

Foreword

I'm not sure what it is about being an author, but as soon as you've written a book or two people start to think that you know some secret formula of how to get a book into the hands of readers. In fact, I've been cornered dozens of times to hear about *a great book idea* and have been handed manuscripts in various forms *to see what I think*.

Usually, I get to around the third paragraph on the first page and know that this book "doesn't fit our...um...er...distinct criteria" of encouraging parents in what's most important.

From our first contact, Charity Hawkins (that's her pen name), distinguished herself from the crowd. Maybe it was her sincerity to partner with us, her well-thought-through idea that she presented us with, or the chocolate she included for our reading enjoyment that set her apart, but we decided to look through her manuscript. I must admit that in the back of my mind I was thinking, *That's the end of that...even though she is sincere*.

At the time we were up to our eyeballs in our speaking tour, zigzagging across the country in our big RV filled with all eight of our children. Behind the wheel, I was certainly in no position to look over a manuscript, but one day as we were tooling down the highway I looked over at my wife, who was riding shotgun, and saw her open a large, three-ring binder.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

She told me she was going to start reading Charity's manuscript. *That won't last long*, I thought. For a little while my wife read in silence and then... she laughed...outloud.

I was shocked because my wife is a tough customer and doesn't laugh easily when she reads. A thought crept into my head—perhaps this book is different. I'm not sure if I said anything at that moment but after her second laughter outburst, I asked her what was so funny.

She relayed a couple of humorous stories, but what my wife was most struck by was the realness with which the author wrote (something we hold as a premium). There was no pretense, expert advice, or lofty goals...just a fellow mom who experiences firsthand,

the hard, hilarious, and rewarding life of trying to homeschool her children.

As my wife talked, I could tell she was hooked. In fact, over the next few days, each time she settled into her RV seat she leaned over and picked up Charity's book.

I was sold. Any book that captured my wife's attention and encouraged her in her homeschool journey like this one did was a book I wanted to get into the hands of other moms.

So, Familyman Ministries is pleased to present you with the novel, "The Homeschool Experiment." Within these pages, you will meet a normal mother of normal children facing a normal, chaotic year of trying to figure out what it means to homeschool and love her family.

It's not always pretty...and that's why my wife likes this book. It tells it like it is and serves as a reminder that she's not alone in her struggles and frustrations. When you read it from someone else's perspective, it helps you to laugh and see things more clearly.

That's my hope for you, the reader, that when you close this book you'll know what matters most. Our desire is that this book will spark some great conversations in your homeschool circles as well (to help you, we've included some discussion questions in the back).

You've heard enough from me. Let me introduce you to Julianne Miller, who is sure to become a good friend. You're going to love her Homeschool Experiment.

—Todd Wilson
"The Familyman"
Familyman Ministries

~ May ~

2010 Homeschool Convention Shopping List

Daniel (6 years old, First Grade)

- Phonics/spelling
- Math
- anything else ?

Joy (4 years old, Preschool)

- Preschool Workbook
- anything else?

Baby Michael

- what do I do with him during school?

Wal-Mart

- diapers
- milk
- toilet paper
- Diet coke

Julianne Miller

"Hello. May I help you?" asks the woman at the first booth I approach in the noisy Oklahoma City Convention Hall. She is wearing a pink sweater set and a string of pearls.

"Um, yes, I was just wondering about—well—I mean, what is Classical Advantage?" I ask, reading the banner above her head. I want my children to have an advantage. Don't I?

"We are a group of homeschoolers that meets each week to do our classical memory work together." The woman beams at me. "Here is what we will cover in Section 8 next year."

She hands me a flyer and I read:

History—Ancient Greece to the Fall of Rome

Latin—Declensions

Math—Geometric Formulas

Grammar—Prepositions and Diagramming

My head swims. Wait a second—this must be for highschoolers. Whew!

"Oh, sorry!" I laugh. "My son will only be in first grade and my daughter will be in preschool. Where's that level?"

"Actually, your son and daughter are still in the Grammar stage," the woman explains, gesturing to a thick binder, "so they *would* be memorizing this material. You'd be amazed at how well the kids do and how much they like it."

She pushes a laptop toward me. "Here's one of our four-year-old students."

She clicks on the YouTube video, and I see a cute girl in pigtails lisping, "Alexander the Great, the son of Philip of Macedon, was born in 356 BC. He used his tactical prowess to wage a series of successful military campaigns in Asia Minor, eventually conquering Persia and expanding the Macedonian Empire."

Oh, that's funny! This is sort of a strange place for a joke, but clearly it can't be...I mean...a four-year-old? That girl can't really have memorized—

The lady is waiting for my reaction. Okay, I think this is for real.

"Wow, impressive," I say weakly. The pigtailed girl is now twirling around in a circle with her arms out saying, "Latin noun endings, first declension: *-a, -ae, -ae, -arum, -ae, -is, -am, -as, -a, -is.*"

"But, ah, do you think she knows what she's saying?"

"That's actually not our focus at this age," the woman explains to me, as if she's heard that question many times. "We're just filling the mind full of information. Kids this age love to learn facts and parrot them back. The understanding comes later, in the Logic and Rhetoric stages."

"Uh-huh. Okay, well, I'll take this flyer and think about it. Thanks very much!" As I slip away, I hear the girl's mom on the video coaching her, "Now, Campbell, can you say your South African Rivers?"

Seriously? My four-year-old still has long conversations with her stuffed animals and can't remember that Monday comes before Tuesday. If I have to teach her Latin declensions, I'm pretty sure my head will explode.

Where are the booths for normal children? I scan desperately around the crowded convention hall. Where are the people who tell me what to do with my six-year-old boy when he would rather play LEGOs than read, much less memorize South African Rivers?

I spot another booth with a large cardboard book for its sign. On the book's cover, hand-painted letters crookedly spell out, "A Natural Education." That sounds nice.

Okay, I don't exactly know what that means, but I like natural things. Like trees. Sky. And...education?

There's a rumpled-looking man in glasses and a polka-dot bow tie waiting for me.

"Hello!" I say. "What sort of things do you recommend for first-grade boys?"

"First grade?" he says sharply, looking at me as if I'd asked him what sort of body piercings he would recommend for children of that age. "Just let them play!"

"No, er, I mean for *school*," I explain. This is a homeschool convention, is it not?

"No need for 'school,'" he says, making quotation marks in the air with his hands. "Just read to him. Don't waste his time on meaningless busywork, like filling in worksheets. Take him on nature walks! Let him build forts in the living room! Let him race cars on ramps on your stairs! When my children were six and eight, they built a castle out of tree branches in the backyard and played in it every day for months!"

"Really? How did you mow your lawn?"

"Oh, we didn't worry about the lawn! Which is more important—allowing your children's imagination to grow and flourish or having your grass cut?"

"Um, the imagination one," I say, though I think my husband, John, would beg to disagree. The one time I persuaded him to let the grass grow so our backyard would be "more like the country," we got a grass snake and lots of angry weeds. He likes a nice, neat lawn.

"Right!" the man says triumphantly. "Here, you need this." He presses a spiral-bound booklet into my hands. "These are the books to read to your son."

"Actually, I have three children. I also have a daughter who's four and a baby who's one, and I—"

"Wonderful! Start them early! Read to them three hours every day if you can. The books listed here in bold are the ones

you *must* read, and all the others are ones you *have* to read. It's only seven dollars."

"Okay," I say, pulling out a twenty. I could use a list of great books, plus I don't think he'll take no for an answer. As he makes change, I flip the booklet open. There must be a thousand books listed in here!

Ages 5–8:

Treasure Island, unabridged

Oliver Twist, unabridged

Swiss Family Robinson, unabridged

I'm sure these are great and all, but Daniel barely listens to an entire Bible story without falling off the couch. I don't think we're ready for Dickens. On the other hand, I don't want illiterate children. I'll give it a shot.

"Thank you." I take the booklet and slip it into my convention tote. "Now, what about, you know, phonics and math and stuff?"

"Wait until he's nine." The man waves his hand in the air. "At least. Just read—give him great literature—it will cover everything. He'll pick up reading on his own. No need to have him write yet. And for math, he can count pinecones and acorns."

"Uh-huh." I say. "Okay, thanks!" I back away imagining what John might say if I told him we were just going to read and count acorns for school next year. Right. Perhaps A Natural Education is not the best plan for us either.

I'm starting to get a headache, but I can't give up. I *have* to find something that will work! I see a cute family—parents with eight children trailing behind, in matching jumpers (girls) and vests (boys), like ten adorable homeschool ducks. Everyone seems to have it all together. How have I been doing this for nearly two years and still don't know what I'm doing? Last year was Daniel's kindergarten year, so it wasn't too bad, but first grade is starting to feel overwhelming to me.

