

In Good Company

The fireworks celebrate the end of the evening at Disneyworld. “When You Wish upon a Star” fills the air in surround sound, serenading happy families as they say good night to the Magic Kingdom. As Tinker Bell glides across the darkened sky, my six-year-old son, Conor, observes, “I can see the cable, Mom. She can’t really fly.”

We shiver a little in the cool March air. Conor is tall for his age and thin. His tube socks are stretched to his knees, exposing pale bare skin between his kneecaps and his shorts. His blue tropical-print shirt is inappropriate for this chilly evening; I’m glad I brought his jacket.

Just like the television commercial, Conor and I stand with our faces lifted, watching the fireworks. We are worn out from a day of standing in line, walking, and struggling with each other. I take his hand, and we walk to the tram that will carry us back to the parking lot. I steal a look at his precious, vulnerable face. *Did I make him happy today?*

Conor’s father and I divorced five years ago. My son and I have never before been on a real vacation together. Our only getaways have been a few days in Chicago, a few hours’ drive from our central Illinois home, and a visit to family in South Carolina. I want this vacation to be special, but so far it hasn’t been easy.

Yesterday, when we landed in Orlando, Avis wouldn’t rent me a car because my credit card was maxed to its limit. I ended up renting a car from a no-name company that accepted my travelers’ checks with proof of my return flight. The hotel I’d reserved a month earlier was overbooked, so I drove down the main drag of Kissimmee and found a mom-and-pop motel. Then, this morning, our first stop at the Magic Kingdom was the gift shop. Conor was determined to spend the twenty dollars his dad had given him within the first hour, which caused me to carry Tigger around all day. Our dream vacation was filling me with anxiety.

I bought only a one-day pass to Disneyworld, because Conor doesn’t like rides; he gets motion sickness on airplanes, merry-go-rounds, and in cars. I convinced him to try the rides with special effects and little motion, knowing he would enjoy them. We did the Pirates of the Caribbean, It’s a Small World, Robinson Crusoe, and Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea rides. We saw the shows. We ate. We argued. I wanted to eat lunch; he wasn’t hungry. I monitored the time so we wouldn’t miss the next show; he dawdled. Constantly, throughout the day, he pulled against me or I pulled against him—which was it?

At about four this afternoon, we finally decided we were having a good time. But I wanted him to have a *fantastic* time. Now, as we watch the fireworks artificially brighten the night, I think Disneyworld is a lonely place. I don’t have someone wiser and more experienced to help with travel arrangements. I don’t have anyone to help convince my son that this is fun and to enjoy the adventures it has to offer. I don’t have someone to take him to the men’s restroom. Conor doesn’t have siblings to share the rides with. He doesn’t have an intact family. Everywhere I look, boys and girls are holding hands with their moms and dads, laughing and enjoying the vacation I’ve dreamed of.

It is December 28, and Conor and I are doing the Chicago Architecture Foundation's (CAF) walking tour of The Loop. Conor's nose is red from the cold, but his head and ears are snug in a green and yellow Packers' stocking cap. He wears ski gloves and a puffy coat that make him look a little like the Michelin man. I, too, am prepared for the Chicago weather, in my long, cobalt blue wool coat and matching earmuffs.

Our group of twelve people is gathered outside the cramped CAF bookstore. Conor is the only child. We follow our leader closely, his words competing with horns honking, trucks shifting gears, and the El clattering overhead. The smell of diesel from the city buses and of tacos and gyros from local eateries is nauseating.

This tour is my attempt to bring life to one of Conor's homework assignments. He reluctantly participates in the gifted program at his school. Though he doesn't like to stand out, he is interested in things other nine-year-olds aren't ready for—such as architecture. In his fourth-grade enrichment program, he is doing research on Daniel Hudson Burnham, a famous Illinois architect who designed many of the buildings in Chicago after the 1871 fire destroyed the city.

