands," I told him. "She understands she never gets to see you."

"That's right," my mother said, "your father likes to have me here so he can leave me alone all the time and play golf."

"You encourage me to play golf."

"I don't encourage you to leave me alone all day."

"Well I'm here all day now that you had it out with Pedro," he said, resigned.

"What happened with Pedro?" Pedro had been our family's gardener for eighteen years.

Mother looked up from the sink where she had been working. "He stole my persimmons," she said.

I waited for more. There was no more. "No one eats the persimmons anyway," I said.

"He was pruning the tree," my father said.

"It's the principle. I told him to leave them there. For eighteen years I had been telling him to leave my persimmons alone."

"You see," my father said, "so I don't play golf. I mow the lawn."

"Not in the winter," Mother said. "You prevaricator. The lawn has been fertilized for the winter. I have already hired a new gardener."

Daddy sighed. "We'll see how long this lasts," he said, his eyes on the morning's paper. "I bought one of those big mowers you just sit on and ride around."

When they first bought the old farm on Lake Michigan, Mother thought she could easily fly back and forth from California to supervise the planning and construction of their home. However, after one season of missed flights and jet lag and early-morning connections and overnight stays in Cincinnati, Mother decided the travel would be much easier from New York.

"You don't want me to come."

"I want you to come."

"No you don't, I can hear it in your voice."

"You're going to be uncomfortable all summer on the sofa."

"I'll sleep in your bed with you."

"Mother."

"You're going to make me sleep on the sofa?"

"Mommy."

She said, "You don't want me to come."

"You'll get bored."

"I have a plan," she said.

"What sort of plan?"

"A plan I'm not telling you."

"What good is a plan like that?"

"You think you know everything," she said.

My mother had visited New York many times before, dozens of times, often staying for two or three weeks a stretch. This time, though, the time she arrived for her summer-long trip, there were problems at JFK. She arrived at our door frazzled, upset, a patch of hair at the back of her head upright because she had been tugging at it, her face blotched from hives.

"I had a fight," she said. She came in but wouldn't let go of her luggage.

"Let me take it," I said gently. "Sit down."

"Who won?" Ethan shouted from his room.

"I had a fight."

"Mommy, let go of your bag."

She released her luggage and sat down on the sofa. She looked at me apologetically.

"What happened," I said.

She looked at me. She looked toward Ethan's door. "We were in the line for taxis. A lot of flights came in at the same time and the line was very long. A young woman cut in front of me. I told her not to, I said, 'I was here,' and she said . . . she said," Mother caught her breath. "She said, 'shut up, you fat old bitch.'" Mother

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pronounced each word with emphasis and then started to cry. She pulled a tissue from beneath the cuff of her sleeve.

"Who said this?" Ethan asked, coming out of his room.

"It was a long line and I had some time to think. I am fat and I am old. She really hurt my feelings. And I wanted to hurt her feelings too."

"What did you do?" I stood in the doorway to my apartment, the door open. Mother's second suitcase was still in the hall. Ethan watched from the door to his room.

"I told her she had a very bad complexion. I said, 'I could lose weight, but there is nothing they can do about the scars on your face.' And the taxis didn't come, so I waited a while and said it again, I said, 'I guess they could try to blast it off with sand, but I hear that hurts a lot and never works.'"

Ethan began to laugh.

She looked at Ethan. "I said it like I meant it," she said.

"Mommy," I said, "well, that's very mean."

"I know," she said, and really started to cry, so that the tears ran down and soaked the collar of her dress. "I wanted to hurt her feelings, and I feel so sad."

"You didn't mean to be mean," Ethan said.

"Yes I did," Mother said enthusiastically. "That is exactly what I wanted to do."

"Well then you were successful!" Ethan said. "You see?"

Mother had an endless supply of tissues underneath her sleeve. I pulled her suitcase inside and shut the door.

