

THE NEW WOMAN'S DAUGHTER  
by Ardis Coffman

Mills College  
Oakland, CA  
March 15, 2007  
Hi Mom,

It's hard to believe I'm almost at the end of my senior year. Where has this semester gone? I guess a lot of it went to Hadyn. I've told you about him before, Mother. He's the Air Force Lieutenant I met at a New Year's party. He's liaison for some kind of missile research project at Berkley. I really like him.

That brings me to the point of this letter. Hadyn asked me to go to Louisiana over spring break to meet his parents. I'd love to see you too, of course, but I can't get to both Arcadia and Shreveport in a week. Would you forgive me if I don't come home?

I've been meaning to tell you that the local paper is now running Healing With Herbs. Of course, I read it every day. My roommate asked why I had that stack of newspaper clipping on my desk. "This column is what keeps me in this expensive college," I told her. She knew you were a journalist, but I guess she thought you were out digging up scandalous doings by politicians instead of digging up compost heaps. The column's wonderful, of course, witty, wise and honest -like you.

Got to go. My anthropology paper beckons.

Love,  
Penny

Arcadia  
March 24, 2007  
Hi Honey,

Going to meet his family, huh? Does this mean you're moving in together? Or are you already co-habiting and you haven't gotten around to telling me about it? Well, whatever.....just don't let it interfere with your studies. Love comes and goes. A career supports you after you forget his name. I'll miss seeing you over vacation, but I'll use the time to organize some of the columns into book form. Bernie at the news service says a publisher may be interested in bringing out a collection.

Love,  
Mother

Mills College  
April 3, 2007  
Dear Mom,

I had a great time in Shreveport. Met all of Hadyn's school friends. His family is very old south, very conservative. Very polite. They live in a house that's almost 200 years old. It's full of antiques. I worried the whole time I'd break something.

I don't know what they thought of me. I've got to tell you about one conversation. Let me set the scene:

We are seated in the family living room in front of the fireplace on two loveseats covered in some kind of black shiny fabric with vines on it. Hadyn and I are on one side of an antique coffee table. His parents are on the other. We are having coffee after dinner. Hadyn's mother pours from a sterling silver service.

"I understand your mother writes a syndicated column," says Hadyn's mother. "How very interesting. Does she use a nom de plume?"

"No," I say, "She uses her own name, Summer Afternoon."

"Summer Afternoon? That's her name?"

"It's a name she took in the 70s. Henry James said those were the two most beautiful words in the English language, so that's what she called herself. I think the name on her birth certificate is Dorothy. My mother believes family names are a paternalistic symbol of a society that denigrates women. She says a woman should select her own name when she's old enough to know who she is."

"I see." Her eyebrows raised so high they met her hairline. "And have you selected a name?"

"I'm keeping Penelope. I was named for an aunt my mother was fond of. I'm happy with it. It suits me."

"A dignified name," says mother nodding.

Hadyn's father speaks: "I don't believe I've asked you what your father does for a living."

"My mother is a single parent," I say. "She never married."

Uncomfortable silence. No one knows what to say.

"This coffee service belonged to my great aunt Hattie," says Hadyn's mother at last. "My grandmother insisted she once used it to serve General Lee, but you know how those family stories exaggerate."

I didn't explain about the artificial insemination. I guess it's just as well.

Love,

Penny

April 7, 2007

Arcadia

Hi Love,

Hadyn's parents sound dreadful. Don't you dare make apologies for who you are. You are a bright, pretty, charming girl who has a great future. What's more you were a planned and much desired child. How many people can say that?

Spring has come to Arcadia. All the lilacs are in bloom and I've had the doors and windows open all week. The only thing missing is you. By the way, I haven't heard a word about a job. What are you planning to do after you graduate in June?

This is a short letter. The publisher says they will look at the book. Unfortunately it does not yet exist so I'm slaving over a hot word processor. The weather is so nice it's hard to make myself stay inside and work. I'd like to be out there hoeing and planting.

Love,

Mother

Mills College

April 13, 2007

Dear Mother,

Three times I've started to dial your number today and just couldn't do it. I think maybe a letter is best for this kind of news. Hadyn asked me to marry him and I said yes. I wish I were good with words like you are so I could explain how I feel about him. Let me try this: The world before I met Hadyn was all pastels. It was pleasant, beautiful often. I didn't long for what I didn't know.

