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Candyland After a Neutron Bomb


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By **KATHERINE JAMIESON** (/tag/katherine-jamieson/)

“Life has gotten real complicated, and when you think of Enchanted Forest, it’s not.” –
Paul Kennedy, documentary photographer of Enchanted Forest

On August 15th, 1955, a month after Disneyland Park opened its gates, the second theme park to be built in the US lowered its drawbridge for the first time to a humbler fanfare. “Enchanted Forest” was constructed on nineteen acres of farmland on the Baltimore National Pike, a Sunday’s drive from Washington, DC. As the story goes, Howard Harrison Sr. got the idea to build the place after reading nursery tales to his 13 grandchildren, and soon running it became a three-generation family effort. “There are no mechanical rides in the park,” Howard E. Harrison, Jr. told the Baltimore News-Post in an article that appeared on Enchanted Forest’s opening day. “Instead, we hope that the children will enjoy the make-believe figures that are before their eyes.”

When my family first started visiting the park in the 80s, two million others had already ventured there to extract a little fantasy from the agricultural landscape. While Disney’s tracts of walnut and orange groves were quickly overrun by the development of new rides, Enchanted Forest remained an island of illusion, growing just over twenty acres during its entire existence. Bordered by cornfields and forests, it was still subject to local pranks and vandalism— the lure of defacing childhood memories proving irresistible over the generations—and neighborly disapproval. Some thought this diversion into amusement to be representative of the direction the country was

going: away from the reality of hard labor and toward the cheap delights of television and movies. For others, the complaint was simpler: land that can be used for growing should do just that.

We went to Enchanted Forest in the summers when we were visiting my grandparents' farm near Frederick, Maryland. Most of the time they lived in Georgetown where my grandfather practiced law and my grandmother hosted cocktail parties. Their stately, white mansion was conflated in my mind with the White House, full of pastel colors and wedding cake flourishes. But the farm was our family's own Enchanted Forest: a fantasy of our agrarian history decorated in Colonial style, worked by local farmers, and financed by a DC lawyer's salary.

Once, when I was rehashing my upbringing in my 20s, my mother retorted that a lot of effort had been made to give me a "magical childhood." Along with time on the bucolic farm and Christmas lore, visits to the fairytale world of Enchanted Forest were a cornerstone of this campaign. From Little Miss Muffet to Jack and his Beanstalk, the characters were modeled on two-dimensional storybook illustrations built from chicken wire and paper-mâché, their features rendered — with varying skill — using oil paints. The creators had been given free reign to make the stories come alive, and there were whimsical details wherever you looked.

Goldilocks' three bears lived in houses with chimneys tailored just to them: Papa's was a corncob, Mama's an open pocketbook, and Baby's a bottle nipple. The sturdy Three Little Pigs' House had a wolf-skin rug, and the Crooked House was truly, unnervingly crooked. Maryland ingenuity and thrift accounted for some of the quirky touches: a worn fire hose was used for the laces on the Old Woman's Shoe, and tractor motors

powered rides. And then there were casual afterthoughts, which gave the park the feel of a cozy, ramshackle home: a garland of broken Christmas lights twirled loosely around the good fairies as they fluttered over sleeping Cinderella.



My brother and I entered Enchanted Forest unaware that tragedy and fantasy sometimes went hand in hand. We were not saddled with grief for Tooty the baboon, who died after allegedly eating a cyanide-laced banana (though the case was never settled). Nor had we heard of the massacre of the fancy peacocks and pheasants when some real forest creature—weasels were accused—invaded the property. We did not know that our favorite characters had been stolen and deposited into neighbors' yards, or that the wishing well, with its waterlogged hopes and dream, had been ransacked for coins.

Unspoiled by the “mechanical” parks of the West Coast, my brother and I wandered happily in the mixed metaphors of childhood fantasy: Mount Vesuvius towering over Ali Baba's cave, Huck Finn's Pond right around the corner from the Easter Bunny house (complete with live bunnies). Willie the Whale laughed a gear-grinding chortle when you entered his maw to greet an old fisherman who may have been Geppetto, or

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Jonah. In a strange conflation of church and amusement, the park had a chapel on the grounds where couples could be married. If after traipsing through Little Red Riding Hood's house, through Peter Piper's Pumpkin patch, over to Hickory Dickory Dock, to see Little Boy Blue, you were tired, you could ride in the bonneted 15-foot Mother Goose who sailed glacially through the park, trailing her black duckling behind. You could fish for goldfish with corn kernels, take the teacup trolley down the White Rabbit hole, call Rapunzel on the telephone. My mother and grandmother were charmed by the simple construction of the park, the folk art characters and mild surprises, and for years these were also the bounds of my creative world. My mother's idealized '50s childhood persisted into the '80s of my own in the form of giant lollipops and green dragons guarding a castle.

But as I got older, these magical realms were less entrancing to me than they were to my family members. This was not the first time fantasy failed to interest me. Though I loved to read, I disliked make-believe. I did my best with the dolls given to me year after year, though I bestowed on them decidedly non-baby names like "Rocky Malone." Grandma, an artist who channeled her energies into interior design, decorated an entire dollhouse for me with her signature attention to matching wallpaper and rugs, and teensy tiny lamps and telephones. I tried to play with it, but I never knew what to do. Make the dolls walk through the house to answer the telephone?