I try to ignore the pounding in my head. There has *got* to be a curriculum that is fun to do but will still give the kids a great education. I look up, and in the middle of the convention center, I see it: An immense, gauze butterfly suspended above a circular booth. Under the butterfly a banner reads: "Exploring God's Creation—A Hands-On Curriculum." This must be it! I make my way over.

"Can I help you?" asks a middle-aged woman in a khaki skirt. She looks nice. Like an experienced mom who knows what I should do.

"Yes, I hope so. I've got a first grader, a preschooler, and a baby—well, really he'll be a toddler—and I don't know where to start, and I don't know what to do with each of them, and what about my toddler?" I realize I sound a bit panicked, so I take a deep breath. "Could you tell me about your program, please?"

She smiles calmly at me, "Oh, I've got just the thing for you. What we have is a curriculum that is very hands-on so your toddler would be in the high chair while you and your first grader make a cookie map of ancient Egypt. Then you'll frost the cookie and put on the Nile River in sparkly, blue frosting.

"Another day you'll make a clay pot with homemade play dough. Then you'll weave river reeds together and pound them flat to make papyrus, and then your son will write Egyptian hieroglyphics on the papyrus and put it in the pot. He'll be practicing fine motor skills, handwriting, history—everything rolled into one."

I don't know how Daniel would handle writing hieroglyphics, considering he still reverses an occasional *s* or *j* in the regular old English alphabet. And I'm not quite sure where I'd find river reeds to weave together. Other than that though, this sounds great.

I picture us in the kitchen making our little clay pots. I'd be wearing my Williams Sonoma flowered apron, and Joy and Michael would be playing with the play dough. We'd probably be listening to Mozart. And how fantastic to learn all about ancient Egypt! Daniel would be so advanced!

"Okay!" Exploring God's Creation sounds like a lot of fun, and this friendly lady seems so sure it would work well for us. "How much is it?"

"Well, you would need Grade 1 SuperCore, and that includes your teacher's notes and planner, a phonics and reading program, a history notebook and timeline, an ant farm for science, and seeds to start your own garden. Oh, and counters and Unifix cubes for math manipulatives..."

I actually have no idea what Unifix cubes are, but everyone keeps talking about them, so they must be important. I am nodding my head and tune back in as she finishes:

"...All that together is only \$459, but we offer a 10 percent discount for convention attendees, and you don't pay shipping of course, so it's a wonderful deal. Now remember, your preschooler can do this too, so everyone is covered. We accept check, cash, or debit card."

Four *hundred* and fifty-nine dollars? For first grade? I can only imagine the look on John's face if he heard that. But, this *is* our children's education we're talking about. If we enrolled them in Redbud Academy, the tuition would be way more than this. Really, this is a bargain!

"I need to talk it over with my husband first," I tell her. "But I'm very interested. Thank you so much!"

I just have to sit down and think for a minute. And I need a Diet Coke.

"Hey, Lisa, can I join you?" I ask, as I plop my convention tote on the table in the convention hall's food court. Lisa and I drove here together from Tulsa this morning. She's got seven kids—all sweet little things—and has been homeschooling forever, so she pretty much knows everything. She still likes to come to the convention, though, to hear the speakers and get motivated for the next year.

"Sure," she says. "I need a break from this catalog anyway. My head's starting to hurt." Lisa sets down the Sonlight catalog, pushes her glasses up on top of her curly black hair, and rubs her eyes.

"Oh, man, no kidding." I twist open my three-dollar bottle of Diet Coke and massage my temples. "I'm totally confused now. That Exploring God's Creation program looks really good, but it's like four hundred dollars, and I'm not sure if it's exactly right. Then, this other man said I just need to read to them a lot and let them play. But then am I a slacker if I'm not teaching them Latin? *Should* I be teaching them Latin?"

"Do you want to teach them Latin?" Lisa asks.

"Uh, no." Is that a trick question? "I think if I can do the basics and keep my sanity, I'll be doing well. But I'm not even sure what the basics are anymore. Don't I have to do math in first grade?"

"Well, I'll tell you what I think," Lisa begins.

I settle back and help myself to some of Lisa's nachos. I wish I could download the entire contents of her brain into mine, but this is a start.

"You have to do what works for you. There is no way that you can do what everyone says you *should* do. No school can either, by the way. You have to choose an approach that fits your personality and works for your children. You can't feel guilty about what you choose not to do. Some of my friends

love the structure of the Classical approach. It makes me break out in hives.

"Then the whole hands-on thing—I have friends, very organized and conscientious people, who did the kindergarten program and *loved* it. They are the kinds of people who have clean closets and can follow directions well. Or they have one child. I am not such a person.

"I bought that hands-on curriculum back when I only had three kids. I remember the time we were supposed to be making a pot out of homemade play dough. Hannah was tired of being in her high chair since we had just finished breakfast, so she was whining. While I was trying to keep her happy, Jonah dropped the entire bag of flour, and it puffed up in a huge white cloud. The whole kitchen was covered in flour, but I was determined to keep going. Then Sarah spilled her juice, which mixed with the flour and turned everything into sticky clumps of yellow paste. Without thinking, I told the kids to go to the other room, so they did, but they walked *right through the mess* and tracked gooey footprints into the living room.

"I had to put the baby in a sling, because she was screaming at that point. I was thinking, 'Why in the world did I not buy Play-Doh at Walmart?' Anyway, the kids ended up watching *Mr. Rogers* and *Reading Rainbow* while I finished mopping the kitchen and vacuuming the living room. Then I was so tired, and the baby was so cranky that I put us all in the car, and we went on a little road trip to Sonic."

"Isn't Sonic the best?" I break in. "And McDonald's. I mean, I feel like such a bad mom for saying it, but it's true! When everyone's stressed out, the baby can go to sleep, the kids can have chicken nuggets, and I can listen to NPR and get a Diet Coke."

"I know!" Lisa says, with wide eyes. "McDonald's breakfasts – you drive up and give them money, and they just

hand you food! Pancakes, piping hot! Nothing to clean up, people strapped in their seats, and you get to sit there and eat. Such a lovely thing. Of course, now," she wrinkles her nose, "with seven kids and me, it's like twenty dollars for breakfast, so we don't go there so much."

Ooh, that's something to consider. The more kids I have, the less McDonald's I'll be able to afford. I make a mental note to think about that later. And what about Starbucks? It's already getting expensive, what with my latte and the kids' vanilla milks, and then Daniel always wants a piece of banana chocolate chip coffee cake, and Joy always wants a slice of pumpkin loaf. So I get it for them. Is that so wrong? Anyway...homeschooling. Yes, where were we?

"I learned that I'd rather teach my kids a couple of basic lessons and then be done with school for the day," Lisa is saying. "Simple works best for me. I mean, when a curriculum says 'hands-on,' think about whose hands they mean. Yours. And my hands are pretty busy, so the less extra work they have to do, the better. In fact, my kids are pretty good at coming up with their own hands-on projects, if I give them some cardboard boxes and masking tape.

"We did projects when they were young, but not every day," Lisa continues. "You really don't have to cover ancient Egypt in first grade unless you feel like it, or are one of those legendary people whose toddlers are perfectly behaved while the older kids do school. It was just too much work for me, honestly."

Well, this is good to hear. If Supermom says it was too much work for her, I'm guessing it might be tough for me as well. "So what did you do?"

"Well, I resold my entire curriculum at a homeschool used-book fair, and got half the money back, and then I went to Mardel and bought a first-grade math workbook and a first-grade

spelling workbook. We did those, and read library books, *a lot of library books.*"

Saying Lisa likes to read is like saying Siberia can get chilly. She had to get a library card for each of her kids when they were toddlers, because the Tulsa library *only* lets you check out fifty books at a time on each card, and she pushes her books in a stroller because carrying them all in a bag throws out her back. If she's reading a good book, it can be three o'clock in the afternoon before she remembers details like lunch.

Lisa goes on, "But, remember, you do have a six-year-old boy. His attention span is short, and he probably won't sit still very well. Put in lots of breaks so the kids can play, but an hour of seatwork during the whole day won't hurt Daniel."

"Okay, but that man told me that worksheets will ruin Daniel's brain!"

Lisa snorts. "Then all our brains would be ruined, right? We all did worksheets. Look, I'm not saying do them four hours a day, but a book to give you guidance on what you should be teaching your children isn't a bad thing. I bought cheap a math and spelling workbook, but any standard one would work – Saxon, A Beka, Bob Jones. The kids are going to have to learn how to sit at a desk and write at some point. You're teaching self-control as much as anything. Sitting still and doing what Mom says is a big part of what they're learning here."

"What about science and history? Do I need a separate curriculum?" I have so much to figure out.

"Well, what we do is—wait. You don't need to think about that yet. Just start with the basics: Bible, reading, phonics/spelling, and math. Simpler is better at the beginning. Plan on three twenty minute sessions a day.

Once you and the kids are in a good routine, you can add more."