Chicago is known for the diversity of its architecture. On our guided CAF tour, we see some of the first skyscrapers by Sullivan and Burnham, the forty-five-story Chicago Board of Trade, the James R. Thompson Center with its much-criticized atrium of empty space, and the IBM Building designed by Ludwig Mies Van Der Rohe.

Conor complains about the cold. His neck is tired from looking up. He's hungry and doesn't think he can wait forty-five minutes until the tour is over. He thinks walking the two-mile walk is child abuse. He is oblivious to our ten companions and one guide who are evaluating my mothering skills.

I'm beginning to wish we had just bought a video of the tour.

The walking tour ends at CAF's gift shop. We buy a paperback book with pictures that Conor can cut out for his poster-board presentation. We discuss topics to cover in his report to make it interesting. We talk about which buildings are our favorites. We agree Daniel Burnham was traditional and that the more recent architects are more creative. Just an hour ago, Conor was whining, and now we are having a healthy conversation. Finally, I am enjoying my son's company.

I want to open up the world for Conor. More than anything, I want to enjoy being with him. But for every easy hour I spend with my son, I have to slog through three hard ones.

I drove four hours to get to Chicago and checked us into the Chicago Hilton and Towers for two nights. Besides doing this tour and seeing the exhibits about architecture and the Chicago World's Fair at the Chicago Museum, we plan to see the Shedd Aquarium, go through Navy Pier, and look at the Christmas windows at Marshall Fields. I wonder if he realizes how I knock myself out for him.

Today is Burger Buddy Day at Enos Middle School. One Friday each month, the fifth- and sixth-graders invite their parents and other significant people in their lives to eat lunch with them. The principal, Dr. Tadlock, always works the lunch line so parents can meet her. After lunch, students and their buddies can visit with teachers or go to the computer lab for the rest of the noon break.

Today I meet Conor at the broad stairway leading to the cafeteria in the basement. He mumbles a greeting, and I follow him through the lunch line. Dr. Tadlock and two lunch ladies place a thin hamburger, tater tots, corn, and peaches into little compartments on my tray. The long tables with attached benches are too low for both of us. I sit and swing my legs together over the bench as gracefully as possible. Conor and I talk in starts and stops and eat quickly.

We dump our trays and the worn wooden stairs creak as we walk up two flights to the computer lab. The lab is a converted classroom with polished wooden floors, faded chalkboards and tall windows, propped open to the crisp autumn smells. Ten computers sit on banquet-style tables in the makeshift lab.

Conor chooses a computer near a window, and we sit in metal folding chairs. I have never operated a computer. I watch while Conor chooses a game called “The Oregon Trail.” In the beginning he purchases supplies—flour, sugar, potatoes, dried meat—and chooses the people who will make the trip from Independence, Missouri, to Oregon. He kills off all the pioneers on the Oregon Trail in record time—with smallpox, Indian attacks, and starvation. I don’t think this is the objective of the game and suggest we switch to a math game. I wonder if this is what Dr. Tadlock had in mind when she instituted Burger Buddy Day.

Puberty is a tearful, tough time for girls; I know this from personal experience. I didn’t know it would be so hard for an eleven-year-old boy. Conor sends mixed signals, and I don’t know how to decode them. His teacher tells me Conor is proud of me, that he tells her things about me often. He wanted me to talk to his class about my trip to Egypt. He invited me to come watch the report he gave about his cockatiel, Einstein.

This is the year I began a relationship with a man, Randy. Conor says he likes Randy but wants him to come around less. We have lived, just the two of us, for eight years in our little house. Now, Conor is pushing away and becoming more independent; yet, at the same time, he seems to want to cling to me. He is emotional over small things and mature about big things. He is affectionate when we are not out in public. When we’re walking together, he’s several steps ahead of me. Sometimes I think he wishes he had a different mother.

The bell signals the end of Burger Buddy Day. Conor and I walk unattached down the stairs, and before we split off—him to social studies class and me to work—he asks if I’ll come to Burger Buddy Day again next month. Perhaps he’s not so embarrassed to be with me after all.

