

The Happiest Place On Earth

By Lauren Billings

Imagine: the year is 2007. It's hot as hell in the middle of June. We open on the excited face of a young, ginger child seeing the sign for Disneyland for the first time. (Admittedly, she's a bit disappointed when the sign only leads to the parking lot.) In case you haven't realized by now, that child was me. I had just spent 26 hours over two days in a car with five other family members. I was hot. I was sweaty. I was about to piss my pants from the excitement (and being in the car forever). I'll be honest with you, I don't remember much about the time I actually spent at Disneyland in 2007. I think I tried to block most of it out. You see, even though I've used humor as a tactic to get you interested in my story, this really ends with my paternal grandmother overdosing on prescription medication and no one really knowing how or why.

Grandma Carol was about the toughest old broad who ever lived. Just about any ailment that could kill people, she lived through. Carol Billings beat cancer. She beat heart disease. To be fair, at the end she was probably at least a little addicted to pain meds, but she always believed she deserved to be pain-free after her life. I dunno how many times I was pulled out of school or out of bed by the words, "This is probably her time, probably the end for her." I never really expected her to die actually. She just kinda pulled through anything and everything. At some point, she was too frail and sick (and dangerous) to live on her own so she had to go into a nursing home, Bickford Cottage. (A couple of times, she almost burnt down my aunt's house and didn't even realize it). She was there, at Bickford, while the rest of us (her son, daughter, in-laws, and grandchildren) went to Disneyland. A 26-hour road trip would not appeal to most people, but

I, Lauren Billings, was not most people. I was eleven years old and loving life. Being stuffed in the backseat with my eight year-old cousin and our matching blue sleeping bags at our feet is probably one of the most vivid memories I have of that trip. Driving through the mountains of Colorado was terrifying and sickening, not least of which was because we almost hit a deer and were nearly run off the road. I do remember everyone being startled by the chip bags in the trunk suddenly exploding due to the altitude and my aunt shrieking that we were gonna die.

At some point, we finally got to Disney and I was about to lose my shit; I was so excited. I honestly have no recollection of the time between getting to Disneyland and that phone call, but I've gotten some perspective from family members on the trip:

Kelli, my aunt: "We hardly ever had to wait in line. It was like God knew our trip was gonna be cut short and wanted us to experience it all."

Farmer, my uncle: "I don't remember anything from that trip except for driving 52 hours in less than a week. I'm sure we went on rides though."

Dad, my dad: "We went on so many damn rides I thought my damn legs were gonna fall off from all the damn walking." (Dad likes to damn things).

We did eventually get that phone call though. It came from my aunt Kim, while we were eating dinner at a Rainforest Cafe. She said that my grandmother was very sick and that this was probably the end for her. I remember running after that, through Disney with my cousin, while crying. Mostly because my grandma was dying, but also a tiny bit because we had to leave Disneyland.

Back in our hotel room, I remember my dad crying. When you're 11 years old, you still kinda see the world as a place where bad things happen to News People. News People weren't

real, at least not in my life, back then. They were just characters that got shot or arrested or blown up. So, to see your dad cry; to see your family cry over something bad that happened *to them*, that makes everything very real. We did get another call from my aunt Kim, telling us that Grandma had finally died and they couldn't save her. Thinking back on that vacation, I probably should have acted differently. I don't remember crying, but I do remember being too uncomfortable to deal with everyone else. I remember hiding in the bathroom, my knees pressed against the porcelain in the tiny room that held just the toilet. There was a landline telephone in that toilet and still, I cannot understand why it was there. Who are you calling while you poop? That whole time I was in there felt like an eternity, but was probably more like 20 minutes of the most surreal shit I had ever experienced. Everything about that little, tiny room surrounded by ugly beige wallpaper patterned with slightly more poo-brown Mickey Mouse heads and a stark white telephone on the wall will stick with me forever.

We drove for 26 six straight hours back to Waterloo, Iowa, and must have stopped for coffee and hot chocolate half a dozen times. My mom let me put three packets of sugar into an eight-ounce cup of hot chocolate and I stayed up the whole way home. I think everyone sort of temporarily lost their minds on that trip. My aunt Kelli alternated between telling stories about Grandma and sobbing and my younger cousin always joined in with her. My dad didn't talk on the way back—not even once.

Getting terrible news in the comfort of your own home is one thing, but to be faced with death when you're at the greatest amusement park in the world feels artificial. Nothing really hit me until we were at the funeral. They played Kellie Pickler's My Angel and I started to cry. I didn't really stop crying for three days unless I was unconscious. Most of the time tears were just

sort of leaking out the sides, but sometimes I would cry so hard that I'd throw up. Nothing felt right for a while after that. Nothing felt real or substantial.

Imagine: the year is 2007. It's hot as hell at the end of June. We close on the tear-streaked face of a young ginger child saying goodbye to her grandma for the last time. In case you haven't realized by now, that child was me.