

## **Our Magical Home**

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Iconic statues of popular toys and tools from different centuries like phonographs and giant foosball players stand high over us, painted in popping colors. As I walk through the halls filled with the bright laughter of children, my mind is transported back 10 years to a time when I was their age, chasing after my sister and exploring every nook and cranny of the resort. Fourteen times we visited these halls in “The happiest place on Earth.” The same place that has given so much happiness to me and my family: Disney World.

We did not have the privilege that many American families had, of having relatives close by. They lived overseas, nearly on the other side of the world. My father, mother, younger sister, and I were all that we had. When we were little, my sister and I did not have the conventional entertainment privileges like video games or even cable TV that other children our age took for granted. But we had our yearly Disney World trips, which meant much more to us.

These annual trips eventually became a family tradition because it was a time when we could be happy together and forget any worries we may have back at home. My father always had a saying: “work hard, play hard.” These trips served as a reward for our family at the end of the year. It allowed us to bond as a family and enjoy the wondrous experiences of Disney’s theme parks.

Disney’s Pop Century Resort is one of many resorts that surround the famed theme park. Although we have stayed at a couple other Disney resorts, Pop Century was the resort that felt like home. Decorations in that century-themed resort featured objects from the ‘50s to the ‘90s. As I walked through the resort, I could see objects representing each decade, from giant rollerblades to dial phones, from yoyos to Rubik’s cubes. The objects acted as doorways to each living section, the sections divided in turn into blocks of rooms, each around five floors high with at least 50 rooms per floor. The resort housed at least five sections and could be filled with thousands of residents depending on the time of year. “Hippie-style” flowers from the ‘60s surrounded the outdoor pools and sprayed the swimmers with gentle jets of water. I still remember how my sister and I eagerly waited by similarly fashioned flower waterjets set into the stone pathways for their timed sprays.

Many years later Pop Century still felt the same to me: the smell of the air, the look of the decorations, the very atmosphere of the place. The resort had become something of a second home to us, a place to rest after a long day at Disney World’s theme parks, from Magic Kingdom to Epcot to Hollywood Studios, and to Animal Kingdom. The very walls seemed to hold memories of my sister and me goggling at stuffed animals and trying out Minnie Mouse ears in the shop.

To save money, my parents used to bring our own food, from multiple packs of ramen to other chilled Asian foods. The dining hall offered complementary hot water for coffee and tea and a microwave for food, which we were quick to use to heat our meals. I often went to the roundabout drinking station to fill my plastic container with hot water that would cook my ramen. Although we were not able to enjoy the resort’s in-café meals like the rest of the residents, I do not remember ever feeling bothered. The homecooked food only made Pop

Century feel as though we belonged. Even the dining hall's colorful carpet, the dotted couches, and the smooth plaid of the tables felt like home.

The fabled theme parks were of course a great focus of ours. Despite how long the walks and waits must have been, my parents told me that my sister and I did not complain when we were toddlers. I cannot imagine how my parents were able to push my sister and me in our double stroller for a straight 14 hours through the sweltering Florida heat every single day of our vacation. As a child, of course, I thought nothing of their efforts, but now, I can appreciate how much they worked to make our trips a pleasure for us. I had just finished my first year at college, and I could barely walk that far by myself in the heat; that my parents had done just that while pushing a stroller *and* while having been at least 10 years older than me astounded me.

I can still remember breezing through the FastPass line for one of our favorite rides of all time: Space Mountain. When we were little, Disney World's FastPass system was still developing and not many people were familiar with it. Our parents took advantage of that system and made sure to get us FastPasses to every ride we loved, allowing us to bypass the regular lines and move quickly to the front. To be able to still walk past the hour-long line just as we had when we were young made me feel nostalgic, as if the 15 years had changed nothing at all. I felt grateful that even now, although my parents were not by our sides anymore, they were still the thoughtful ones that had reserved these passes so that we could enjoy our favorite rides.

To allow our parents to relax more, my sister and I decided to go to the theme parks by ourselves. Our parents would follow us at the beginning of the day but would return to the resort after a few short hours, allowing us to enjoy ourselves with some quality sister time. They did not have the same stamina as they had in the past, which was why they allowed us time to ourselves so they could rest. The rides themselves were just as much fun as I remembered, but now, I had a somewhat ephemeral feeling from them – I knew that this visit could be the last. Starting college meant that we would not be able to embark on these family traditions anymore.

My sister must also have felt that this trip might be our last as a family because she made sure to plan our trip down to the minute details. I always admired her determination and work ethic. Her grounding personality coupled with her responsible nature always made me feel as though I was the younger sister of us two. She never ceased to remind me that I was her role model, with my soft and caring personality a complement to her bold and strong one. But to me, she would always be my role model.

My sister went through a phase where Space Mountain was her favorite Disney ride, but later she became scared of its speed and blinding fast drops and had not gone on the ride for the past few trips. However, on this last visit, she decided she would brave the rollercoaster one more time. As we boarded the tiny space-shuttle themed cars, I remembered when I used to carry my Pluto plush with me everywhere I went and how afraid I was that he would fly out of my arms during the fast-paced ride. But I didn't carry a plushie anymore; I only had my bag to worry about. The thrill of shooting through the dark, screams echoing into the cold atmosphere and "stars" blurring into thin lines around me felt just the same as it had felt five, seven, ten, even fourteen years ago. I could remember why Space Mountain had long been my favorite ride.

Snapping me out of my reminiscences, my sister dragged me along past the castle of Cinderella, its blue parapets and shining white bricks the symbol of Disney's Magic Kingdom and made me go with her on every possible ride. The most unforgettable moment was when she led me on a

30-minute-long journey to find the “fresh fruit waffle sandwich” she had researched months in advance. The absolute look of euphoria when she held up the waffle sandwich for me to photograph could not help but make me smile in return. She is absolutely obsessed with sweet foods and loves any type of sweets. Holding that sandwich, she looked like she had just won the lottery.

Although much of the theme parks are familiar to me, I see them differently now. The theme parks were still just as magical to me, but I now noticed and appreciated the workers behind the scene. I had just begun to work a part-time job and was able to empathize with their hard work. I had not realized how many kids my age were working, standing in bright Disney-themed uniforms in the hot sun for hours without rest. They were bringing children so much joy by regulating the rides I rode as a child.

At the end of the day, we dragged our tired bodies back to the bus, which would return us to Pop Century. When my sister and I finally arrived in the hotel room at the end of the day, we collapsed on our shared bed with our Minnie Mouse ears discarded on the table. The only thing I could see on her face was a smile that was mirroring mine, our hair billowing out over the colorful bedspread. We were home again.