Now suddenly everything is bright, deep colors. It's amazing to me. I walk around looking at things saying "wow." I'm so happy, mother. Please be happy with me.

We want to be married in the campus chapel the Saturday after I graduate. His next assignment is Greenland, a secret project. The base where we'll be living is underground. That includes headquarters, family housing, medical clinic, movie theatres, everything. It's all connected by natural tunnels. Hadyn says if there is a nuclear attack we may be the last people alive on earth. Of course that attack is not very likely now that the Ruskies are our new best friends.

There's so much to think about. We'll do a military wedding with the bride and groom leaving the chapel under crossed swords. I'll need a dress, of course. And flowers. My roommate is going to be my maid of honor. Do you remember when I got a Barbie doll in a wedding dress as a birthday present and you took it away from me?

That's all for now, mother. I know it is going to take some time to digest this news. Please know that I'm happier than I've ever been in my life.

Good-night and I love you.

Penny

Shreveport, LO  
April 14, 2007

Dear Summer,

I hope you don't mind me calling you by your first name though we've never met. My husband and I are so pleased that Penny and Hadyn decided to marry. She really is a lovely girl. We did so enjoy having her at our home.

Of course the wedding is going to call for a great deal of planning. I'm sure there are a million things we need to talk about. We would really love to have you come and visit us the last weekend in April. I believe the children can be here at that time too, so that we can get the invitations underway.

Looking forward to meeting you, I am

Gloria Vander

April 16, 2007  
Arcadia

Penny,

I tried to call as soon as I got your letter, but there was no answer. I assume you were with Hadyn. Of course, I remember the Barbie bride, and I remember well why I took it away from you. I wanted you to understand the reality behind the silk and lace. It's a symbol of slavery as sure as a ball and chain on the ankle. I guess you missed the point. For God's sake sleep with the man if you must, but don't marry him. You are aware I assume that a wedding dress is designed to look like a shroud? In some cultures women get married in their shroud and then keep it for burial. Does this tell you something about your expectations if you go through with this idiocy?

Have you given any thought to what you'll do with yourself all day in this cave in Greenland? What kind of life is that - never seeing the sun? And what kind of man would ask you to live it? I'm appalled.

We've got to talk. I'll try to call you again tonight.

Your mother,

Summer Afternoon

Arcadia  
April 18, 2007  
Dear Mrs. Vander,

Thank you for your invitation to visit you, but I may as well tell you upfront I'm opposed to this marriage. Penny has too much going for her to bury her light in some cave in Iceland or wherever. I think you will find that my daughter will soon come to her senses and the wedding will be off.

Summer Afternoon

Mills College  
April 22, 2007  
Dear Mother,

I'm lying here awake after your phone call thinking of all the things I wanted to say to you and didn't. Somehow we ended trying to outshout each other and then you hung up. So here I am in my pajamas, notepad in hand, trying to find a way to tell you what I want to say. This is it:

When I was growing up my friends always envied me. I had that wonderful garden to play in and the nicest mother in town. You never demanded that I be in at a certain time or that I make certain grades. As a result I always came home earlier and studied harder than anybody else to make you proud of me. I love and admire you, Mother, but I want a different life from the one you have. I want to be Hadyn's wife and the mother of his children.

You're concerned about what I'll do with myself in Greenland. I'm not. There's a house to take care of and the Officers Wives Club to attend. We want to start a family right away. I'm excited about being a wife and mother. It's all I ever wanted. Please try to understand and don't be upset with me. I don't want to gain a husband and lose my mother.

Love,  
Penny

Arcadia  
April 30, 2007  
Penny,

Since when did you want to be a wife and mother? I've never heard you say such a thing. I think this young man puts ideas in your head. If you go ahead with this medieval rite, don't expect me to attend.

The book is off to the publisher. I've been working like a troll to finish. At last I've found time to do the spring planting. Ardelle helped me with the plow for the last two day and now we're ready to plant. I'm going to put in five rows of sweet corn this year.

Love,

Mother

Arcadia  
May 1, 2007

Dear Penny,

I help your mother with the garden the last couple days and she talk about your wedding. She real upset. We close friends since you moved to Arcadia 20 years ago and I never see her in such a dither. You're her life, girl. Yesterday we was sitting under the Elm tree talking. Summer says, "Do you remember when I fell off my bicycle and got that deep gash in my leg?" Then she starts looking on the back of her calf for the scar. But, of course, it ain't there. "Summer," I says, "that was Penny fell off the bike."