"Okay," I sigh. "But what if I completely mess up first grade? What if I ruin Daniel for life?"

"Oh, well, at least you're not blowing things out of proportion." Lisa says with a raised eyebrow. "Jules, look how well you did this past year, even with a new baby to take care of! You taught Daniel to read, when he was *four*, no less."

"Well, he pretty much picked it up on his own..." I protest.

"No, you worked with him a lot, and then he picked it up. You taught him phonics, and checked out those phonics books at the library, and practiced three-letter short-vowel words in the grocery store. I remember."

Oh yeah. That's true. I guess I did.

"And you kept working on his handwriting with him even when *Handwriting Without Tears* turned into many, many tears," she points out.

True. Every time I made him sit down with a pencil, Daniel felt that the world was full of injustice. Even with the best curriculum, we still had lots of tears. Lots of phone calls to Lisa after those mornings.

"And you read Joy all those beautiful *Five in a Row* picture books and helped her finger paint. Oh, and let's not forget—nursed and diapered and took care of Michael."

This is true also. Why do I doubt myself so much? I need Lisa to come live in my house and be my cheerleader.

Or maybe she could come over and teach my kids. That would be awesome!

But no, her seven children might miss her. So I guess it's up to me.

"You'll be fine," Lisa promises me. "Here, let me pray for you, then you can go buy your stuff."

"That would be great," I sigh, feeling so much better already.

"Father, we thank you for our precious children who you have entrusted to us. We pray for wisdom as you guide us. Help us to know what's best for each of them and for our families. I pray you would help Julianne trust in your guidance and know that 'all of her children would be taught by the Lord and great would be the peace of her children.' Help us follow you faithfully, even though we, like Abraham, might not know where we are going. You do. Thank you, Lord. Amen."

I am crying now, sniffing and wiping my nose. I am such a crier. Lisa laughs at me and finds a tissue in the bottomless bag she always has. "Now, go buy your stuff. Have fun."

"Yeah, right," I say. Okay, maybe it will be a little fun.

"Call me when you're ready for dinner," Lisa says, and she returns to eating nachos and circling books in her catalog.

After the conference, Lisa and I eat dinner at a Mexican restaurant. (We seem to consume vast quantities of cheese and chocolate whenever we get together.) Then we get stuck in a traffic jam on the turnpike back to Tulsa, so we get lots of extra kid-free time to talk. I pick up my car from her house and drive home. I'm thinking over the day and all the decisions I've had to make.

It certainly would be easier if John and I would enroll our kids at Redbud Academy, the sweet private Christian school down the street from us. Lots of our friends send their children there, and those kids seem to be doing so well; they are polite, darling, literate children. I'd love to have my kids turn out like that. Why am I doing this homeschooling thing again?

Oh, right, John wanted me to try it. He has so few strong opinions, but go figure, he had an opinion about homeschooling. Something in me wants to try it too. So I'll try it. If it doesn't work out, Redbud is a good Plan B.

I've kept a list of all my purchases.

Daniel

- Math workbook	\$19
- Math speed drills	\$5
- Spelling and poetry workbook (A Beka)	\$29
- Reading book (A Beka)	\$19
- Grammar (Rod and Staff)	\$8
- Botany (Apologia)	\$30
- Unifix cubes	\$16
- Human anatomy puzzle (Melissa & Doug)	\$19
- Easy reader books - I'll get at the used-book fair	

Joy

- Numbers workbook (Rod and Staff)	\$3
- Letter workbook (Rod and Staff)	\$3
- Math: teddy bears	\$20
- Science: butterfly house	\$20
<i>(Lisa said fennel attracts butterflies.)</i>	
- Pegs with shapes (Laurie)	\$10
- Wooden pattern blocks	\$15

Michael

- Ball (He needs a present too!)	\$5
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John

- <i>Help! I'm Married to a Homeschooling Mom!</i> book	\$10
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Total Cost: \$231

Not bad! I think my accountant husband will be impressed.

Thinking about all this fun new stuff is cheering me up. Next year is going to be great! I'm still going to let the kids play

in the backyard, go on nature walks, do wonderful imaginative things, and help me in the kitchen. I just want to make sure they can read, write, and count as well as—okay, better than—other kids.

And get admitted to Harvard. Not that they'd *want* to go there, but it would be nice to have the option. Also, I wouldn't complain if one of them were a Rhodes Scholar. I'd like to visit Oxford.

And really—how hard can first grade be? We did okay with kindergarten, as Lisa pointed out.

I was my high school valedictorian and a National Merit Scholar. I graduated from college with honors and had a successful career in the business world for five years. I can surely manage first grade and preschool. Last year was just hard because of the baby and sleep deprivation.

This whole homeschooling thing is going to be a piece of cake.

~ June ~

Let's have a ball!



What: Michael's 1st birthday

Where: The Millers' House

When: Friday, June 11
12-2 p.m.

No gifts please -
your presence is enough!



R.S.V.P. to Julianne

At least the boys are having fun. I'm in the backyard with my kids and their cousins, Maddie and Drew. Drew is a few months older than Daniel; Maddie's ten but she thinks she's sixteen and seems bored by everything.

"What are we supposed to *do*?" she asks, after giving our backyard a once-over.

"Whatever you want!" I smile cheerily at her. "You can draw with chalk or jump on the trampoline, or play with Joy." Joy is cooking for her dogs, Bis-kette and Dee-Dee, in her playhouse.

"You could play with the boys on the fort." I knew she wouldn't go for that one. The boys, as usual, are playing a game involving shooting things and whacking each other with sticks. They usually get a bit wild, and their games often end in tears. "Or you can sit here and talk with us!"

"Yeah, right." Maddie snorts and rolls her eyes. "I'll go text some of my friends." She finds a chair on the side of the patio, plops down, and buries herself in her iPhone.

I can't believe her parents gave her an iPhone. *I* don't even know how to use an iPhone. Granted, I'm the most technologically backward person I know and have no desire to use phones for anything other than calling people, but still. "You still don't know how to text?" my friends are always asking. Yes, well. I have lived thirty-four years without texting and seem to be managing.

John's brother, Dave, and his wife, Ginger, drove up from Dallas with Maddie and Drew for Michael's party. I have to admit I was a little surprised. They usually can't be bothered with such minutia, but I guess since we haven't seen them since Christmas, they decided to come. John's parents, Frank and

Vicky, also came up from Highland Park, their exclusive neighborhood in the heart of Dallas. John's family is very, well, um... rich. And mine is...not so much. The family dynamics can get a bit strange, but mostly everyone gets along.

My parents flew in from Midland, way out in West Texas, and my sister, Holly, is on her way up from Austin. Texas will be well represented at the party.

None of Michael's three baby friends who we invited could come, and all of our family (who I mostly invited as a formality) decided to come. If I would have known that, I might have put a little more thought into the party. John's family is used to the over-the-top birthday parties that people throw in Highland Park. Oh well.

At least John cleaned up the backyard for the occasion. It's always covered in trash that the kids commandeer for their imaginary stories. Daniel wouldn't let John clean up a big tangled ball of string hanging from the pear tree because it's his "net for catching robot bears." He and Joy have involved battles with these robot bears.

"All right, I'll leave the net," John said earlier as he looked around, as if seeing the back patio for the first time. He's been working a lot, so he actually hasn't been out here much.

"Why are there diaper boxes all over the patio? This is ridiculous." He started picking them up.

"No, Daddy! Wait!" Daniel's blue eyes widened in alarm. "Those are for my secret hideout!" He is a type A personality and builds things constantly, which is great for his imagination and all, but slightly annoying when we have to take his creation apart, and he starts freaking out.

"Can I at least move them to the side of the house?" John asked me.

"Yes, that's fine," I said, giving Daniel a look, since I could tell he was about to protest. "Guys, help Daddy move these

over by the fence. And move the rocket too, okay?" The "rocket" is an old refrigerator box with fire drawn on the bottom and a window cut out of the side.

"Yes, ma'am," Daniel muttered but dropped his head and looked as woeful as if his dog had just died. He's a bit dramatic.

"Great," John said, as the boxes were hauled off. "That's better. Except for that pole. Can I get rid of it yet?"

The pole is part of a basketball goal that we got for free a few years ago. At the time, I thought it would be great to set it up but have since realized we have nowhere to put it. Plus, the backboard kept giving us fiberglass splinters. The pole is lying on the ground behind the shed and the kids have been using it as a balance beam, which actually works quite well, since the huge cylinder of concrete around the base holds it in place.

"The kids use it as their balance beam," I said weakly, realizing I sounded a lot like Daniel.

"Honey, they can use plenty of other things as a balance beam. They can walk on the railroad ties or the curb or the crack in the sidewalk. Or, you know, the *actual* balance beam at their *actual* gymnastics class that we are paying for?"

