



Parents in  
their right mind  
do NOT leave  
their twelve-year-old  
daughter  
with a  
babysitter!

Melissa Merritt wrote this story in seventh grade as a homeschooler in Ingle-side, Illinois. She likes to dance, write, and do "almost anything creative." Fantasy literature is her favorite reading—her favorite author is J.R.R. Tolkien.

**B**ut, Mom, I don't *need* a babysitter!"  
"Ann, it's not like I'm getting you a nanny! It's just for two weeks. Her name is Mildred Barnes, and she's very nice."  
"Hmph. Anyone with a name like that has got to be, like, totally avant-garde," I said sarcastically.

"You'll survive." She turned and walked into the kitchen.  
"Couldn't you just take me to Europe too?" I reasoned, trying not to sound shrill. When she didn't answer, I stalked upstairs to my room, fuming. No parents in their right mind left their twelve-year-old with a babysitter! I baby-sat kids myself! Besides, Sara Davis, my new friend who was really popular, would never be seen with me again!  
On Friday, I canceled going to the mall after school.  
"Why?" Sara asked.  
"I have a doctor's appointment," I lied. Actually, I was going to have the Grand Meeting with Mildew Bomb, or whatever her name was.  
"Aren't your parents leaving today?"  
"Tomorrow."  
"Why aren't you going with them?"  
"Oh, I didn't want to. I thought it would be much more fun to have the house all to myself for two weeks."  
"Awesome!"

Perfect. Now all I had to do was take every precaution to hide my babysitter. My mind raced. Then I stopped. What was there to plan? All I had to do was not let anyone in the house. I laughed to myself.

After Mom and Dad left the next day, I lay on my bed, face in pillow. In my head, I recounted yesterday's meeting. Mom, Dad, and an old lady had stood on the front stoop. She was tall, had thin lips, and wore her salt-and-pepper hair in a tight, stiff little bun.

"Ann, this is Mrs. Barnes," Mom had said.  
"H-hi," I'd stammered, feeling a rock in my stomach.  
"Pleased to meet you," Mrs. Barnes had said.

It had been no comfort today when Dad had seen my scowl as he waved goodbye and said, "Remember, Ann, even though Mrs. Barnes's rules may be different from ours, she's still in charge. So you'd best obey her because she has permission to ground you if you cause trouble—and that includes your play auditions."

My phone rang. I got it before Mrs. Barnes could. It was Sara.

"Hi. I wondered, since you have the house to yourself and all, if we could have, like, a party there."

"Nope."

"Why?"

"My cranky next-door neighbor would have a cow."

"Oh brother."

Mrs. Barnes strolled into the room. Didn't she know how to knock? She signaled for me to get off the phone.

"I gotta go. I smell something burning," I said.

"OK. See you tomorrow."

"Why did you say you smelled something burning?" asked Mrs. Barnes.

"Why did you tell me to get off the phone?" I countered, my jaw set.

"Well, dear, while your parents are gone, your phone conversations will be limited to five minutes, according to what they told me."

"But—"

"Now, now, Annie," she said, gently wagging a finger, "while I'm here, I'm responsible for everything, including what you do. So I would appreciate it if you'd comply with my rules. Your mother and father want their little girl in one piece when they get home, and I will do my job."

Annie! "OK," I said sweetly, thinking, *Depends on what the rules are.*

"To start with, it's time to get ready for bed. I've a platter of sugar cookies and warm milk awaiting you downstairs." Her thin lips curled into a smile.

I consulted my clock. "But it's only eight-thirty!"

"And to bed by nine, dear!" Mrs. Barnes turned and waltzed away, her little bun like an eye in the back of her head.

*Yeech!* Warm milk! Seething with helpless rage, I crawled into bed. Why was she doing this? Nine was an hour earlier than my normal bedtime, two hours from my weekend one! I sulked myself to sleep, wondering what other horrors she had in store for me.

I got my answer Monday morning.

"Annie, what have you got there?"

"My Rollerblades," I said through clenched teeth. *If she called me Annie one more time . . .*

"Don't you mean roller *skates*?"

I rolled my eyes. "I mean *blades*." I dangled one in her face. She arched an eyebrow.

"When are you skating, and with whom?"

What was this, an interrogation? "My boyfriend Alan, after school."

"Who's chaperoning?"

"Nobody."

"Ann, I'm responsible for you. I'm sorry, but I can't let you go running off with some strange boy unless I supervise." I shot her a glare that I hoped looked as angry as I felt. "Better safe than sorry. Your parents are thousands of miles away. I don't know what you are or aren't allowed to do, and I can't call them for every little thing. I'm sorry, Ann."