She just can't bear the thought of you going away to live in some dark tunnel. Hon, could you reconsider? Maybe just put the wedding off for awhile? Give her a chance to get used to the idea. I know I'm being a Nosy Parker, but it's awful to see your mother like this.

Your Aunt Ardelle

Mills College

May 3, 2007

Dear Mrs. Vander,

Hadyn tells me you received a letter from my mother refusing your invitation to visit. I hope you will forgive her. She is not usually rude. She is just having a difficult time adjusting to the idea of losing her little girl. I expect in years to come you will be great friends.

Affectionately,

Penny

Mills College

May 5, 2007

Dear Ardelle,

I just returned from taking my last final and found your note in the mailbox. There is no way I can postpone my wedding. The bridesmaids' dresses are ordered. Hadyn's parents have chartered a plane to bring family and friends to San Francisco. The caterer has been paid and the cake ordered. Really it is out of my hands.

Penny

Mills College

May 10, 2007

Mom,

Please! Graduation is next Thursday. You don't have to stay for the wedding. Just come for commencement exercises and go home. I know how important my graduation is to you. Please be here and be part of it.

Penny

Mills College

May 17, 2007

Dear Mrs. Afternoon,

I've not had the pleasure of meeting you, but I know your daughter well. I've been her academic advisor for the four years she's been here at Mills and I was pleased to act in place of her father at her wedding yesterday. I'm sorry that none of her family was able to come. I wanted you to know that she was the most beautiful bride I've ever seen and at 62 I've seen a good number. She's a lovely girl, intelligent and caring and I know you are proud of her. Just thought I'd let you know that everything went well. I believe the newlyweds will spend several days in Hawaii before they leave for Greenland. I got your address out of my files.

Best Wishes,  
Clayton Deering

Date: Monday, May 20, 2007 15:59:31 -0500

From: Bernstein@aol.com

cc:

Subject: Something wrong?

What's going on, Summer? Just got a call from Julie Walker. She says they still don't have the revisions they requested. You're almost three weeks behind on the column for us. I tried to phone you, but your answering machine was off. Give me a call, will you?

Bernie

Greenland

June 7, 2007

Hi Mom,

Well we've arrived, but I can't tell you exactly where. My New York APO is on the envelope and that's all we're allowed to reveal. Hadyn is at work and I'm sitting here in an empty family housing unit wondering when the furniture will be delivered. This is pretty weird living underground like this. Electric lights on all day and night. It's warm though. We can go out in the tunnels without coats. Pretty strange when you think how cold it is up on the surface.

The first thing I did when we arrived was check to see if there was a letter from you. There wasn't. Let me know how you are, will you please? I've never gone this long without hearing from you. I miss you.

Penny

Date: Tues, June 12, 2007 8:22:13 -0500  
 From: Bernstein@aol.com  
 To: Summer@aol.com  
 Subject: You want to get me fired?

Still no column and no revisions! The managing editor had me in his office for some face time this morning. Either you get some copy in here or we both get the axe. The publisher is holding the contract until they see the rewrite. This is not like you. In the twenty years we've worked together, you've always met deadline. If I don't hear from you in the next week, I'm flying out to Arcadia. I'm worried about you.

Bernie

From: City of Arcadia  
 To: Resident 25 Mt. Olympus Way  
 June 18, 2007

Pursuant to ACO-2557 (Arcadia City Ordinance) stating that all dwellers within the city limits shall adhere to acceptable standards of property maintenance, you are hereby informed that the land at 25 Mt. Olympus Way does not meet acceptable standards. If improvements are not effected by July 1, the property will be renovated by city contractor and the owner billed for services.

The following items fail to meet city codes:

- grass unmowed X
- tree limbs blocking roadsigns X

Date: Friday, June 19, 1995 9:17:33 -0500  
 From: Summer@aol.com  
 To: Bernstein@aol.com  
 Subject: You Want to Get Me Fired?

Don't you dare come down here. I'll get the columns done and the revisions too. I don't know what's the matter. I can't seem to get anything done. I feel like I'm swimming in mud. I've got a doctor appointment this week. Maybe I'm sick. I'm just so tired.

