

# Wait Till Next Year

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“SO Aunt Millie told me to come on down next weekend and bring a girl friend. Don’t you think you could come?” Catherine’s voice was eager and pleading. I took my foot off the running board of the car and rubbed it across the grass. “Sure, I’ll come—it will be loads of fun.”

Catherine backed the car out of the drive and soon disappeared around the corner. As I walked back to the house, I was aware of a tingling anticipation. It made me want to skip up the walk. To think of spending the weekend in a cottage, with the ocean at the front door!

The night was black as velvet, studded with sequin fireflies. Its softness rubbed against me, like the neighbors’ cat, who slid by my legs, soft and black too, with gleaming eyes.

A weekend at Atlantic City! Mother certainly wouldn’t object to my going with Catherine. After all, next year I would be a senior in college. My parents realized that I’d grown up since my freshman days. But, standing there on the step, with my hand on the doorknob, I felt a jab of misgiving. There was the time last summer, when I had promised to go to a dance at Fort Dix. Mother had said, “You can’t walk home alone from the bus station. It isn’t proper.” I had argued, “It is only a walk of three squares,” but Mother had been firm. After that episode, I’d told myself that this summer, things would be different.

Well, this was the next summer! I pushed open the door. Mother and Daddy were both sitting in the living room. I looked at Daddy first. He was usually easy to persuade if I could make him listen. But he was busy now, pasting up the August issue of his poultry magazine. A half-full glass of ginger ale rested by his elbow. I walked over to him. “Daddy—” He looked up at me and picked up his glass, leaving a dark, wet ring on the board. I thought of a thousand things to say, to open the subject, and wondered why I started out as I did. “Do you know that Catherine is going to her aunt’s summer home at the shore?” Daddy tilted his head back and sucked the ginger ale from under the ice

cubes. He spoke absently. "Really? That's nice." I opened my mouth to tell about my invitation, when Daddy crooked his finger at me and nodded toward the magazine. "What do you think of this page arrangement? Should I move this cut over here, or do you like the caption better on this side?"

I knew that if I tried to make Daddy listen now, he would become annoyed. As I juggled pictures and scraps of paper, I watched Mother. She was sitting in her housecoat, with her feet tucked up under her, and reading a novel. It ought to be easy to tell her. I'd wait until she finished that chapter.

After Daddy and I had decided on the caption, I went over to Mother's chair and looked over her shoulder. As she glanced up, I remarked, hating the casual tone of my voice, "Is it a good book?" She smiled and wrinkled her nose. "Just like all of Temple Bailey's.—There's some ginger ale in the refrigerator."

As I knocked ice cubes out of the pan and poured ginger ale into the glass, I told myself that this would be easy. Mother was in a good humor, she would have no objections. Nevertheless, my heart pounded a bit as I strolled back to Mother. Good! She had just finished the chapter and was stretching and yawning. "Mother!" She closed her mouth slowly. "Ummm?" "Mother—" My voice sounded as if I were reciting. "I have an invitation to spend the weekend with Catherine, at Atlantic City. I think I'll go; it sounds like fun."

Mother opened her eyes and sat up. "How are you going to get there?"

"—Drive with Catherine."

"Stay there all by yourselves?"

"—No, her aunt will be there." This was silly, like the question-answer quizzes of grade school.

Mother rubbed the book back and forth under her chin. Then she spoke slowly. "I don't exactly like the idea of your driving with Catherine. She's so scatterbrained. I'd worry all the time you were gone." She opened her book again.

I heard Daddy swirling the ice cubes around in his glass. Sometimes he had come to my rescue and had helped change Mother's mind. Once, long ago, I had been crazy about the boy who delivered the groceries. He'd asked me for a date, but Mother had said, "No, you're too young." Daddy had said, "Why not have a bunch of boys and girls in some evening, and ask Jim too? Moth-

er and I can go to the movies or something." Although second best, that party had been a success.

Daddy wasn't going to help me out this time. He slouched down in his chair, pushing papers around on the dummy page.

I faced Mother again. "Heavens! You shouldn't worry about me. I'm not a baby any more." My hands were clammy cold as I clasped them behind my back.

Mother's shoulders stiffened and her face became set. "I don't think you ought to go." The clock struck ten, and the last note vibrated endlessly. My face burned. It was like driving wedges and having someone pull them out as fast as I put them in. Mother repeated, "I don't think you ought to go."

Standing straight in front of her, I asked, "Why?" and my indignation exploded in that one word. A stiff silence followed. Then Mother's voice snapped at me. "I don't approve of Catherine and don't think you ought to go to the shore with her." Mother sniffed and turned her mouth in a downward curve.

I closed my eyes to think, to grasp at any straw. "I'm old enough to decide things for myself. I see nothing wrong with going to Atlantic City. Catherine's aunt will be there."

Mother snapped her book shut and stood up. Wrapping her housecoat around her with one sweep, she started upstairs. Looking back over her shoulder she sniffed again. "You aren't going. We won't discuss it any more!" She went on upstairs.

As I stared after her, I noticed, sharply, against the top step, a long black streak. Funny place for a black streak. Then I began to feel shaken, as if I had just been slapped across the face.

I turned toward the kitchen, and Daddy handed me his glass. He spoke without looking up. "Maybe, some Sunday, we could drive to the shore and you could take one of your girl friends with you." At his offering of "second best" I tried hard to sound pleased. "That would be fun," but the words stuck in my throat and I choked.

Setting the glasses down hard in the kitchen sink, I cracked one of them and tossed it into the waste basket. I would have to tell Catherine I couldn't make it. That voice still stung in my ears, with the flat "No, we won't discuss it!" just as if I were a ten-year-old, asking for money to go to the movie.

Well, next year, I would graduate from college. Next year, things would certainly be different.