Her sweet voice said, *Big baby*. I spun around and charged out the door, slamming it. On the way to school, I gathered my thoughts. What year was she living in? Man, she made Mom and Dad look like a couple of Hell's Angels. I had to tell Alan that I had a dentist's appointment. There. Problem solved. NOT! This was only the beginning.

Sara dropped by after school the same day. To my horror, Mrs. Barnes answered the door. Before either of them could open their mouths, I butted between them and said, "Mrs. Barnes, this is my friend Sara."

Sara nodded, and Mrs. Barnes gave an embarrassingly friendly hello.

She turned and breezed back to the kitchen. My heart started beating again. When Sara gave me a questioning look, I whispered, "That's the cranky neighbor I told you about. She came to borrow some sugar."

"Oh. Can I come in?" asked Sara.

"No. It smells awful farther into the house because of a project I'm doing. A lot like gasoline." (I happen to know that Sara can't stand the smell of gasoline.)

"I don't smell anything."

"It's too far back in the house to be smelled out here."

"Oh. I came to ask if you'd like to come to the movies with Patti and me."

I knew Mrs. Barnes wouldn't stand for it. "Can't. I have to baby-sit."

"OK. Bye!"

Boy, hiding Mrs. Barnes was a challenge.

Tuesday, as I walked home from school, thinking of how my house had been turned into a nursery, I bumped into

Sara and some of her friends. We got into a conversation. We were there all of five minutes when I looked past Sara and saw Mrs. Barnes marching up the sidewalk. True, she always wanted me to "check in" right after school to make sure I was in one piece, but surely she wasn't mad about five minutes . . .

**"Since you've got the house to yourself, I wondered if we could, like, party there . . ."**

“Ann Miller, where have you been?” she fumed, red-faced.

She grabbed my arm and tugged me toward home without another word, her thin lips pursed tightly with an invisible clasp. I stole a glance over my shoulder, wondering what was holding back the hysterical laughter I expected. Sara and her friends stood rooted to the sidewalk, eyes bulging.

Safely back home, I said, “Mrs. Barnes, what’s the matter? We were just talking!”

“Not another word! One more antic and you won’t go to that basketball game you mentioned!”

What a weirdo! I stalked up to my room. Of course, the phone rang immediately. It was (surprise!) Sara.

“What was *that* all about?!”

“What?”

“You know what.” I could imagine Sara’s suspicious expression. “Wasn’t that the same woman I saw at your house yesterday?”

“Yeah. She was mad because I, uh, knocked over her lawn ornament.”

“Weird neighbor.”

“Ann Miller, come here!”

“Who was that?”

“The TV. I gotta go. I’m really tired, and that woman gave me a headache.”



I stormed downstairs.

“What do you want?” I snapped.

“Ann Miller, I am disappointed in you. I picked up the phone to answer the ring, and I couldn’t help but hear how you lied about me to that girl.

You will have to be restricted from attending the

game Friday.”

“*What?*” I shrilled.

“Don’t raise your voice to me, young lady!”

“But I promised Alan!”

“Well, Annie, you know you’re not allowed to socialize unchaperoned with boys anyway. Furthermore, I want you to call that girl back and tell her the truth.”

This was too much. “No,” I said.

“You must.”

“I don’t have her number.” I wondered if she’d believe me.

“Tell her at school, then.”

“All right. I will.” Of course, I didn’t.

I bided my time till Thursday, waiting for Mrs. Barnes to forget about my impertinence. Then I said, “I’m kinda having trouble with math, and there’s a big test coming up. Is it OK if I study at Peter Bridges’s house tomorrow?”

“Not at a boy’s house!”

“But his parents will be there!”

She paused, frowning. After a few seconds she said, “Well, all right. I’ll walk you there, and when you’re ready to come home, you call me.”

“No problem,” I said coolly.

At school the next day, I persuaded Peter by flattery. The game was at five, and I would go to his house at 4:30. It was a five-minute walk from there to the school.

As might be expected, Mrs. Barnes escorted me right up to the Bridges’s front stoop. To my great relief, she didn’t ask to speak with his parents. After she left, Peter and I studied for about fifteen minutes. Then I complained of a headache, thanked Peter, and bolted out the door.

Minutes later, I was on the bleachers with Alan, Sara, and Dave. An annoyingly loud little girl sat in front of us, playing with a straw hat.