Office of Dr. Marie Ford  
 Arcadia  
 June 30 , 1995  
 Dear Ms. Summer:

Attached are the results of the blood test performed in my office this week. There is nothing remarkable. You're in excellent health. As we discussed in my office I think your problem is depression and I strongly suggest you see the therapist I recommended.

Regards,  
Marie Ford M.D.

Greenland  
July 17, 2007  
Dear Mother,

I have the most wonderful news. I'm going to have a baby. Saw the base doctor today and he confirmed that I'm eight weeks pregnant. I guess it happened on our honeymoon. Please, please write to me. I really need my mother now.

I'm feeling well. Had some morning sickness all last week, but it's getting better. Got to go. I'm having lunch with two other women I met at Officer's Wives Club. One of them will have her baby next month. New babies all over the place. I can't wait.

Love,  
Penny

FROM SUMMER'S JOURNAL , JULY 28, 2007

I wonder how my life got so out of control. Bernie is furious with me about the late columns. I just can't seem to get the revisions to work. And now Penny is pregnant. My little girl. Guess that means I'm about to be a grandmother. I'm not sure how I feel about that. I wasn't ready to pass the torch yet. I saw the therapist my doctor recommended yesterday. We talked about personal space. He wasn't critical exactly, but I think he was implying that I've lost track of where my borders end and Penny's begin.

I was looking for some old columns in the attic later that day and I found a poem I'd written when I was pregnant with her:

Mine more now than ever.

My flesh, my blood, my bone

Faceless, sexless, breathless life

We prepare for our farewell.

You stir - I did not choose this movement-

You alone possess your life.

Choiceless we approach the moment  
I hold you close with open arms.

I've got a feeling I understood things better then, than now. Revised chapter one of the book today and sent it off. Maybe that will get his boss off Bernie's back. He's really been very patient.

P.S. I think I'll send that poem to Penny.

Greenland  
Aug.1, 2007  
Dear Summer,

Penny talks so much about you, I think I've known you forever. It amazes me when I realize we've never met. I'm writing this for my wife. She had a miscarriage yesterday and is still in the base hospital. She'd like to come home and see you if it's okay with you. The doctor thinks some fresh air, sunshine and her mother is the best thing for her right now. She's reluctant to make plane reservations without your approval since you've answered none of her letters since our marriage.

Yours,  
Hadyn

SUMMER'S JOURNAL AUG 3, 1995

Saw the therapist again today. He's okay. I really didn't want to see a man. I don't relate well to men. Told him I always knew I could be a good mother. I'm sure I would have failed as a wife. Anyway the therapist is not a control freak like most men I know. I explained how hard it is for a woman to accomplish and how much harder it is when she has to worry about bruising a man's ego. I didn't expect him to understand, but I think he knows what I'm talking about. I just didn't want to see Penny pulled apart. I wanted her to have a chance to use her mind, but maybe that wasn't my choice to make.

Date: Aug. 13, 2007 16:22:05 -0500

From: Bernstein@aol.com

To: Summer@aol.com

cc:

Subject: You're terrific

Publisher loves revision. Just perfect. You rock, girl.

Arcadia

Aug. 13, 2007

Dear Penny and Hadyn,

I just opened your letter. I am so sorry - about the baby and about my behavior. We both lost our children and that is the hardest loss to accept. I wish I were with you because I feel very close to you right now. The difference in our losses is that yours was beyond your control. I almost lost my daughter through my own stubbornness and pride.

Of course you can come home, Penny. And you too, Hadyn, if it's possible for you to get leave. Please, please come home. I welcome you both with open arms. They stay open too. No grasping. That means I let go when the time comes to leave.

Did you get the poem I sent you? Too bad I didn't heed my own words. I didn't want you to make the final separation. I wanted to choose your future for you. I was wrong and if I could take it all back I would.

Well, on to plans! First of all, I'll have to get the garden in shape. I've let it go shamefully. I've even had a letter from the city demanding that the grass be cut. Then I'll see if I can get the column a week or so ahead so that I'll have more time to spend with you when you get here. Then there's the rest of the revision on the book. Oh, hell. Just come home. Everything else will work out.

Love,  
Mother

Date: Wed, 13 Aug 2007 22:07:33 -0500

From: Summer@aol.com

To: Berstein@aol.com

Subject: You're terrific

Glad publisher liked work. Don't call me girl.