Reelfoot Lake is a huge swamp in northwestern Tennessee that was formed when an earthquake caused the Mississippi Rive to flow backward and cover the cypress forest with water. The lake is shallow. My new husband, Randy, cuts the motor and carefully maneuvers the johnboat to a better position among the lily pads. The boat rocks as it bumps over the cypress stumps crowded below the water’s surface. These stumps provide habitat for crappie, largemouth bass, catfish, bream, and blue gill. Randy and his two teenaged sons have fished here many times. It’s the first time for Conor and me. We all have cane poles and are using live crickets for bait.

I watch my fifteen-year-old son and am embarrassed by his lack of engagement. He throws out his line a few times, then gives up. I think he should act more interested in this activity. He should try harder to have something in common with his stepbrothers.

They are content to stay out here for hours on this windy, chilly day in May, casting their poles and pulling in our dinner. I think Conor wishes he was at home playing video games.

Back at the cabin, there is no television and, therefore, no video games. Conor stretches out for a nap on the Hide-a-Bed in the living room, while Randy and the boys clean the fish. I am disappointed by Conor's antisocial behavior. He should be learning how to gut a fish just in case he might need to someday. He could be bonding with the boys.

After dinner, Randy and his sons reminisce about years past; they tell exaggerated fish stories and talk about people we don't know. We turn in early, because they want to fish at dawn. Conor and I decide to sleep in.

The next morning—midmorning, that is—I invite Conor to walk down to the lake's edge. We sit in Adirondack chairs. The landscape is perfectly flat—water as far as you can see, surrounded by cypress forest. The cypress trees cast their lacy shadows over us. Conor acknowledges the place is beautiful. We watch blue herons wading at the water's edge and listen to birdsongs we can't identify.

We both admit that fishing isn't our thing, that we're out of our element.

"Randy is a good guy, but sometimes he gets on my nerves," Conor says.

"He gets on my nerves, too, sometimes. But that's part of life and living with other people."

"I guess this isn't a very comfortable situation for you, is it?" I ask, already over my disappointment in him. "Can you at least enjoy the lake and being here?"

He agrees he can endure it, and we relax and enjoy the moment. We talk about the future. We talk about what it means to be successful. I say that, to me, it means working at something you love doing. He says he knows I work hard and he appreciates it. I say his opinion of me is important to me. We talk about high school and how he likes it much better than junior high. I tell him it was worth the trip just to spend this time with him.

The twenty-six-foot U-Haul has an automatic transmission, a radio, a pretty good heater, and a trailer hauling my car. When we pass semis on the interstate, the wind pushes against the truck and the trailer wags behind it. Conor is the driver. At twenty-one, he is delivering me to a new home, a new life. My second marriage is over, and I am moving to Denver.

It is an amazing freedom to choose where you want to live first and then find work. Six months ago I moved out of my house, took early retirement from the State of Illinois, got a job at the Colorado Department of Health, and rented an apartment. Conor plans to move to Denver when he graduates next year with a degree in architecture. It's December 28, exactly ten years since our Chicago Architecture Tour. We are headed in the same direction.

As we drive away from Illinois, I shed the leaving-behind feelings like a snake sheds its skin. I have a feeling of rightness, anticipation, and energy. We have made this trip many times over the fourteen years since my brothers moved to Colorado. But this time, we are going home.

Though it is winter, the sun warms the brown hills and plains. I relax and stitch the pieces of a new quilt I'm making for my nephew's wedding.

I watch my son's face—so much like mine thirty years ago—as he steers the truck. His face lights up as he talks about his professors, environmental design, and precast concrete. We talk about new cars and family and skiing and everyday things. Not once in the two-day trip do we turn on the radio.

I don't have to wonder if he's happy today. We are in sync, without tension. I am not trying to influence him; he is not trying to gain control of the situation. We are having a great time just being together. Finally, I have what I've always wanted.