In addition to being literal, I also became anxious about the "real" risks of these kinds of fantasy parks, rather than the imagined dangers of big bad wolves. Famously, I refused to enter a pirate ship tourist attraction at the beach because I deemed it a "fire hazard." When a ride involved going into small, dark spaces, I talked a lot about being "claustrophobic," a word I had learned to describe the intense panic I felt in elevators.

Looking back, I think I really was afraid of some of the characters at Enchanted Forest, but I couldn't admit it. It was easier to focus on pragmatic concerns than explain why Alice suspended above me in a perpetual fall— arm outstretched, whites of her eyes glowing above her eyeballs, mouth open in a silent, high-pitched scream— was so utterly terrifying.

The last year we visited Enchanted Forest I was ten-years-old, my brother seven, both of us on the cusp of abandoning fairy tales for interactive computer games. One of our favorite stops had always been the Snow White and the Seven Dwarves' underground gem mines. The tour wound through musty cul-de-sacs where hunched dwarves toiled with picks to unearth gleaming pieces of plastic, all of it lit by feeble light bulbs. The park provided an extra perk for this attraction: quarters were left on all the small ledges, which protruded from the sides of the cave walls. Each year, we ran through in a frenzy gathering them to buy treats

Whereas the Dwarves' mine had once seemed an exotic warren of riches, we could count money now and knew the bounty wasn't great. Still, ice cream was ice cream, and we were game. We began our headlong rush through the tunnels as a race, dodging toddlers and grabbing quarters without pausing to admire the dwarves and their never-ending toil. And so we were faster than usual, faster than we had ever been before.

At a bend in the tunnel, we saw a familiar figure hunched over a ledge. Grandma! But why was she here? She and my mother usually walked behind us. She seemed to be taking one of the quarters that the park left for us. But why would she take money from her own grandchildren? We called out to her, trying to grasp the situation, and her abashed look gave it all away.

As epiphany after epiphany struck, I grappled with the fact of lifelong deception in the name of fantasy. I had never once wondered why my brother and I were the only ones running through the mines. Or, why the park would gift to us—presumably everyone—more than the cost of our entrance fees; or why, every year, my grandmother left to use the bathroom at Robin Hood’s Snack Shop before we visited Snow White. In short, the treasures of the tunnel were just another taken-for-granted generosity of the universe. In daylight, we reported Grandma’s trickery to my mother, who was, of course, in on it. At the risk of sounding dramatic, this was the end of my childhood.

Shortly after we caught Grandma, Enchanted Forest lost its fight against the intrigues of the “mechanized” world. TV, video games, and Paramount King’s Dominion with its roller coasters, log flume, and cable-car sky ride were blamed for wresting children’s attention from the simple pleasures of the Merry Miller’s House and the Cup who ran away with the Spoon. The trend was nationwide, and other parks like our Enchanted Forests that had cropped up around the country in the 50s and 60s (we never guessed that ours wasn’t the only one), from Salem, OR to Old Forge, NY, either capitulated to the demands of modern children, or paid the price. As it turned out, the new generation wanted rides that moved, and moved fast.

The famous Old King Cole figure still lords over US Route 40, a flaming queen bedecked in rapperesque gold chains, his hip cocked jauntily to the right. But instead of directing hundreds of thousands of visitors to the “Storybook Land of Fairy Tales Come True,” he now points the way to the Enchanted Forest Shopping Mall with its Petco, Pearle Vision, and Avis Rent-a-Car. Committees were formed over the years in an effort to preserve the original Enchanted Forest rides, but it would have taken millions to restore the original site and no one had millions to spare for an old-time amusement park.

Some of the structures were rescued before the forest encroached beyond hope, and restored versions of the originals are now scattered on local farms, or selling on eBay. A blog featuring images of the dilapidated buildings describes the park as “Candyland after a neutron bomb.” Forty years after its opening, Enchanted Forest made the complete transformation from idyllic childhood fantasyland to ironic crime scene: the dilapidated park was the setting for an episode of *Homicide: Life on the Street*, and later for the horror film *Fear of Clowns*.

My own final experience of the park was also cinematic. In 1990, as a young teenager, I went to see John Waters’ 50s send-up film *Cry Baby* which takes place, like all of his films, in Baltimore. The climax, in which the heroine has to choose between her “square” boyfriend or the bad-boy Wade “Cry-Baby” Walker (Johnny Depp), is set in Enchanted Forest.

I knew nothing about the movie, or Waters’ campy, ironic style, and the scene took me fully by surprise. My solipsism was breached; I was shocked by the fact that this place existed independently of my own personal history. The familiar turreted castle rising again on the big screen felt like a violation of privacy: the desecration of my memory of a place that no longer existed. It all came back to me in the dark theater, the giddy joy of tearing through the dim Dwarves’ tunnels, and the bite of sunlight in my eyes when we had to emerge into the real world.

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