"Okay. That's fine," I said quickly. I was willing to sacrifice the pole so we didn't have to discuss the cost of their gymnastics classes again. "But, it's behind the shed anyway, so no one will see it today. Look how good the yard looks, honey!" John looked around and decided it was acceptable.

Now, I survey the yard again and must say, it does look pretty great. The yellow roses along the back fence are in full bloom. I guess it was worth scratching my arms bloody on their thorns when I planted them last spring. The grass is green and freshly mowed and our cute, raised-bed garden is leafy with spinach and lettuce and beans. Actually, the arugula is getting a bit wilted now with the June heat, but still, it looks very organic of us. My sister will be proud.

Ever since her daughter was born nine months ago, my sister, Holly, has been in a health-nut-mommy-blogger phase. Where is she anyway? Her plane was supposed to have landed at 10:45. Gardening was not something Holly and I ever learned in Midland, out in the flat, cracked desert of West Texas. Midland was perpetually dry and hot, so when I first saw Tulsa's green trees and rolling hills I fell in love.

Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* could easily have been inspired by Northeastern Oklahoma. Spring crashes in with thunderstorms of light and glory. Tornado sirens send us scurrying to eat our dinner in the closet, and then months of tree blossoms erupt overnight—each morning as I drive down the street, I see gifts anew. Summer nights lilt along, warm and slow; I sit watching my husband and children chase fireflies through the darkening yard. In the fall, the horizon shimmers with leafy flames of gold and scarlet: maples, Bradford pears, sweet gums. And, in the winter, when the snow gusts past the bony branches of the sycamore trees, I can cuddle inside with my family by firelight and candle-glow, like a cozy picture on a blue Delft Christmas plate.

Because I grew up in Midland, where the seasons alternated between hot with green grass and warm with brown grass, I'm continually astonished by the changing seasons. I'm shocked and gasping when we drive down the streets in the spring: "Look at that tree! Oh, guys, look out Joy's window; look at that pink dogwood! It's just *gorgeous!*"

Right now, Joy is still busily cooking imaginary food in her playhouse, periodically interrupting Maddie's texting to ask if she wants invisible pancakes or an invisible ham sandwich for lunch. Maddie is at least doing her part by ordering and pretending to eat, which is uncharacteristically involved of her. Dave and Frank are over on the corner of the patio, probably wishing they had a stiff drink. John brought them Dr Peppers.

I'm here at the table with Ginger and Vicky. There are some benefits to having so many adults around. My parents are in the house to hear Michael when he wakes up from his nap, so I am just sitting here with nothing to do. It's great.

Vicky watches the kids play for a bit, and then asks casually, "So, Julianne, are you tired of homeschooling yet? Or ... ?" She lets the question hang, hoping I'll jump in. I don't. "Or...are you going to keep going?"

Here we go again. I try to not sigh. "No, we're going to do it again next year." I force a smile, bracing myself for what's coming.

"I just don't know how you do it with three kids!" Vicky says, looking worried for me, or maybe for the kids. "It seems so hard!"

"It was, especially with a new baby, but it was a good year too." The homeschool support group I'm in has lots of women with four, eight, or even ten kids, and all those women are still alive. I want to tell Vicky this, but I don't. That will only scare her even more.

"You know," Vicky adds, biting her lower lip, "my friend volunteers at a junior high. She was telling me that a seventh-grader recently enrolled after being homeschooled. She said he was way behind academically."

I'm waiting, thinking she has a point. Nope, I guess that's it.

"And she said he was behind socially too." Vicky shakes her head sadly.

These comments are *so* helpful. Thanks, Vicky, for that vote of confidence. You don't even know that kid, and yet he's your benchmark, rather than all the homeschooled kids who are above average? Breathe. Smile.

"Yes," I say, as politely as I can manage. "I'm sure that happens sometimes. Excuse me, I'm going to get a few things ready inside."

As I get up, Vicky and Ginger start discussing Dalton Prep, the private school that Maddie and Drew attend. At least Vicky is happy about that.

Even though I'm used to Vicky's comments, I'm still annoyed by them. I go into the kitchen and get out plates and forks, slamming them down on the counter a little harder than I intend.

What Vicky doesn't understand is how all this talk of how hard homeschooling is, how I can quit any time, all of this makes me even more determined to do it. I have a slight stubborn streak. And I like to prove people wrong.

I think of the time my fourth-grade teacher told me Longfellow's *Paul Revere's Ride* was too long to memorize. Within the next two weeks, I had memorized all one hundred and thirty lines of it and recited it to her at recess, just to prove I could. It irritates me when people say I can't do something.

Okay, deep breaths, Julianne. Vicky isn't saying you're a bad mother; she's only wanting the best for her grandchildren. Vicky and Ginger are nice women who love their families. We are all on the same team here.

After calming down a bit, I go outside with the plates and forks. Ginger and Vicky are discussing how exhausted they both are.

"Luisa had to take the week off last week, so I had the kids all day, every day!" Ginger is moaning.

Yes, welcome to my world.

"Oh, you poor thing!" Vicky commiserates. "I understand! Maria had to take care of her grandchildren, so I was stuck arranging everything for this trip, getting the house ready, everything all by myself!"

What, packing for two? Vicky has had Maria as her housekeeper for at least thirty years. In fact, both John and Dave invited Maria's family to their weddings. Even when her children were young, Vicky was always quite busy with her PTA projects and Junior League meetings and needed Maria at least four days a week. So I can see how details like laundry and packing might be a bit baffling to her.

Vicky looks dressed for a yacht trip right now, in her white-and-navy-striped boat shirt (Talbot's, I'm guessing) and navy capris. She's almost sixty but is one of those women who looks unfailingly put together and beautiful.

And thin. Annoyingly thin. Once we were visiting for Christmas, and all of us swore the scale was broken, but Vicky stepped on and chirped, "Nope. One hundred and seven, like always!"

Ginger always looks perfect too. I try not to hold it against her. Today, her long auburn hair is swirling around her shoulders; she's wearing huge fashionable sunglasses and diamond stud earrings.

I feel a bit frumpy next to them. I still have fifteen pounds to lose of Michael's baby weight. With the other two kids I tried to have the weight off by the first birthday party, but this time it didn't happen. Part of it is—I have no time to work out. Part of it is lack of sleep. And the rest—I don't know. I'll get there. It might just take me a little longer than planned. And, I have to remind myself, Vicky and Ginger have housekeepers, nannies, and this mysterious thing called Free Time. I do not.

"Love the Escalade!" Vicky is saying now. "Laura has one just like that!" "Laura" is Laura Bush, who lives near them and attends the same Methodist church. I doubt "Laura" would recognize Vicky by name, but Vicky manages to speak of her as if they were best friends.

"Yes, we love it too," Ginger says. "We needed more room. The kids were always fighting over which DVD to watch. This one has two DVD players so each of them can watch their own movie. We hardly heard a peep out of them the whole way up here! In fact, we are considering—gasp—*driving* to California this summer!"

"Hold on a minute, there," Dave interrupts as he and Frank walk up. "Nobody said anything about driving." John comes out the door with a plate of fruit to set on the table.

"I said considering. We are *considering* it. I am, anyway. I detest flying. All that waiting in lines and keeping the kids quiet on the plane. Ugh."

"Oh, I totally agree." On this, Ginger and I are soul sisters. "Flying is the worst torture for parents. It's evil. If everything goes well, you're fine. But if something goes wrong and someone has a meltdown..."

"You're dead," Ginger finishes.

"Dead. It's over." I pour myself a Diet Coke. "The whole plane ride you are stuck with a screaming child and two hundred strangers who hate your guts. I've told you about my trip to Chicago, right?"

"What happened?" Vicky looks terrified. I think the thought of flying with one child without a nanny is horrifying enough to her.

"Total meltdown. I was five months pregnant with Joy; Daniel was about eighteen months old. We were going to watch John run the Chicago Marathon, but he was on a different flight so I had Daniel by myself. I don't think I had told Daniel 'no' or 'sit still' very much until that point. These were completely foreign concepts to him. Right after takeoff he started screaming his head off. The lady in front of us changed seats because he was kicking the back of her chair so much. He was literally on

the floor for most of the flight. Businessmen were glaring at me. I felt awful. There's nothing you can do at that point."

"Nothing," Ginger echoes.

"A wonderful stranger ended up giving Daniel some cookies, which helped. Now, I'm prepared. I pack enough toys, DVDs, snacks, and drinks to last us for about three days. Just in case. I pack candy and cookies too, as a last resort."

"See, that's what I'm saying about flying!" Ginger tells Dave.

"Yeah, but driving? Do you know how many hours that is to California? It's probably two days," Dave argues.

"Two *days*? Oh." Ginger has never been very good at geography. She has a degree in Interior Design, but managed to get through high school and college without learning where those quiet states like Wisconsin or Idaho are. She never cared enough to figure it out.