My Mother has worn to bed one of the same two oversized t-shirts for as long as I can remember. My father bought them for her on business trips. One is torn beneath the arms and worn out so that it is nearly see-through and says *Georgia Peach* in big orange cursive. The other is black and has naked cowgirls on it and says *Trainee. Mustang Ranch. Where Quality Keeps 'em Coming.*

The first week of Mother's stay, I made a mistake I would not make again that summer. I went out with a boy I particularly liked and told my mother the truth about where I was going and with whom. When I arrived home after 3 a.m., she was waiting, pacing the floor in her *Mustang Ranch Trainee* t-shirt, her short hair standing on end, her face blotched with hives.

"Where have you been?" she demanded.

"I told you."

"But where have you been for so long?"

"Out."

She followed me into the kitchen while I fetched a glass of water.

"Did you kiss him?" My mother never asks questions like *Did you kiss him?* She launches them like accusations.

"I don't like the tone of that question," I said.

"Did you kiss him?" she demanded again.

"As a matter of fact, no, Mother, he had a cold and I didn't kiss him."

She was quiet and looked at me for a long time. "Ethan!" she shouted through the slatted doors of the kitchen into Ethan's room.

"Hmph."

"Can you have sex without kissing?"

Mother spent her first week in New York on the phone to Michigan and on the sofa with her house plans spread out before her.

"I don't like this architect."

"What's wrong?"

"He says I can't have a basement."

"You don't like him because he's gay," Ethan said.

"Mother, you're building beside a wetland," I said.

"I think he just doesn't want to bother building a basement for me."

"It will flood, Mother."

Ethan said, "If you build it, it will flood."

"He is not gay, he is married," Mother said then, to Ethan.

"He's gay. Julia said he was gay."

I had met the architect and discerned that he was definitely gay. I had met his wife and discerned that she was definitely gay, too. Ethan had not even met the architect.

"Julia," my Mother said in her most admonishing tone, "my architect is not gay."

The second week, Mother fired the architect and rehired him again.

One morning during the third week, while Ethan and I slept in after long nights at work, Mother got up early, made the effort of blow-drying her hair, and went out for the entire day. By the time she must have come home, Ethan and I were at work. The mornings that followed, she was up and out before Ethan or I got out of bed.

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"Where do you think Mommy's going?" I asked him one afternoon over coffee. When Ethan and I lived together, I made coffee for the two of us in a press every afternoon when we woke up.

Ethan rolled his eyes. "I hope I get this pilot so I can escape this summer of madness." He went to his room and shut the door, which in that apartment in New York where we lived together for six years was merely a gesture at privacy as the door to his room was a flimsy slatted passway into the kitchen.

The next time I saw Mother again, I asked where she had been going every day for the past week.

"Columbia," she said.

"Where?" I heard her, but wasn't sure we were thinking about the same Columbia.

"I'm taking a class," she said. "I'm taking a course in American literature at Columbia."

I looked at her. "Why?"

"Because I am bored and have to do something with my life," she said.

"So what are you doing with your life?"

"I'm going to apply to graduate school."

I nodded. "What exactly do you expect to do with a graduate degree?"

"Teach," she said.

I didn't point out to her that with my graduate degree from Columbia, I had been bartending for two years downtown in New York.

Mother and I went together to Michigan to see the architect. From New York to Traverse City there's a change of planes in Chicago and from Chicago to Traverse City there's a little twin-engine plane that invariably makes my mother sick. By the time we got to the architect's office, Mother was throwing up into a bin in the parking lot. Traveling with my mother is never a holiday. "The plane made me sick," she said.

"Commercial air travel is for assholes," I assured her.

She looked up from the bin. "I don't like that language."

Mother and the architect had a personality clash. They argued over the definition of veneer. They argued over the sensibility of storm windows and wooden windowpanes and false mullions. They argued over which plants the architect had drawn on the elevations.

"They look like hydrangeas to me," my mother said.

"They're not, they're lilacs."

"They don't look like lilacs to me, they look like hydrangeas."

