



THE KIDS IN THE CAVE

BY NAOMI SHIBLES

With no excuse to leave my house in a leafy part of the city, I shrank between walls of bricks and plaster, behind fences, to teach and write. I struggle to recall what happened since the lockdown. There must have been something between teaching and writing, reading and wine.

Between scrubbing and blunt worry, only halos of childish memories filled the spaces. I escaped, hidden in my house like a lesser mammal, into my imagination until it ached with fear and then into the memories that drifted from town to faded town. They settled like spent pods on a tidy house by a lake.

I was five when I poured a watering can over the plastic sunflower in my Nana's garden to make it spin. It was as tall as me. She posed me there for a picture in front of the neighbor's orange grove and I smiled with my free hand on my hip. I wasn't supposed to pick the oranges, but the neighbor liked my Nana and didn't mind.

Nana's modest dock jutted into the lake just past fingers of reeds interviewing one another in a skim of algae. I thought it was special that we had our own dock and paused on the front step to admire it while a spray of sunlight sparkled across the water like glitter nail polish. The fishing pole was small enough for me to handle on my own, and I carried a loaf of Wonder Bread in its white, plastic bag dappled with primary dots.

A ribbon of asphalt flowed past the front yard into a spooky tunnel of Spanish moss dragging at tired trees. I was glad to scurry across where the road was sunny as my small fingers worked a piece of white bread into a tacky cube to use for bait. The marmalade cat—we called him Morris—knew to wait where the dock met the softened land for any fish I caught. Most of the time, the ducks ate the cubes of compressed bread from my hook, and the alligator in the lake almost always ate the ducklings.

I tamped my pandemic fears, unexplored, into a crux of bravado as compressed as a cube of Wonder Bread and retreated into these vignettes of a childhood place, still vivid through the decades, to vent the pressure.

The wooden bird cuckooed in the living room, waking the lizard who lived behind the clock in the tidy house on the lake. He poked his lime nose out to survey me on my belly in the shag carpet, filling in a line picture of Tinker Bell and wondering why my page of the coloring book looked messy next to Nana's page of lightly shaded crayon with each stroke going in the same direction. I pulled at the fibers of carpet when she wasn't looking, my hand grubby with humidity and Ultra Green wax. When the lizard was convinced that I was settled, he withdrew behind his ticking fortress.

Nana sat on the sofa underneath a glamorous silver wig even though her own hair was still brown, KOOL Filter Kings snuggled with her lighter in their own clasp purse next to the beveled ashtray, where a cigarette lounged, burning its sweet, maternal smoke. The television screen looked out from its mahogany stronghold like a curious neighbor at the window. It was alight with *WKRP in Cincinnati* or *Candid Camera*—we loved both shows—and we laughed.

From top: image by Matthias Engelbach; the writer and her grandmother at Disney World: image by Ricardo Guzman.



Image from mickeyblog.com.

We had the space to belly laugh with streaming eyes, comfortable under the cuckoo's and the lizard's watch. I never laughed on the boat—there was no one to laugh with. On the boat, I was fed ramen noodles and Tang. In Nana's house, I had my own plates with Mickey Mouse waiting for me at the bottom when I finished each meal.

Mickey Mouse lived only forty-five minutes away—making Nana's house even more wonderful—down the newly established road that stretched straight and true to the Magic Kingdom. To get there, we had to drive past alligators and other monsters on either side of the thoroughfare in the everlasting swamp. They lent our frequent journey from Nana's to Disney World the danger an adventure needs.

Nana slid her powder blue Karmann Ghia sports car into a spot in the Donald Duck lot and we rode the monorail, piercing the Contemporary's lobby with the gleaming, futuristic shuttle, to travel through an enchanted vortex that spat us out over giant topiaries of Goofy and Dumbo. That's when we knew that our journey was complete. Back then, a ticket was twelve dollars and the characters—my Nana called them "critters"—just walked around for any child to hug.

My favorite place at Disney was Tom Sawyer's Island. While my Nana sunned herself on a bench behind movie star sunglasses, spending time with her cigarettes, I explored every crevice of what I thought were real caves. I was fearless, alone in the dark, feral.

My Buster Browns shuffled up the edge of a crag and I squished into a dim corner, silent and wild. Families walked through and I leaped from my hideout to startle them, imagining myself on *Candid Camera*. In those caves, I felt in control, as if my stable life at Nana's fortified my uneasy life on the boat, rather than the two worlds preening as antonyms.

When my son was five, we rode the raft to Tom Sawyer's Island on a Halloween lousy with squalls of hot, driving rain. Lightning closed the rides, but the caves were dry. I pointed out my old hiding places in the accent lighting and my son clamored into those same niches to wait for a victim. The only person who came along was a park attendant, overheated in compulsory foul weather gear and cross from searching for us.

The storm was worse. The caves were flooding. Tom Sawyer's Island was being evacuated and we had to go.

We crammed with the rest of the island's castaways under a shanty, waiting for a break in the lightning to sail the raft back to Adventureland. Storm water poured in sheets over the edges of our shelter so that nothing else existed except steamy sweat seeping into heavy denim and low-voltage excitement. When it seemed safe, we piled onto the raft and it took on water halfway across, creating a mildly thrilling memory—my favorite Disney recollection because I knew that my son knew that he was safe with me.

The following year, I crouched in my early memories, selfishly, to avoid unchecked fear, but they reminded me of what I wanted as a child: a place where I felt cozy and safe. Rolling strips of dough in cinnamon and sugar for my Nana to bake "snails" that filled the kitchen with a heady comfort; morning dew slick on orange, shining cheeks in the pumpkin patch at Halloween; my black leotard and pink tights for ballet class; evening frog songs; reading books and gnawing on a hunk of watermelon in the Florida heat.

Shoving my ruffled socks into stiff, patent leather shoes because it made my Nana happy to take me to polka dances where they slid along the sawdust floor. Eyeing the jelly donuts spread across a folding table as she spoke at her AA meeting.

As I withdrew into my earliest favorite places, behind my fences, pressed still between bricks and plaster, I remembered that when I was small and needed it, my Nana had the time to be kind. The pandemic thrust time into our house, so my son and I used it to bake cookies and mix pantry items into science experiments that exploded in rivulets of foam. We did scavenger hunts in the backyard and planted seeds.

Together, we stitched time into yards of luxuriant experiences that would arrange themselves and settle into treasured memories. My own memories of my Nana and her tidy house on the lake reminded me that I, too, had time to give my child the kindness that he needed to feel cozy and safe in this gossamer place we call home.