"Where in California are you going?" John asks.

"Oh, Dave has this conference about—what is it, honey? Some accounting thing."

"Fraud."

"Right. Fraud. And since he's managing partner of his firm, he's decided to go," Ginger explains.

Dave is the older brother, and the first ten years out of college he practically gave up his life at a Big Eight accounting firm to get to the top. Even now, he puts in long hours and works weekends, something John doesn't want to do. John still does well, because he's a hard worker (and brilliant), but he isn't a partner like his older brother. Instead, he's the manager of the audit department at his firm. It's the choice he made.

Ginger continues, "So I thought the kids and I would tag along, go to Disneyland, lie on the beach. The town is close to Anaheim. Where is it again?"

"Dana Point?" John asks.

"Yes! That's it!" Ginger says. "How did you know that?"
How *did* my husband know that?

"Well, I forgot to tell you, Jules," John looks at me apologetically, "My boss asked if I'd want to go to that same conference. He wants me to represent the firm. Good networking, I guess."

Okay, these are the things I want to hear when I ask about his day. John "forgets" to tell me stuff all the time. I have to virtually pry it out of him. He is the quiet type, and he thinks no one would be interested in whatever he has to say. Small details like friends giving birth. People quitting. Trips to *California*.

"Okay, in the future," I say, trying not to nag him too much, especially in front of his family, "this is the sort of information I would like to know."

"I know, I know." John smiles at me with twinkling eyes. "So, wanna go?"

"Go where?" my mom asks, coming out of the house. She is holding Michael, who must have just woken up from his nap. His cheeks are rosy with sleep; his wispy, white-blond hair is sticking out all crazily in the back, like a soft circle of dandelion fluff. Is there anything more endearing than a rumped, nap-tender baby? Maybe a sleeping baby. Or maybe baby toes, like rows of perfect, tiny peas.

"Sweepy baby," I croon, scooping him up from my mom to cuddle him on my chest and kiss his warm cheeks. My dad hands over a sippy cup of milk. I snuggle Michael close to me. He peers out with eyes like big brown marbles, surveying all the activity.

"Where'd all these blond kids come from?" Dad asks. It's so weird—John and I both have brown hair, but all three kids are blondies.

John is tall and handsome, and he always tells me I'm beautiful, but I'd say I'm about average. Our children, however, are absolutely adorable, like three stair-stepped angels, with their dimples and button noses and doe eyes. When they're in a good mood, that is. When they're in a bad mood, they have furrowed brows and scowls and fire shooting from their eyes. It all depends on the day, really.

John fills in my mom and dad about the conference.

"I want to go," I say, "but it's so much *work*. Vacations are so exhausting. They aren't vacations at all for the mom. They're just a week of stress in a new place preceded and followed by a week of laundry."

"That's the spirit, honey," John laughs.

"Well, it's true! I'll be the one taking care of the kids, keeping them quiet in the hotel room, listening to tired, cranky little people who miss their own beds."

"You need a nanny." Ginger reaches for some grapes from the fruit plate John brought out with him. "Seriously. Then she can watch them and you can go to the spa. The conference is at this swanky resort."

"St. Regis Monarch Beach," Dave jumps in. "The one where all the AIG employees went days after the federal bailout. There was a huge public backlash."

"I remember that!" John said. "But I didn't realize this is where it was."

"Yeah. It's seriously nice. Five-star luxury resort."

"Ooh," Vicky is suddenly interested. "You *should* go, Julianne. You could use a break."

What is that supposed to mean? Vicky acts like being a full-time mother is such a terrible, exhausting job, as though she thinks I must be on the edge of a nervous breakdown at all times.

"At places like that they usually have babysitters on staff," Ginger tells me. "You can leave the kids in your room, and the babysitter keeps them busy. Last time Dave and I went to New York, we hardly even saw the kids except at breakfast."

Like I'm going to leave my kids in a hotel room with some person I've never met.

"But I like my kids. I want to do things with them if we go," I protest.

"I *like* my kids too!" Ginger bristles. Oh shoot, now I've offended her. "I'm just *saying*, it's a nice break, that's all."

"Jules, think of all the educational opportunities!" My mom is setting the table for pizza. "You could go to a museum, take the kids on a boat trip. When Dad and I went to Catalina Island, they had dolphin- and whale-watching cruises. You could count it as science."

Now that sounds awesome. Plus, it sounds a lot more fun than doing phonics and math at home.

We could do all kinds of educational things there. Forget about Disneyland. We could learn about oceanography, the history of westward expansion, Spanish missions in California. This could count as a *month* of school!

"Mom, I'm *starving*!" Daniel comes up with a red, sweaty face, and Drew follows him. "And I'm so thirsty. Can you get me some milk? I'm *so* thirsty!" Have I mentioned Daniel is dramatic?

"Yes, good idea!" I say to Daniel. "The juice boxes are on the island in the kitchen. Can you go get them and give one to each of the kids, please? That would be a nice way to serve your sister and cousins." I'm trying to have Joy and Daniel do more things for themselves and for other people instead of expecting to be waited on all the time. The thought that they can do things for themselves doesn't seem to occur to them.

"I want Sprite," Drew whines.

"No, honey. You have juice like the other kids," Ginger answers.

"Mom, we have Sprite at home all the time!" Maddie chimes in from across the patio. "We *always* have Sprite. We're not babies."

"Fine!" Ginger says. "But you'll have to pour it yourself."

"Way to hold the line, babe," Dave says.

Ginger shoots him a look. "They whine so *much*! I'm so tired of the whining! Do yours do that?" she asks me.

"Yeah," I say. "Sometimes they do." Especially when I give in to them, I think. But I better not say that. She's already annoyed at me.

"Julianne, the pizza's probably about done," my mom jumps in. "Are we almost ready to eat?"

"Yeah, we're going to have to go ahead. We can't wait for Holly anymore." Would you mind bringing it out?" My kids are sort of like time bombs, especially Daniel. If he doesn't eat every few hours, he melts down. He turns into this sullen, angry child. We call it a Hunger Crash. Joy has Tired Crashes. I can see the storm clouds brewing on their faces. If we know what's good for us we'd better feed these children.

Just then I hear a "Knock, knock!" from inside the house. My sister is coming through the front door. She joins us on the patio, giving Mom a hug on the way out.

Holly's mahogany hair is pulled back in a low ponytail. She's wearing Emma in a chic, paisley-patterned Moby sling. I tried to use those with all three of my babies, but I always felt like the baby was squashed up inside or about to fall out. I could never pull it off.

On Holly the sling looks perfect, though. She looks like a celebrity mom out for a trip to the Farmer's Market with her adorable matching baby.

"Sorry I'm late!" she chirps. "I had to pick up a few things at Whole Foods on the way here. But don't let me interrupt! Let's eat!"

John starts handing out pizza, and my mom gets Michael settled in his outdoor high chair. (We eat lunch outside a lot so we have an outdoor seat as well as an indoor one.)

"I just brought a few things for Emma," Holly says in a low tone to me while everyone's getting food. "We don't let her have pizza yet, so I got some tofu and baby food. I usually hate to buy baby food, but what are you gonna do?" she says, laughing.

Indeed. I hate that store-bought baby food too. Which is why we feed our baby pizza.

We sing "Happy Birthday" to Michael, who seems cheerfully confused by all the fuss, and he grins at all of us until John helps him blow out his candle. The kids made him carrot-applesauce cake—they saw it on *SuperWhy!*—and he gobbles it up. By the time he's done, he's got cream-cheese frosting and chocolate ice cream in his hair, but he's blissfully content. Then, he opens presents, with help from Daniel and Joy.

Dave and Ginger's gift is a Baby LeapPad, which is supposed to "give him a head start." Because I guess babies need a head start in computing or perhaps in texting their little baby friends. And they give him a one-hundred-dollar bill. For "whatever he wants."

Frank and Vicky give him a Jeep. A tiny, motorized version. They had it shipped to the Toys"R"Us here and picked it up when they got into town. Fabulous. He can drive around the neighborhood with his peeps.

Holly gives him a necklace of amber teething beads. "They release calming oils into the skin and help with teething," she said. "The oil is a natural painkiller. Emma's seemed to really help."

"Oh, look at that," my dad drawls when we put the necklace on. "Our little hippie!"

John doesn't seem too pleased with the hippie comparison, but I think Michael looks cute. Like a miniature surfer dude.

Daniel and Joy give Michael a special book: They collected pictures of family and familiar things around the house like a sippy cup, balls, and LEGOs (Daniel added that one), and then pasted the pictures onto construction paper. I covered the pages with contact paper, punched holes in them, and tied the book together with a ribbon. Daniel and Joy loved making something special, and Michael seems to love looking at all the familiar faces and toys.