"There's not enough room here for hydrangea bushes, with the wetland they'll grow over the path."

"I'm just saying you drew hydrangeas, not lilacs."

"I drew lilacs."

They couldn't agree on a color of stone, or a palate for the outside of the house that would be best for the surroundings.

After the meeting with the architect, Mother and I ate grilled cheese sandwiches and French fries at a 1950s drive-in. "You see," she said, "he doesn't like to listen to me."

I had to agree she was right, but sometimes I didn't like to listen to her either.

My father phoned twice a day, even in Michigan. "Hi darling, can I talk to Mommy?"

"Don't you want to talk to me, Dad?"

"Sure I do. How are you, darling?"

"Fine, how are you?"

"Good. Can I talk to Mommy?"

He was homesick for her, and she was equally homesick for him. "Poor Daddy is lonely," she told me one night after he phoned.

"Why don't you go back?"

She looked at me. She shook her head. "I have to do something with my life," she said.

"My teacher doesn't like me," my mother said one day after school.

"How do you know?"

"I can tell. I put my hand up and he doesn't call on me. Maybe I say stupid things in class."

"I'm sure you don't."

"Maybe I do."

I shrugged. "Well, he has to call on you once in a while. You paid for the class."

"He calls everyone by their first names," she said. "Except me. He calls me Mrs. Reynolds."

"You're right," I said. "He doesn't like you."

"I'm going to win him over, though," she said, smiling. "With my term paper."

Mother spent that weekend on the sofa, tugging at her hair, writing her term paper longhand on college-ruled loose-leaf notebook

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paper, dog-eared copies of *McTeague* and *Sister Carrie* and *The Good Soldier* in front of her, highlighting the passages most useful for proving her thesis. Later, she paid me \$20 to type it—"Blaming Booze: When Good Characters Go Bad."

As far as I could see, not much needed to be straightened out in my life or in Ethan's, but my mother didn't see it that way. What my mother could see was that my brother and I were wasting our expensive educations by getting up at noon and spending too much time in front of the computer. "I am writing," I would lie. "I'm checking my e-mail," Ethan would confess. What my mother could see was that I had no boyfriend and Ethan no girlfriend. Actually, I had several unimportant boyfriends, and so did Ethan.

She bought us new towels and scrubbed the cupboard underneath the kitchen sink. She bought me a new winter coat, a long sweepy one that flowed like water around me when I walked. She stopped short of having the Oriental rug that had been my grandmother's cleaned. "When you move back to Los Angeles, we'll get it cleaned then," she said.

I had no intention of moving back to Los Angeles. I didn't know Ethan had it always not far in the back of his head.

One Saturday morning while Ethan slept in or pretended to sleep in, Mother and I went for breakfast at the Hotel Wales up high on Madison and strolled down afterward, stopping into shops and looking for a flowy linen shirt my mother had in mind to wear during the summer evenings in New York. It's difficult finding sizes to fit my mother in any styles she'd wear. My mother likes the type of clothes skinny people wear.

"I'd like a black linen shirt with sleeves that fall just above the elbow, something that buttons up but not too high," she told one particularly aloof, bored sales boy in a shop that sold mostly handbags.

"I think they've got something like that at Bloomingdale's," he said.

"Bloomingdale's," my mother said flatly, glaring at him.

Outside, she turned to me, a little angry, very hurt. "Bloomingdale's? Do I look like I want to shop at Bloomingdale's?"

"You don't look like that to me," I assured her.

"He thinks I want to shop at Bloomingdale's because I'm fat."

"Maybe."

"Really?"

"I don't know."

"Bloomingdale's." She mentioned the incident several more times throughout the day, and throughout the next week, and occasionally for the rest of the summer.

Soon it became clearer and clearer that my mother's American Literature teacher at Columbia really didn't like her.

"He rolls his eyes when I ask a question."

"I think you're imagining that," I would say.

