

DAVID MAMET

Born in Chicago in 1947, David Mamet has written many plays, including Sexual Perversity in Chicago, American Buffalo, and A Life in Theater. He is the author of several screenplays and two collections of essays, the more recent of which is Some Freaks. He won the Pulitzer Prize and the New York Drama Critics Circle Award for Glengarry Glen Ross. He lives in Massachusetts and Vermont. The following essay is taken from Writing in Restaurants (1986). In it Mamet's expectations about a trip with his family to the Caribbean are subverted.

A FAMILY VACATION

My people have always been anxious about traveling. I think this dates back to the Babylonian Exile. In any case, when I was growing up, the smallest move was attended by fear, puttering, and various manifestations of nerves. My father and mother would fight, we would invariably get lost, we would miss meals, bedtimes, and destinations entirely.

My parents' fears took many convenient forms: fear of polio, of contamination from drinking fountains, of drowning from swimming too close on the heels of eating . . . all of these were just handy guises for the severest xenophobia, which I saw all around me as a child, in my home and my friends' homes.

Looking back, the fear of the strange that I saw around me is understandable, and I am only half kidding in referring to it as a cultural trait. My parents and the parents of my friends were one short generation removed from The Pale of Settlement in Russo-Poland; and to *their*

parents the shortest trip away from home offered real possibilities of real trouble: difficulty of obtaining food acceptable to their religious laws, of confusion as to the local customs, of persecution and murder itself.

So this was the jolly burden which my parents inherited from their parents and passed down to me; and seventy years removed from the Cossacks I was still unable to take a vacation.

On our honeymoon, my wife and I went to Paris and I spent two days curled up on the bed. Yes, you will say, correctly, that probably had something to do with getting married—but isn't that a journey of a sort as well?

The above specious observation to the contrary notwithstanding, in eight years of marriage, and based on our informative experiences on the honeymoon, we have not really had a vacation.

But this year it occurred to both of us that we were not going to live forever, that our daughter was not forever going to stay a fascinating, loving, three-year-old, and that on our respective deathbeds we were going to be unlikely to say, "I'm glad I advanced my career in 1986."

So my wife, speaking not for herself, but for the Group, signed us up to take a vacation. A model husband, I, of course, agreed and congratulated her on her decision, knowing that as the time came to leave, I could find some pull of work that kept me at home, or at the very best, feign sickness, and failing that, I could actually *become* sick.

The last being a tactic I'd employed before and to advantage: "You girls go away, don't worry about me, go and refresh yourselves," and then they'd go, and I could stretch out over the whole bed and smoke cigars in the living room.

But this time it was not to be. And, as the day set for departure drew near, I told my wife that I was heartbroken, but I could not accompany them; to which she replied that she had checked my date-book, and I had nothing scheduled for the week in question save a haircut appointment, which she had canceled for me; and that she had already told the kid how Daddy was going to come down for a week and "not work."

Well, I fought a holding action on the rectitude of her having unilaterally canceled my haircut appointment, and on the collateral issue of my well-known inability to enjoy myself when my hair is too

long. To which arguments my wife responded, "Tough," and off we went to fun and frolic in the Caribbean surf.

On the way to the airport, the cabbie asked us why we were going to vacation on an island which was currently being decimated by a hurricane. I thought, Aha! The cavalry arrives. But my wife said, "We're going down there to find out, and if it has not passed we'll just come home, and that's what we're going to do." We prepared to get on the plane.

I explained to my wife that on the plane going down I was going to have to do research, and she said, "Fine." My research consisted of reading the galleys of a detective novel someone wanted to make into a movie, and my enjoyment of it would have been increased if she had resisted, but she did not. So I struggled through the book. My daughter watched *Romancing the Stone*, and my wife colored in the kid's coloring book for three and a half hours.

At the island we found that the hurricane had indeed passed, so I scowled and we went off to our hotel. We got to the hotel, and I braced for what the Semitic Traveler will of course recognize as the interlude of: I am here, I am paying good money, everything is wrong. Change everything immediately and make it different or I am going to die.

The bellman put the bags in the room, I opened the doors to the patio beyond which was the sand beach and the Caribbean, and a football landed with a huge "plop" in the water outside.

Fine, I thought, here I'm paying good money for some peace and quiet, and some overly American jock who can't leave home without his props is going to ruin my vacation.

Then as I watched, the football opened its wings and revealed itself to be a pelican which had just dived for a fish.

Okay, I thought, I'll try. And I did try. I changed into my suit and sat on the beach. I thought about Somerset Maugham and his sea stories. I thought about Joseph Conrad. I picked up a seashell and thought how very Victorian it looked, and wondered at the Multiplicity of Nature.

The sun went down, we put the baby to bed, and my wife and I went to dinner. We sat in a beautiful restaurant, hanging out on a cliff

over the beach. There was a "popping" sound below, like far-off fireworks. I looked and saw the sound was made by the undertow, dragging the stones behind it. I said, "The stones on the beach being dragged sound like far-off fireworks." My wife said nothing. I said, "It occurs to me that the teaching of literature is completely *wrong*. Now: here we have a lovely simile—but the point is not the *simile* . . . the point is not the writer's knack at making a *comparison*—the point is the *stone*!"

My wife said, "Why don't you take a vacation?"

Well, I had another drink, then I had *another* drink, then we went back to our room and we fell asleep, and I slept for eighteen hours on each of the next two days, and on the third day I wasn't thinking about Joseph Conrad anymore.

My daughter asked me to come out and make "flour," and rather than responding "Just a minute" I went out and made flour. Making flour consisted of pouring sand into a palm leaf, and I was surprised to find it just as enjoyable as (and certainly more productive than) a business lunch at the Russian Tea Room.

The punch line was that we had a grand old time. We swam and went waterskiing, we had breakfast on the patio. The baby went naked on the beach for a week with a strand of beads around her neck, and her hair got bleached and streaked.

Some good friends were vacationing on a neighboring island, and they came over for a day and we all got drunk and went skinny-dipping in the moonlight; my daughter and I bounded on a trampoline a couple of hours every day; and all in all, it was the trip of a lifetime.

I thought: we are Urban people, and the Urban solution to most any problem is to do more: to find something new to eat in order to lose weight; to add a sound in order to relax; to upgrade your living arrangements in order to be comfortable; to buy more, to eat more, to do more business. Here, on the island, we had nothing to do. Everything had been taken away but the purely natural.

We got tired as the sun went down, and active when it rose; we were treated to the rhythm of the surf all day; the heat and the salt renewed our bodies.

We found that rather than achieving peace by the addition of a *new idea* (quality time, marital togetherness, responsibility), we natu-

rally removed the noise and distractions of a too-busy life, and so had *no need* of a new idea. We found that a more basic idea sufficed: the unity of the family.

I did leave the island two days earlier than they, as I had to be in Los Angeles on business. As I got on the plane, I harbored a small secret joy at my forthcoming return to the addiction of busy life: I would have meetings and talk on the phone and lounge across the bed and smoke cigars in the hotel room.

I waved from the plane window and put my writer hat back on, and several thoughts occurred to me. The first was of Thorstein Veblen, who said that nobody traveling on a business trip would ever have been missed if he did not arrive. And I said to myself, you know, that's true.

And I thought of Hippocrates, and his hospital on the island of Cös, where the sick were treated to a peaceful view, and warm winds, and the regenerative rhythm of the surf—to a place where man could be healed because the natural order was allowed to reassert itself; and I missed my family, and was very grateful for the week that we spent with each other on the beach.