My parents give him a cute wooden wagon for blocks. Into the wood is carved his name, then: "Happy First Birthday! Love, Poppy and Nana." Michael's present from John and me is a Little Tykes basketball goal, since he is obsessed with every kind of ball. That's one of the three words he can say. "Mah" for Momma and milk, "Da" for Daddy, and "bah" for ball. After John assembles it, Michael makes him and my dad play "bah," which means John and my dad shoot the ball and Michael claps and makes the sign for "more."

So much for the no gifts request on the invitation! No, I'm delighted everyone cared enough to come, and it's fine that they brought gifts. I might have to give the Baby LeapPad away, though. We have a policy of no

video games, and already Daniel and Joy have said, “Why does Michael get a video game? It’s not fair!”

After the party and a few more hours of hanging out, Dave and Ginger head off to the Radisson so Maddie and Drew can go swimming. Frank and Vicky leave for the McBirney Mansion, the historic local inn where they’re staying. I’m sitting in the kitchen with Holly and Dad and Mom while John puts the kids to bed.

“Whew! I’m exhausted!” I say, sinking back into the kitchen couch. Any kind of party wears me out, but especially draining are parties that involve babies, cake, and the extended Miller family.

“Barb, where’s my BlackBerry?” My dad looks around the kitchen. “I need to see what Light Sweet closed at today.”

“Check the carry-on bag.” My mom starts bagging up the leftover pizza.

My dad goes out to the living room. He is in oil, like most everyone in Midland, Texas. Or, the “awl bidness” as he says it, in his West Texas drawl. Dad checks the price of West Texas Intermediate light sweet crude like most people check the weather.

My mom starts wiping down the counters and waves me away as I start to get up and help, “Sweetie, you relax. I’ll clean up.” Bless her.

“Could you come live here?” I ask her. “Then the kitchen would be clean all the time.”

“Oh, you do a good job. It’s clean enough. It’s hard with three little people in it all day long.”

“No kidding,” I say. “I fantasize about sending them all off to school so I can clean the house and have it stay clean for more than twenty minutes.”

“Someday your house will stay clean, but you’ll miss holding your babies. It will come soon enough.” My mom starts to tear up. She always does that.

“Mom! No making us cry today!” I say reproachfully. I get emotional on birthdays. Last year our neighbor cut down a gorgeous sweet gum tree on Joy’s fourth birthday and I bawled. “We walked by that tree every *day* when she was a baby!” I sobbed to John. “And now it’s gone! It’s like the death of her *childhood*!” He wonders where the kids get their emotional streaks.

“Are you glad to have a break from school?” asks Holly, thankfully changing the subject.

“Absolutely. I can’t imagine being one of those people who homeschools through the summer. I was ready for the break. Last year was crazy—a new baby, a few trips, then the holidays, then John’s busy season at work. I felt like we never got a chance to catch our breaths.”

“I went to a homeschool convention last month, though, and bought all our curriculum, and this summer I’m going to get organized and ready to go. I think next year will be much better.”

“I heard Daniel doing double-digit subtraction.” My mom is loading the dishwasher. “He was saying something like, ‘There are seventy-two robot bears and only sixty-three children, so there are nine more robot bears than children! They are doomed!’ That’s pretty good for just finishing kindergarten.”

“That’s so cute!” Holly says. “They are very creative. Joy was pretending to cook for me all afternoon. She said, ‘Do you want pancakes or French toast?’ and when I said, ‘Pancakes, please,’ she acted very serious and said, ‘Oh, I’m so sorry. We’re all out of pancakes. How about French toast?’ She’s a hoot.”

“Yeah, somehow they manage to learn; I’m not sure how. Did you hear Vicky, though? Every time I see her, every single

time, she says, 'Are you still homeschooling?' with this worried look on her face like I'm going to ruin all of us. She always says, 'You can quit any time, you know.'"

"It's because Vicky can't fathom homeschooling," Holly says. "It's not her thing."

"Yes, and ultimately, it doesn't matter what she thinks, if it's what you think God wants you to do," Mom says in her gentle way. "If I please men, I would not be a bondservant of Christ." I know she is quoting Galatians 1:10; it's one of her favorite verses.

"I know, Mom. You're right. John thinks it would be good to homeschool and I want to try it too. It's just that Ginger is always talking about how fabulous Dalton Prep is, and Vicky thinks homeschooling is ridiculous. I feel like they are expecting me to fail. Or think I'm a freak."

"Which you are," Holly deadpans, and we all crack up. "Are you still boycotting Facebook, you weird girl?"

"Of course. Until the day I die. Why add one more time-sucking activity to my life? But look, I'm still here! You can still contact me in the form of an actual, real live person or by phone or by that old-fashioned method—email. I haven't vanished off the planet yet!"

"It's only a matter of time," Holly says. "So John was saying you might go to California! That's fun."

"Yes, and Mom was telling us about all the educational things to do there."

"Oooh, Jules!" Holly is getting an idea, I can tell. "I read this magazine article about a family that saved for, like, ten years, then took a whole year off and traveled the world. You could do that!"

"What could we do?" John asks, coming into the kitchen with Emma, asleep on his shoulder. He's so handsome when he's holding a baby.

"Oh yikes, she fell asleep on you?" Holly jumps up from her chair. "She must be exhausted. I'm going to go put her down. See you guys tomorrow." Holly slides Emma onto her shoulder and heads upstairs to the guest bedroom.

"Night, Holly." I say. "I'll fill you in later," I tell John. This Traveling-the-World idea might be a bit of a discussion.

"We'd better hit the road too," Dad says, coming into the kitchen. "We'll come over in the morning."

"Sounds good," I said. "See you then. Thanks for coming!" We give hugs all around and see them out. John and I go to bed.

As I lie in bed, I am picturing all the places our family could go on our trip around the world. I think Holly's plan is completely feasible.

John and I have been saving two hundred dollars a month in an educational account in case we decide to put the kids in private school. If I end up homeschooling, we could use that for our educational travel account. We could visit our friends who are missionaries in Kenya, or China, or France. Our kids could learn about other cultures while learning to serve the people there.

I was listening to the Rick Steves radio show the other day, and he was discussing a web site where you can rent houses abroad. There was one in Scotland that cost only eight hundred dollars a month! That would be completely within our budget.

You know, over the course of the kids' education we'd probably *save* money over private school. Private school would cost thousands of dollars a year for all three of them. This would be way less than that.

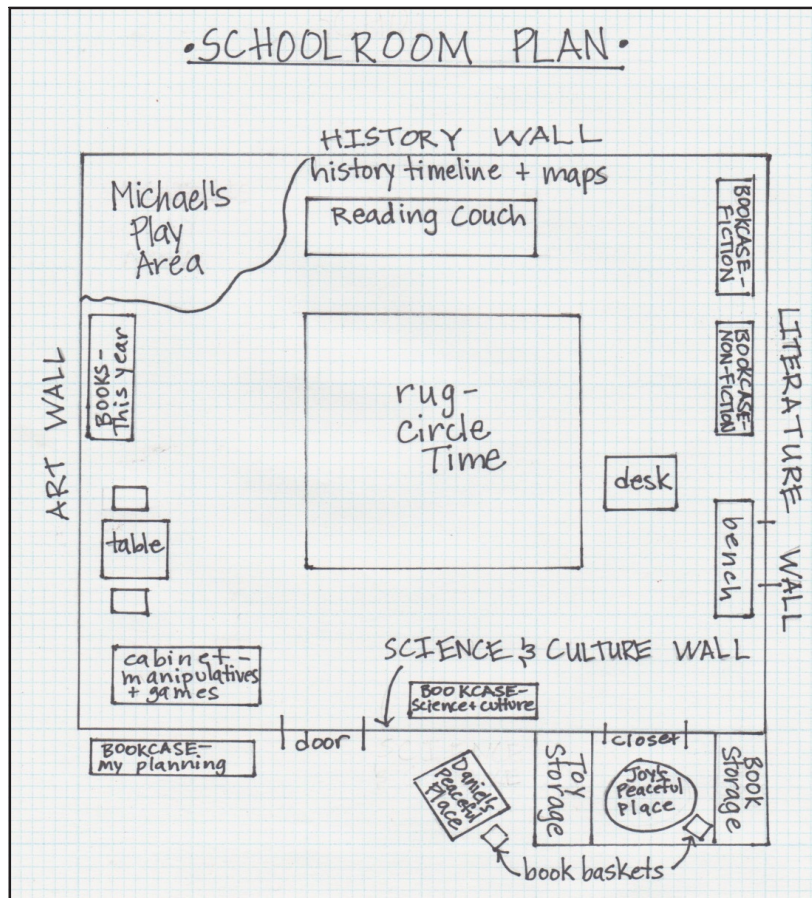
Oh wait. What about John's job?

He couldn't get off for a month at a time to travel. Maybe he could travel with us to our destination, and then the kids and I could stay as long as we want!