She would pause and consider it. "I don't think so. He rolls his eyes. The other students won't talk to me during the breaks."

"They're eighteen years old."

"But what am I going to do if I don't go to graduate school?"

"Build your house."

"I am building my house," she said. "My architect is an idiot."

I didn't understand why she thought she was cut out for graduate school and I didn't want to hurt her feelings by asking her directly. During college at Fresno State University, Mother nearly flunked out altogether, was put on academic suspension for an entire semester, and in the end only just passed after she met Daddy who fell in love with her and wrote all her term papers.

We went to Michigan again, later in the summer, to meet with contractors. They came to our small cabin next to the golf course, the operational center for mother's house-building enterprise, and I offered them all microwave popcorn or water or tea.

Mother and the architect fought about whether to use a local contractor or one from the larger town nearby. They fought about when to start building and whether or not it was time to start quarter-inch drawings. They fought about which trees to remove on the property and at which angle the house would face the lake. I could see my mother was quarrelsome, but I began to really dislike this architect. He had stopped even being considerate of her. He cut her off mid-sentence and spoke to her in the condescending tone that only family used with my mother.

"You see," she said, "the windows are not symmetrical."

"It would look ugly your way," the architect told her.

"But last time I told you what I like."

"You are not the architect."

The architect hadn't done much this trip but cause trouble, and afterward he presented Mother with an enormous bill for his time.

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"He charges me too much and he doesn't listen to me." Mother began to consider Dad's fear that the house would make them poor.

When Dad phoned, he was tender and kind. He encouraged her to keep the architect, or else to find a new one, and assured her that no one would be made poor.

That trip, Mother took me to a meeting of the Kiwanis club, which she had joined in an effort to make friends in town. Mother had never been the club-joining type. When I was seven, she quit the Junior League after three meetings, unable to tolerate "those bitches." I remember her telling her sister, in language completely out of character for my mother, that the Junior League president was "an anti-Semitic bitch married to the richest Jew in town." Throughout my childhood, she quit the PTA after a fight with my sixth-grade teacher, resigned from the board of the Fresno Art Museum after a heated disagreement over displaying found objects, decided the Literacy Council Board was full of "condescending old bags," and either gave up on or was shoved out of several informal quilting groups.

Here in Harbor Springs, in the backwoods of Michigan, members of the Kiwanis seemed to so far appreciate her forthright unpredictability, and she seemed to like them just as much. She was the youngest Kiwanis member by about thirty years, and the only woman. After breakfast, an old man I'd seen riding his bicycle around town approached me. "You sure are sweet-looking," he said to me. "Are you married?"

"No."

"Are you in love with anyone?"

"We'll see," I said.

He and Mother chatted about contractors for a few minutes and he said goodbye and as we walked to the car, Mother said, "Do you think he has someone in mind for you?" Mother was always very excited at the idea of me having a boyfriend, but always very unhappy with the reality.

I didn't know what my mother wanted from the summer, but I let her get on with it and tried not to be discouraging. Her American Literature course ended, and we waited for three weeks for her grade to be mailed. She commandeered my mailbox key and checked for news every day at two. She stared for hours at her house plans. We ate many breakfasts at Hotel Wales and rarely saw Ethan, who pretended to sleep later and later, and left for

work earlier and earlier. Mother spent a lot of time in antique shops and furniture stores looking to furnish the new house, but seemed to have forgotten the task of finding a new architect.

When her grade finally came, she sat on the sofa gripping the envelope for more than an hour before opening it. I paced from room to room, I sat down and got up, I made more than one cup of tea. For a very long time she sat on the sofa with that worried, vulnerable grimace of hers you see in photographs from when she was a child, that awful strain on her face that tries to be a smile.

"What if he failed me?"

"Mother, he didn't fail you. You went to class, you participated, you wrote 'Blaming Booze.'"

"What if he gave me a D?"

"Well. Then."

"I can't go to graduate school with Ds."

"You don't deserve a D."

