

Rules for
the Southern
Rulebreaker

Misssteps and Lessons Learned



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SHE WRITES PRESS

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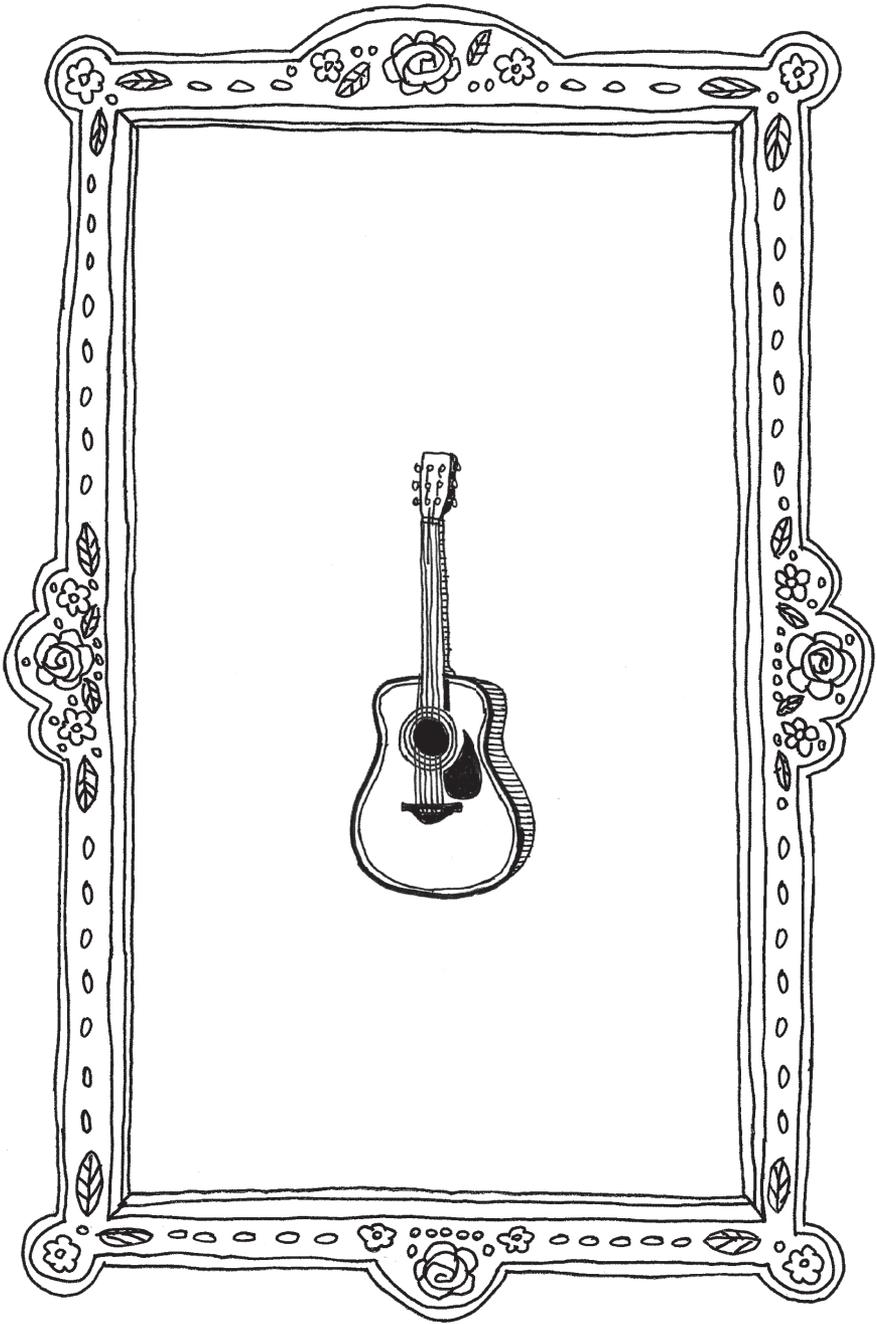
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2. Children Require Age-Appropriate Entertainment



I'd never heard the words "ma'am" or "Molly" very often until I was the oldest attendee at the Okeechobee Music Festival in Central Florida a few years ago.

"You need any help with that tent, ma'am?" the guy with a turquoise tattoo of a deer's head and antlers blazoned across his chest asked as I struggled to build shelter out of some gray nylon and way too many plastic sticks.

"Where'd you get your necklace, ma'am? I love it," asked the girl selling peanut butter and jelly sandwiches that she'd apparently rubbed in the dirt and then jumped on five times.

"Sure, go ahead, ma'am. It's all good," said the shower attendee when I asked if he could please just let me in for free after learning I had to walk two miles to the General Store to buy a \$7 token for admission to his portable showers.

As for Molly, that's the nickname for methylenedioxy-methamphetamine, a close cousin of Ecstasy, and the drug of choice at music festivals these days.

“Hey, dude, did you score some Molly?” a clean-cut blond boy in a T-shirt that read “Good at Making Bad Choices” asked a guy wearing no shirt at all.

“Who the hell even gave us that Molly last night?” I overheard a girl camping near our tent ask her friends.