I can totally picture us coming out of our quaint Scottish cottage, and riding to town on our vintage bicycles for tea. My bicycle would have a woven basket, probably filled with lavender or whatever grows in Scotland. Heather? Yes, filled with heather, and we'd bring bread to feed the ducks on the way into town. Or maybe they don't have ducks there. Sheep, then. We'd feed the sheep and then bicycle in to town for tea. With cream. And scones.

I don't get it. Why doesn't everyone homeschool?

~ July ~



What a gorgeous afternoon—perfect for the sprinkler park on Riverside Drive. Cotton-ball clouds float overhead, and the Arkansas River sparkles happily along.

Michael is in a swim diaper (I forgot his swim trunks), sitting by the tiny fountains, trying to catch the glassy arcs of water as they bubble up from the ground. Daniel and Joy are playing with Vanessa's twins, all of them swinging like wet monkeys from the jungle gym.

Vanessa was my college roommate. She's in town for the day to help me in my quest to Become an Organized Person.

Not that I'm totally disorganized. I have some systems. Our clean laundry is sorted into pretty baskets in the laundry room, one for each person in the family. I have color-coded hooks hung in the garage for our coats. I purge the kids' rooms periodically and sort toys into plastic buckets that get rotated out.

The problem is—I'm outnumbered. My kids can make messes faster than I can clean. I feel like I keep getting farther and farther behind. The coloring sheets and artwork pile up, the bills need to be filed, and the car—well, let's not even talk about the car.

What I'm saying is: I've got to get organized this year and Vanessa's just the person to help me do it.

"I'm sort of compulsive about it," Vanessa said apologetically this morning in my kitchen.

"No, that's okay. I want to be compulsive too!" I earnestly told her. "Teach me how!"

Vanessa's home is very creative and colorful, but still clean. Simple. That's what I want. Not a lot of visual clutter clogging up my brain. Granted, Vanessa's twins are eight, and they go to school. And she doesn't have a toddler. But still, I figure I can learn some things.

Here are the three things she told me to work on:

1. **Routine.** John and I have to get in the habit of making our bed every day and picking up our room. (Okay, *I* have to get in the habit; it's usually my clothes strewn about.) Otherwise, how can I expect the kids to make their own beds and keep their rooms clean? This is a good point.

2. **Simplify.** I am supposed to clean out the kids' toys (again) and give, throw, or store away unnecessary stuff. (The question is when? Her kids are in school all day, and mine are here with me all day. I have to figure that part out.)

3. **Put things in their homes.** We are going to work on everything having a "home" and making sure we all put things in their homes. I have been letting the kids get away with leaving messes in their wakes, as if they were clothes- and shoe-spewing tornadoes.

I am going to turn the playroom into a schoolroom, and I'm sure it will help a lot, to have all our school stuff in one area instead of littered around the house. I've got the curriculum and other stuff from the convention arranged and ready to go.

I feel more organized already.

After our hard work this morning, Vanessa and I decided that we all deserved a trip to the park. We went through the McDonald's drive-through and got the kids Happy Meals and ourselves salads.

Now Vanessa and I are at the sprinkler park under the shade of a tree, lazily watching the kids. Lazily, in the sense of being prepared at any moment to jump up and grab a baby who's tipped over and could drown, while simultaneously checking on the big kids to make sure they don't break an arm. That Mom kind of lazy.

I forgot how people always stare at Vanessa. She looks a lot like Gwyneth Paltrow with long blonde hair and blue eyes, but she is quiet and unassuming. In college, total strangers used to stop her on the sidewalk and ask her out. It was unbelievable. And a bit annoying.

The thing I love about Vanessa, though, is that she always seeks God's will for her life and doesn't worry about what other people think. She got her degree in Music Performance and went to Nashville after school but never made it big. A lot of people thought she was crazy for pursuing that ("Do you know how hard it is to make it big in Christian music?") but she felt like God gave her the gift of her voice, and it was what He was leading her to do at the time. So she went.

While she was in Nashville, she worked at a print shop to pay the bills and learned a lot. She has a great eye for design, so now she does graphic design work from home while her kids are at school. She is always using her creativity to serve others, doing projects for her church or different ministries just to help them out. I'm constantly amazed by the creativity and brilliance of my friends.

"We should get back," Vanessa says, checking her watch. We drove separately so that she could head straight back to her ranch in Northeastern Oklahoma as soon as we're finished.

"I know. We should go too. But they're so happy!" I hate to leave when everyone's content, and I am actually getting to have an adult conversation. I'm letting Joy and Michael skip their naps, but maybe they'll fall asleep in the car on the way home.

"We can stay a little bit longer." Vanessa stretches out in the shade and takes a sip of Coke. "I only have work waiting for me when I get back anyway."

"How's work going?" I ask.

"Oh, fine. Things have been a little slow with the economy. But, it's some extra money anyway, and I like doing something

creative. What about you—do you think you'll ever go back to work? For money, I mean."

We both laugh. We hate it when people ask if we "work." We are mothers; what do they think?

"Honestly, I have no desire for a cubicle again." I shudder at the thought. "Or computer programming. That was *so* not me."

"Yeah, talk about a terrible career match for you, my creative, non-technical friend."

"I know," I smile. "Ridiculous. But, as hard as staying home is, as physically and emotionally exhausting as it is, it's a pretty great job. I get to make my own schedule, finger paint, and snuggle up and read books to my kids. I feel like I get to help my children be anchored in this world. It's so much more interesting than programming ever was."

"You don't get bored?"

"Well, there's still that strange mix of too much to do—like laundry and dishes—but somehow being bored to tears. Maybe it's the lack of other adults? But as the kids get older there's less of that. I can have actual conversations with Daniel and Joy now.

"But, you know?" I add, after thinking for a minute, "It's challenging too. In my old job I felt like I used one tiny part of my brain, and did the same thing over and over again. Now I feel like I'm getting to use more of my whole brain. And, yeah, it's hard, but I like a challenge. Technical work in an office was honestly much more boring for me."

We watch our children play together. Daniel and Vanessa's son are chasing each other in the grass, their bodies lithe and glistening, like dolphins in the sun. Vanessa's daughter and Joy are picking dandelions and blowing the seeds into the wind while Michael giggles and claps. They are all joy and awe and wonder.

"I mean, what could be more important and precious work?" I am careful because I don't want to offend Vanessa or

seem like I think less of her for choosing to work and send her kids to school. I am just trying to explain. "I read this quote by Abigail Adams the other day about how if we are raising heroes, philosophers, and statesmen then we need learned women. That's us, right? What nobler work could we have than raising these precious little ones to love the Lord and follow Him with their lives? They're going to change the world someday."

"Oh, you're so right!" Vanessa breathes, her eyes filling with tears. "I pray for my children every day as they ride off on the bus. I pray for their safety, and that they would have an influence on the classmates, not the other way around. I want them to make a difference in the world."

"They will." I give her a hug. "They already do. You are an amazing, creative, godly mother, and your children will be just like you when they grow up. I can tell about these things."

We laugh, and we wipe away a few tears. What is it with talking about my children and the Lord? It makes me cry every time!

We silently watch the kids, golden and happy in the sun.

"It's scary though, isn't it?" Vanessa says softly. "I mean, what if we mess them up?"

"I know," I sigh. "Especially if you homeschool. Then you can't even blame a teacher! It's my job to teach them everything. It's a lot of responsibility, and it's sort of terrifying. It's all on my shoulders."

"It's not *all* on your shoulders," Vanessa says, and I know what she means.

We stayed too long.

We let the kids have an ice cream (those darned music-playing ice cream trucks), then they had to go rinse off in the fountains again, and then Vanessa and I had to dry them off and get them in the cars. Vanessa and her kids are already gone.

Everyone is melting with exhaustion. Daniel complained and groaned all the way to the car; Michael is sticky and fussy; and Joy is having trouble obeying anything I'm telling her, which I know means she's having a Tired Crash.

Normally, with her pretty heart-shaped face, blonde hair, and sparkling brown eyes, Joy looks as if she could be sitting at a desk in a *Pottery Barn Kids* catalog. Right now though, her hair is wild and her face grimy; she looks like a bedraggled and potentially violent street urchin.

The problem is—I've *got* to run by Whole Foods on the way home. My sister got me hooked on these apple chips, and I need to get a few other things that the normal grocery store doesn't carry. Otherwise, we have to drive all the way across town tomorrow. I just need to pop in.

"Hey guys, want some fizzy juice?" I lay out the bait. "And a zucchini muffin?"

"A kiwi muffin?" Joy suddenly pays attention. "Yes! I *love* kiwi muffins!"

"Zucchini muffin," Daniel mutters.

"Okay, then we need to quickly get in the car and pop in to Whole Foods," I say in my super-excited mom voice. "Then we'll go home and watch a movie." Nothing like bribery.