I looked toward the gym entrance and almost fainted. The doorway framed Mrs. Barnes’s tall figure. Without thinking, I snatched the straw hat from the loud little girl and covered my face.

“Ann, what—” said Sara.

“Hey! Gimme my hat!” screamed the little girl. She started grabbing it back. I did the only thing I could think of. I threw it like a Frisbee onto the court.

The little girl began clambering down the bleachers. “My hat! That girl threw my hat!”

“Tina! Stop!” cried her mother.

Tina darted onto the court. The confused players ran about, trying to stop and trying to avoid hitting Tina at the same time.

I watched the bedlam, dazed. *Now where would I hide?* I inched toward the nearest exit. *Air! I needed air!*

From behind, rough hands gripped each of my arms. I was sandwiched between Mrs. Barnes and Tina’s mother.

“You nearly killed my daughter!”

“I did n—”

“Ann Miller, stop fibbing and tell the truth!”

What year was she living in? She made my parents look like Hell’s Angels.

Whatever possessed you to—”

I'd had enough. “Butt out!” I screamed at Mrs. Barnes. For a moment, both adults stood there, gaping. Then Mrs. Barnes regained control.

“I am terribly sorry about this. I will see that she is punished,” said Mrs. Barnes, yanking me toward the gym door. And to me, loud enough for the whole world to hear, she said, “Shame, shame! Mrs. Bridges called to see if you'd gotten home safely!”

Back home, Mrs. Barnes grimly announced, “For *that* little performance, you are grounded until your parents return next Saturday.”

I stomped up the stairs.

“Annie! Don't carry on that attitude! Stop at once!” shouted Mrs. Barnes.

I whirled around. “My . . . name . . . is . . . ANN!” I turned on my heel and stomped harder. For extra effect, I slammed my door. Stupid Mrs. Barnes. Tears filled my smarting eyes. I brushed them away. I was not a baby!

Within minutes, my phone rang. Hardly having the strength, I picked up the receiver.

“Hello?”

“Ann, what's going on? And why did you throw that little girl's hat?” Sara asked.

“I dunno. Sometimes I do crazy things.”

“And that was the same woman who dragged you down the sidewalk the other day!” Her voice suddenly changed from suspicious to mischievous. “Is she your . . . *babysitter*?”

“NO!!” I spluttered. “How could you say that? She's just a crazy neighbor!”

“Uh-huh. Right.”

Five very boring days passed. Miraculously, I wasn't the laughingstock of the school, considering my last phone conversation.

On Thursday, the day of the play auditions, I ran home after school. About a block from my door, I slowed my pace, assuming a tired look and sagging into the house.

“Mrs. Barnes, I have a terrible headache and feel sick. May I have some aspirin?”

“You poor, poor dearie. Of course you may.” She reached into the cabinet for the aspirin. “And hop right up to bed. Call me if you need anything.”

I trudged up the stairs to my room and closed the door softly behind me. I got on the bed and creaked the springs, feeling just a teeny bit guilty. I shook off the feeling, climbed out my window via the big maple branch, and made a beeline for the school.

The auditions had already begun. I was one of the last to perform and didn't goof up at all. I anticipated the leading role.

“This weekend, I'll call every one of your parents about the play,” said Miss Carey, the drama teacher. I ran back home and climbed inside. Safe at last! Now, I had only to practice my acting with Mrs. Barnes. That is, I would be a model child until Saturday. Then maybe she'd forget to tell Mom and Dad about my grounding.

During my two days as a model child, I discovered a new side to Mrs. Barnes. She really wasn't so bad. On Friday, as we watched “The Three Stooges,” I remarked, “Man, if I acted that way at school, I'd get chased out.”

“Maybe some would chase you out and others would admire you for being yourself.”

I shrugged. But maybe she was right. Again, I felt kind of guilty for sneaking out to the auditions. This time it bothered me more. I considered telling Mrs. Barnes the truth, but I swallowed it. The last place I wanted to be was back in the doghouse.

Saturday finally arrived. I was happy to see Mom and Dad. I sat in the living room listening to their discussion with Mrs. Barnes. To my surprise, she didn't make me sound as bad as I had been, although

she did say, “Regretfully, I had to restrict her from the auditions.” She turned to look at me and

smiled. “She was an angel otherwise.” I squeezed my eyes shut. Oh, well.

I could still sneak out to rehearsals . . .

The phone rang.

Mom left the room to answer it. Dad and Mrs. Barnes chatted while I

planned my strategy. I became aware of a presence and opened my eyes. Mom towered over me.

“I told Miss Carey you'd be unavailable, *Angel*.” ★



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