I didn’t go to the music festival three hours away in the middle of Florida by choice. The only thing my then-seventeen-year-old daughter Charlotte wanted for her birthday was to go to Okeechobee Fest with her friend Samantha. Me tagging along in my turquoise Lilly Pulitzer shift and tortoise shell readers certainly wasn’t part of her birthday fantasy, but nobody under eighteen was allowed admission without an adult.

“What? Are you running for mom of the year?” a friend asked when I told her I was taking the girls to Okeechobee.

“Or worst mom of the year,” a frenemy chimed in with a smile, revealing her overly whitened teeth.

“Well, if you feel comfortable taking them, I think it’s great. I just know I couldn’t throw my daughter into all that at her age,” another mom said or, rather, judged.

Enough with the judgment. I wasn’t taking Charlotte and Samantha to turn tricks by the swamp or cook meth in an abandoned shack. We were camping in the great outdoors, unplugging, bonding, and seeing some great musicians.

The three-day lineup included Mumford and Sons, the Avett Brothers, Jason Isbell, the legendary Preservation Hall Jazz Band from New Orleans, and Kendrick Lamar. After arriving Friday evening, an attendant reeking of pot inspected my Honda Pilot for drugs, and we followed a line of cars rolling across grassy fields until we finally pulled in next to a grove of queen palms and managed to put up a four-man tent on our allotted swath of dirt. Charlotte and Samantha headed out in their jean shorts and embroidered, bell-sleeved shirts to see a rapper called Lil Dicky while I went to Hall & Oates.

“Sara Smile” made me smile. “Rich Girl” brought back memories of the twelve-year-old me listening to my transistor radio

in my old tree house, hoping my mother wouldn't overhear the lyrics "It's a bitch girl."

Fast-forward thirty-six years and here's what my seventeen-year-old daughter was hearing at the Lil Dicky show. I don't have the rights to share the exact lyrics but one of his songs makes the point that he still hasn't "been up inside" a certain girl "before," but he really wants to have intercourse with the "whore."

Not only was my seventeen-year-old daughter listening to this, and plenty that was worse, I drove three hours and was peeing in the woods to enable her to hear it. As I fell asleep in the tent that first night, I tried to convince myself that liking music depicting wild behavior doesn't mean you engage in wild behavior. At her age, I knew every line of Prince's "Darling Nikki," yet I definitely did not become Nikki.

The next morning when the girls and I were using Neutrogena makeup wipes to clean off the dirt caked around our polished toenails, I thought of the advice those child psychiatrists on the *Today* show were always spewing about bringing up the tough topics.

"So . . . a lot of wild people here. Did you see the girl wearing only Band-Aids over her nipples?"

"That's, like, ridiculous," said Samantha.

"It's like, is a bikini really just too confining?" Charlotte added.

"And some people are just clearly so out of their minds on drugs," I said.

"We saw a girl throwing up in the middle of a mosh pit and none of her friends were even paying any attention to her," Samantha said.

"She looked so miserable. This would be the worst place to be so sick. There are no bathrooms. Gross," Charlotte said. "That made me never want to get that sick."

"You'd never want to get that sick at a music festival or anywhere?" I persisted.

"Nowhere, Mom. Okay?" Charlotte said with a smile and roll of her brown eyes. "I mean, most of the people here aren't

totally drunk or messed up. It's more about music than getting messed up."

She was right, and I felt better. I was glad the "dialogue was started," to quote the experts.

Lil Dicky would also redeem himself when he later became a spokesman for Trojan condoms and safe sex. Here's what he had to say for guys who shun protection: "Let's talk about the potential consequences of that 'you got up in there raw' sex. Texting your friends about it. Ejaculated inside of her fully satisfied. I hope you're satisfied. How does it feel to go to work tomorrow with HIV?"

Give 'em hell, Dicky.

The second day of the festival, I was reading in the sun next to our tent when a neighboring camper, the one wondering where the hell that Molly came from, walked over to offer me a chicken and pesto wrap. It had been growing bacteria in the sun for hours and was the last thing I'd eat, and I'm someone who has eaten my fair share of pizza crusts out of the trash the day after my kids' sleepovers. But I didn't want to dampen her effort at camaraderie.

"That's so nice of you. Sure. I think I'll save it for dinner."

"It's, like, ten bucks."

"Actually, no thanks. I hit the grilled cheese food truck pretty hard at lunch."

Stacey didn't make a sale, but she still stayed to chat a bit. I learned she was in college in her native Maryland.

"It's my spring break so I'm here with some people I met at a music festival in Virginia last summer," she said. "The best festivals have so much variety in music, so you get a big variety of people. You can walk through and it's like listening to a radio station that's changing everywhere you go. I love finding new bands and new people."

I complimented her pendant, a stone wrapped in wire, hanging around her neck.

“It’s a caged crystal. I gave my mom one just like it for Christmas, so I always feel close to her whenever I wear it,” she said, clutching the jagged purple rock. “She’s, like, my hero.”

Fifteen minutes later, I overheard my new friend back at her tent informing everyone: “If I don’t find drugs, drugs find me.”

What would Stacey’s mom back in Maryland wearing the matching caged crystal do if she heard that? Ban music festivals? Quit paying her college tuition? Ship her off to rehab?

Most of us moms just do the best we can, learning with each new situation along the way, making up the lyrics as we go.