Only, I realize Joy is soaking wet. What did she do, run through the sprinkler after I dried her off? I can't take her into Whole Foods like this; she'll get a cold.

Aha! I have a stroke of brilliance. There's a Salvation Army right up the street! We can go there, see if we find any bargains, and get some dry clothes all at the same time. I feel like one of those quick-thinking moms on TV. I should be in a Mentos commercial.

I get them all buckled in, and we drive up the street to the Salvation Army. We walk in the store and back to the racks of children's clothes.

"I'm freezing!" Joy shivers and hugs herself to warm up.

"Okay, honey. We're going to change into dry clothes here in just a sec," I say, as I scan the rack. Yes! A flowery yellow Gap skirt—\$2.99. Great. I grab it. And here's a pink T-shirt. Perfect.

"Joy, go put these on in the dressing room, please." I point Joy to the dressing room against the wall. She doesn't move.

"Mommy, I want this shirt." Joy has spotted a sparkly green spaghetti-strap tank top. Size four.

Really? What is wrong with people? Who would make a spaghetti-strap tummy-showing tank top for a little girl? And who would buy it?

"Joy, we're not getting that." My voice is firm. "It's not modest. We don't show our tummies."

"I want it." Joy's eyes have turned to stone. Her lips are in a thin line.

"Joy. We're not getting it. Here are your clothes. Please go put them on."

Clearly I can't give in. She's being ridiculous. She can't wear that shirt. Okay, forget about Whole Foods; we just need to get home. Joy's hit the wall. She's in the Land of the Irrational, as John and I call it. If we were at home I'd put her in Time Out or to bed. But I can't do that here, obviously.

"No." Joy stares at me defiantly. "I. Want. This. Shirt."

I've seen this look before. This child has a will of steel. When I make her sit at dinner until she eats three bites of whatever I've served (Three bites! That's it!), she often stays in her chair two *hours* and then falls asleep on the table. I do not have time to have a two-hour showdown at Salvation Army. I'm going to pay for this later, but I decide to compromise.

"All right," I say. "We can get it for your dress-up. But you can only wear it for dress-up, understand?" I'll throw it away next week when she's forgotten about it.

"Okay," Joy says with a glint in her eye. She knows she's won. That little stinker. Now I'm irritated at myself and her.

"Can I go put my new clothes on?" Joy whines. "I'm freezing."

"Yes, good idea." I pull the tags off the skirt and T-shirt, give her the clothes, and take her to the dressing room. It's only about fifteen steps away from the cashier, so I can keep my eyes on the dressing room door the whole time and pay for the clothes while she changes.

I take the tags and go to the cashier. Daniel is whining about going home, and Michael is starting to cry in the car seat. I know Daniel will flip out if I tell him that we aren't going to get fizzy juice and muffins after all, so I'll just keep that bit of information to myself for now.

"Thank you." I take our bag from the man checking us out, trying to seem calm and unruffled. I feel like a bit of a crazy person anyway for taking wet children into a store.

We go to get Joy from the dressing room, and I find her there, buck naked, making faces at herself in the mirror.

"Joy," I try to use a patient voice. "Why are your clothes not on?"

She makes a face at herself in the mirror. She crosses her arms and furrows her brow, making what I guess is Joy's Angry Face. We have got to get out of here. My heart begins to beat faster.

"Here, let me help you." I leave Daniel outside to keep an eye on Michael in his car seat and go into the room with Joy.

"NO! I. Will. Do it!" she says bossily.

"Okay," I say firmly. "You have three minutes to *put your clothes on*. Or I'm doing it for you." I close the door. I am starting to sweat.

"It's okay, sweetie," I tell Michael who is fussing and acting hungry. I have goldfish out in the car, but we've got to get to the

car first. I take him out of the car seat, so I can hold him and comfort him.

After about two minutes, I knock on the door.

"Joy?" No answer. I open the door.

Joy is sitting, still completely naked, on the bench, looking at herself in the mirror. She sticks out her tongue at herself, then laughs.

Okay, now I'm mad. This is ridiculous. She's totally ignoring me. This child...

Stay calm. I have got to get this girl to the car. If she's not going to dress herself, I have to do it for her. I warned her.

"Daniel, watch Michael for me, okay?" I say to him, and sit Michael on the floor. Thank heavens Daniel is obeying. "You're doing a good job helping Mommy. Thank you." I kiss him on the head and go into the dressing room.

"Here, Mommy's just going to put your shirt on, okay, honey?" I am trying to not anger the beast.

I pop her shirt over her head, then put one arm through. Suddenly she realizes what I'm doing.

"NO!" she screams. "I *said*, I was going to *do it!*" She has gone over to the dark side.

"No," I say in a low tone, trying to keep our voices down. These walls are paper thin. "You didn't obey, so Mommy has to do it now. It's okay."

"NOOOOOOOO!" she screams. She pulls her arm out of the sleeve and wriggles out of the shirt.

We hardly ever spank, but I really wish I could right now. There's no way I'm doing that in public though; they'd probably call the police on me.

I hear Michael starting to wail outside the door. My heart is starting to pound.

"Mom!" Daniel is saying in his panicky voice. "Michael's crying! He needs you!"

We have got to get out of here. I am going to have to wrestle this child into her clothes. I hold her down and put the shirt over her head and arms.

"OWWWW! Mommy you're hurting me!" she screams.

"It wouldn't hurt if you would stop fighting me!" I hiss at her. "Stop. Calm down."

I try to sit and hold her for a minute to calm her down, but she sees herself in the mirror and gets inspired again. Now she's putting on a show. She makes an angry face at herself and then turns back to me.

This is completely ridiculous. I stuff her legs into the skirt. We're almost there. I can just scoop her up and leave. Forget underwear.

"OWWWW! Mommy!!! Stop!!!!" she's shrieking at the top of her lungs.

I hear a knock on the door.

"Yes?" I reply.

"What's going on in there?" asks a woman in a threatening voice.

"What?" I say, annoyed. I open the door a crack and see a young lady, maybe in her twenties. This lady doesn't even work here. She's just another shopper. What is she doing? Who does she think she is, butting into this? Meanwhile, Joy has wriggled out of the shirt and skirt again, and stands naked with her arms crossed across her chest glaring at me.

"Is there a *problem*?" the woman says imperiously.

"Yes, there's a *problem*." I fling open the door so she can see Joy who is shocked into silence. "I'm trying to get my naked, screaming child dressed. Do you mind?"

"Well," says the woman in a haughty voice, "*I believe* parents are supposed to be *responsible* for their children's actions."

What is that supposed to mean? Does she see anyone else trying to be responsible for my children's actions? Who's in here trying to get her dressed? What does she expect me to be doing—I have a baby and another kid here. I would be happy to leave if I could.

Then it hits me what to say.

"Oh, *great*!" I say in a fake delighted voice, "Are you offering to help? *Fabulous*!"

The other shoppers are staring at the scene by now, and this lady is trapped. Ha!

"All right, I can help," the lady says grudgingly.

"Wonderful!" I say in a saccharine voice with a big smile. "You can carry my car seat. Daniel, you carry Michael. And I'll carry my naked, screaming child! *Thanks*!"

My face burning with embarrassment, I wrap up Joy the best I can in the clothes and, holding my head high, walk through the crowd of staring people to the car. I buckle Joy in, still naked, but finally silenced. I pile the clothes on top of her as best I can. I take the car seat from the lady.

"Thanks so much! I *really* appreciate it!" I tell her with a huge, fake smile. She stomps off in a huff, annoyed that she ended up helping me instead of finishing her speech, I guess.

I buckle Michael in, give him some goldfish, and help Daniel into the back. We drive home. Joy has resumed crying and screaming at the top of her lungs. Michael is whimpering. Daniel is sitting in stunned silence.

This is, officially, the Worst Parenting Moment of My Life.

And, it was all my fault. I know better than this. Why did I take hot, tired, cranky children into a store? What is wrong with me?

My mind flashes back to how brilliant I thought I was with that great idea. Talk about pride going before a fall.

My cheeks are still flushed with humiliation. I'm annoyed at myself for setting my daughter up for that one. I'm embarrassed for how my daughter (and I) just acted. I'm angry with that lady for treating me like I'm abusing my children.

A thought hits me—if I can't even get Joy to put her clothes on, how am I ever going to teach her to read this year? Maybe it's crazy to think I can homeschool Daniel and Joy and deal with a baby. Maybe Joy would do better with someone else teaching her. Maybe Vicky is right; maybe I am going to ruin their lives.

Suddenly I remember our trip to California. We've decided to go, but John has a business trip in Chicago the week before, so the plan was for him to meet us there. Which means I will be flying with the three kids by myself. I thought I could handle it. I am beginning to have doubts.

This meltdown was horrible, but at least it was brief. What if that happens on the plane?

As Joy's wailing begins to subside in the backseat, I silently pray.

Lord, help me.