"I want to go to graduate school."

"Just open the envelope."

A while later, she opened the envelope. She looked at it. She started laughing. She laughed and laughed. She rested the envelope in her lap and threw her head back and laughed. "He gave me a C," she said.

I laughed too, a disappointed laugh.

Ethan was cast in a Diet Coke commercial, which was not a pilot but was something. Ethan said, "Dat's some-ting," like my grandmother used to say. Our grandmother was dead, but we still liked to mimic the way she spoke, her catch phrases like "dat's some-ting," or "you wan' 'em penis-butter and jelly?" or "don' make fun grandmama." The commercial gave him a reason to get out of New York for a little bit. In the fall, they offered him the entire campaign, which Ethan figured was even better than a pilot.

Mother and I helped him pack and Mother bought him a travel iron and Ethan felt happy and confident and looked very handsome, which was good enough for our mother. Seeing Ethan like that made her happy and confident too.

My father phoned repeatedly to make sure Ethan didn't need a ride from the airport, and Ethan assured him every time as if it were the first time that he did not need a ride from the airport.

I was happy for Ethan but sad that I didn't make our mother feel happy and confident. She worried that no one would love me

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and that I would bartend until I was too ugly to bartend and that no one would ever like my stories as much as she liked them. She worried the same things about Ethan until he was rescued by Diet Coke.

"Maybe you should come to Harbor Springs and find a teaching job," she said.

I nodded.

"There are a lot of rich boys in Harbor Springs," she said.

"I don't like rich boys," I told her. I tell her this because it's true but also because I like to wind her up.

"It's just as easy to love money."

My mother promises that if I marry one of the impoverished boys I like to date, I will be unhappy later. I tell her not to worry, that I am not going to marry any of these impoverished boys or anyone else. This frightens her, as she does not want to continue paying my health insurance for the rest of her life.

She left New York in late August, shortly after Ethan went to Los Angeles, shortly before everything in New York changed for good. I was mostly relieved to see her go, but then the apartment seemed empty without her suitcases and blueprints and various paperbacks. In the end, she said herself she wasn't cut out for graduate school. "But I wanted to make sure," she said. She looked at me sideways. "You know Daddy helped me cheat in Geography."

"I know," I said. "He wrote your English term papers too."

"He did?!" she said. "I don't remember that. I don't think so."

"All right," I said. The following week, she would remind me that she wasn't cut out for graduate school because Daddy had helped her write all those English term papers anyway.

That fall, she and my father took a weekend trip to Michigan and found a new architect who seemed to share my mother's ideas of symmetry. Mother backed the car into a tree and Daddy didn't scream at her. When they returned to Fresno, my father gave up golf for the autumn and spent his weekends mowing the lawn, which my mother considered a romantic gesture at spending more time together.

Just before her flight to California at the end of the summer, Mother was dining alone at her favorite overpriced Greek restaurant on 71st Street. She had started with the octopus, moved on to the swordfish baked in herbs, and finished with a hot chocolate and the yoghurt smothered in honey and cherries. She sat, quite content, while Costa the waiter indicated repeatedly he would

bring her check. A woman and her young, professional daughter sat at the table across the way, and as Mother admired how attractive they looked in their short-sleeved linen shirts and matching summer sweaters, how elegantly they held their wine glasses, how their eyes lit up identically when they laughed, she overheard the woman tell her daughter, "Don't, darling. If you eat it all, you'll end up looking like her."

Mother looked at her hands, and thought, *Even my hands are fat.*

On her way out, Mother couldn't keep from responding. "You should consider other people's feelings," she said with restraint as she passed the women's table. Costa offered to wrap a dessert for the plane, courtesy of the chef. Mother refused, kissed Costa on both cheeks, and felt very happy for not having an impulse to hurt anyone the way she felt hurt. Walking back to my apartment in time to meet her car for the airport, she would tell me later, she had a certain feeling of elation and freedom and relief she hadn't felt in a long time.