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12 Letters

William Safire
Country Matters

Fenton Johnson
22 About Men
How I Spent My Summer Vacation

How I Spent My Summer Vacation

THIS IS WHAT IS FAC-
ing me, for 18 years a
confirmed city boy, as
I drive a rented car from the
Louisville airport to the
small (population 800) Ken-
tucky town where I grew up:
a summer with my widowed
mother, who lives alone in a
house that once supported
parents, four daughters, four
sons, three dogs, a flock of
Rhode Island Reds, a one-
acre garden, 200 quail that
my father brought home
from the Rolling Fork Fish &
Game Club as an experiment
in re-establishing the birds in
neighboring fields.

For two months before
leaving San Francisco I had
turned down jobs, weaseled
out of meetings, left phone
calls unreturned. On my
kitchen table I kept a running
list of Things to Do during
this three-month visit:
1) replace water heater
2) put on new roof

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of the novel "Crossing the
River" and teaches creative
writing at San Francisco
State University.*

3) tear out wood-burning
stove
4) buy air-conditioner (win-
dow unit)
5) insulate greenhouse
6) put on new roof
Youngest son, self-em-
ployed, I was the likely can-
didate for these jobs — and
for broaching other matters
more delicate:

7) what about money?
8) living alone? Why not a
dog?
9) love life?

So I drove up, to find my
mother sharing the porch
swing with a new man (a new
man?), a longtime friend of
the family, an 82-year-old
Southern gentleman 10 years
her senior. "You don't think
he's too old for you?" I whis-
pered while he was inside.
She shrugged. "He's alive,
which gives him an advan-
tage over most men around
here." When he returned he
put his arm around her, she
cuddled up to him. My moth-
er, whom my father hadn't
publicly kissed in 47 years of
marriage!

That Saturday he took my
mother and me to the theater

(Father hadn't attended a play
in his life). Late that night we
drove home — the kids (them)
in back, the chauffeur (me) up
front. At his house I parked in
the drive. I waited a few sec-
onds — a thick and delicious
moment. Then I cleared my
throat. "I think I'll get my sun-
glasses out of the trunk," I
said.

A few weeks later, since
fishing is her passion and my
mother's friend is no fisher-
man, I searched out the bam-
boo poles from the depths of
the woodshed. We spent an
hour sanding rust from the
old hooks. "Every time we
fished we had to sand every
single one clean," she said.
"Father would never throw a
one of them away."

We stashed the bark poles in
the trunk and drove to the
river, where everybody's feed-
ing on whatever's in reach:
dragonflies, mosquitoes, water
snakes on top, bass, catfish,
crappie in the sinkholes, and,
stalking the mussel beds, the
great blue herons. Mother
cocked her head, listening.
"Can't catch when the locusts
grind," is what father always

said." But we did: The next morning a single pole bobbed and dipped, a nice blue channel cat. Back home she pried the hook free, studied it a moment, then tossed it in the garbage.

Should I dwell on her strength — plunging a butcher knife into the channel cat's steel-gray head — or her need — angry and red-faced at her impotence before the medical bureaucracy? Anyone who's not dealt with health-care systems for the elderly is in for an education. I know what we wanted to hear, myself and my scattered brothers and sisters: she's doing fine, she loves our visits but doesn't need our help, she has her bridge club, bowling, golf, reading, volunteer work, the church, friends. Over long-distance lines, in letters she tells us this, and we believe her.

But a summer is a long time to keep up an illusion, and one Monday morning after I'd been gone for the weekend she dropped her guard. "It's Sunday afternoon that get to you," she said. "There's nobody to call, nothing on television, a million things you can't bring yourself to do. Sometimes I just get in the car and drive." Then she stood abruptly and disappeared, to reappear a half-hour later waving a wrench: "I fixed the toilet," she said. I checked it out: the leak was gone.

I was in Kentucky for only three months, but things move fast in California — out of sight, out of mind. To listen to my friends, I might have been leaving for Beulah Land. Three months in Kentucky? Drop a line, my San Francisco friends said, and I could have cut their skepticism with a knife. Let us know how it goes, they said, we're thinking of doing the same for our folks.

That's what struck me over the summer, as I typed away in the basement, the only cool place in the house: how many told me of their parents in the same situation — the nuclear family exploded, its children scattered over hundreds of thousands of miles. *The child is father to the man*, I thought, though more often to the woman: All my friends, now parents, had parents, most often widows, most often living alone and at some distance from their offspring.

some comfortable, most depending in some measure — financial, emotional — on their children.

About that air-conditioner and my list of projects. My mother refused to let me buy a unit until they went on sale, which they never did, in that long hot summer. The weekend we planned to put on a new roof it rained. That same weekend we were supposed to take out the old wood-burning stove. We *did* replace the water heater. Mostly we went on walks. One moment I was teacher, the next I was student. I talked about life in the big city, she taught me the names of birds and plants, and stories that went with them.

On my last evening in Kentucky we walk through the nearby fields of the monastery at Gethsemane, where Thomas Merton wrote, where years before she and my father had thrown picnics for monks who sneaked out of the enclosure. In the tolling of Vespers I hear their names, a medieval litany: Clement, Marcellus, Christopher, Chrysostom, Finian, my namesake. They are almost all gone now, drawn away by marriage, secular careers, other religious orders, death.

In the fence rows we hear the scratch and scatter of quail — lots of quail; a covey explodes under our noses.

The summer heat has broken, the paths are lined with fall wildflowers: partridge pea, boneset, goldenrod, ironweed. The sun sets in a hurry, the light low and autumnal; all around us is the knowing that this, another summer, is coming to an end.

Somehow this one gesture sums up that summer: my mother's hand, wrinkled and spotted with age, stripping a dried stalk of purple loosestrife for seed to plant in her wildflower garden. She is careful to point out, as her hand cups the seed, that she is scattering some for those who come next year.

Back in San Francisco, I don't regret the unfinished projects. Driving my mother on her dates, learning from her in the woods — this is what we've been working toward for 35 years: an easy reversing of roles, adapting to circumstances rather than trying to force them to adapt to us. ■

'He's alive,' my mother said,
'which gives him an advantage
over most men around here.'