It's All Relative — All the Time

Getting away from family while on a family getaway [by Maureen L. Egan]

The Relatives Came, a popular picture book written by Cynthia Rylant, will no doubt be a perfect summer-reading pick for many people excited about visiting their extended family this summer. It's a warm, fuzzy reminiscence from a child's perspective of long summer vacations with faraway relatives gathered together in one sprawling house — lots of hugging, laughing and intergenerational good times. How nice for them, but it's fiction.

No relatives come to see my family in Richmond during the summer, so every year my husband, kids and I crawl up I-95 to see them. I'm no kid, so what I remember of these visits is not sleeping, hence the sniping at whoever's in the room, sniping at whoever's out of earshot and intergenerational fighting over bathroom privileges. Perhaps time will transform the stressful reality into something charming, sweet and untrue, but I am a long way from distilling my memories of vacationing in the same house with relatives into a story suitable for children.

For starters, we have too many relatives, and none of them live in Virginia. I have seven siblings, and my husband has five, and both families congregate at beaches well north of us — my family at my parents' beach house, my husband's at a rental. Neither house can handle all those who might show up, so a significant percentage of planning to get together is figuring out how to keep everyone from getting together at the same time.

The problem with cohabitating with family is that we're related. My older sister and I steadily simmer over our different parenting styles. She thinks I'm too controlling; I think she's too lenient. I think there is such a thing as too much fun and not enough sleep. She thinks I'm wrong; I know she is. She thinks I'm a crabby killjoy. She's right about that, and I get crabbier the less sleep my children get. So do they, which is my point.

Add in an ill-tempered sister fresh from breaking up with her boyfriend for the third time in two months, another sister who is charming as long as my father doesn't ask her about money, a father who asks every adult within range of his porch swing if they have enough money to buy an ice-cream cone, and me, the daughter who paints some of the house every summer, which annoys my siblings because then they look lazy.

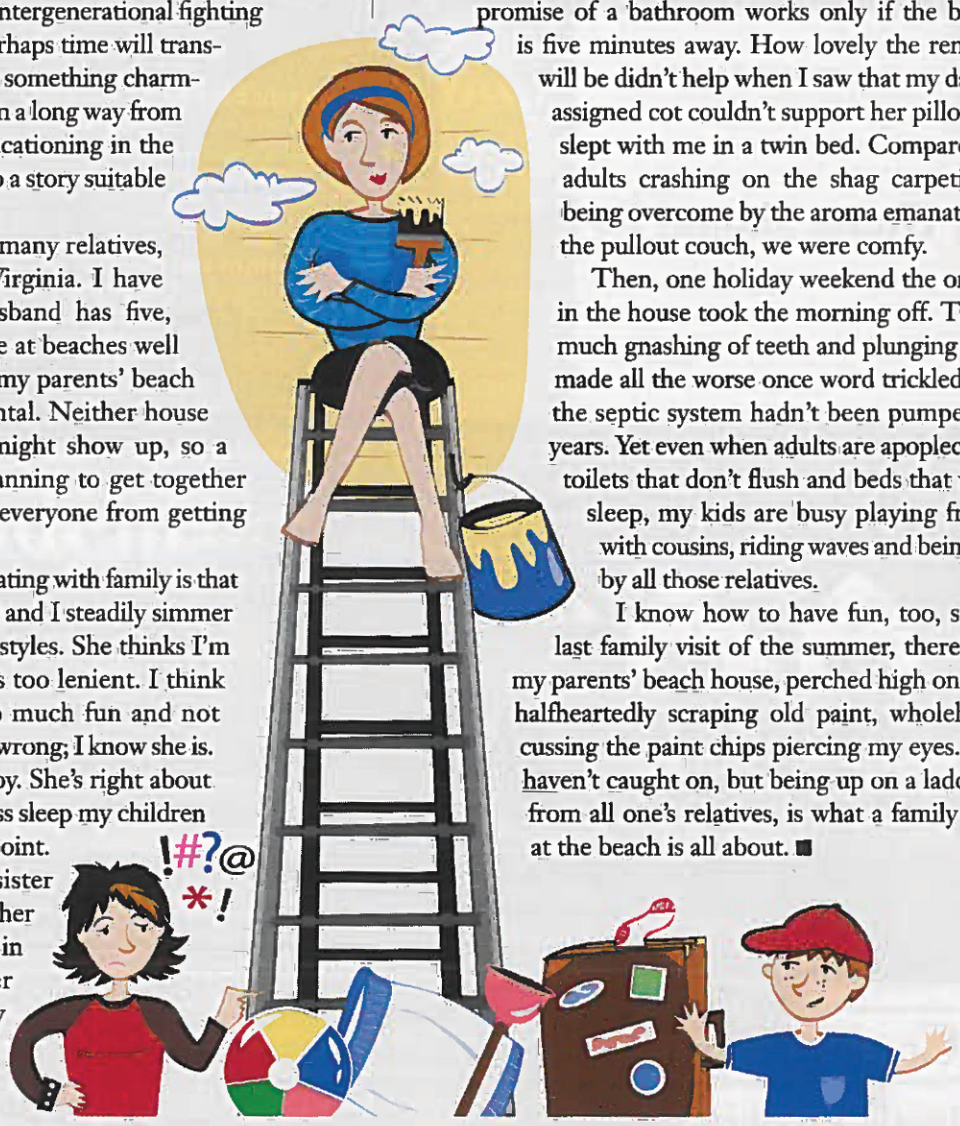
To be fair, I use my painting time to grouse at my father for buying cheap paint or for painting over mildew, so I'm also the most obnoxious daughter, and the competition is fierce.

When we visit my husband's family, I go with the flow a little more — or just go — to the beach, to the store, for walks and long runs. No one minds when I disappear, since 18 relatives are crammed into a house with beds for nine and one bathroom.

There has been the promise of a second bathroom ever since they started renting the house. Unfortunately for my kids, the promise of a bathroom works only if the bathroom is five minutes away. How lovely the renovations will be didn't help when I saw that my daughter's assigned cot couldn't support her pillow, so she slept with me in a twin bed. Compared to the adults crashing on the shag carpeting after being overcome by the aroma emanating from the pullout couch, we were comfy.

Then, one holiday weekend the only toilet in the house took the morning off. There was much gnashing of teeth and plunging of toilet, made all the worse once word trickled out that the septic system hadn't been pumped in five years. Yet even when adults are apoplectic about toilets that don't flush and beds that withhold sleep, my kids are busy playing freeze tag with cousins, riding waves and being spoiled by all those relatives.

I know how to have fun, too, so by our last family visit of the summer, there I was at my parents' beach house, perched high on a ladder, halfheartedly scraping old paint, wholeheartedly cussing the paint chips piercing my eyes. My kids haven't caught on, but being up on a ladder, away from all one's relatives, is what a family vacation at the beach is all about. ■



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