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We modeled this cover on a classic Rockwell painting, see page 49.

## MY WORD

By Ronnie Koenig

# DISNEYLAND, SOLO

What it's like to experience 'the Happiest Place on Earth' without the distraction of kids, friends, or even your spouse

**T**he meeting with the agent hadn't gone as planned.

Fresh off a plane from the East Coast with my beloved screenplay tucked into my oversized tote, I was sure that I was about to experience my big Hollywood break. Two days later, I sat alone in my hotel room – a corporate-looking high-rise in Century City – and stared at my cellphone. The actress whose recommendation had gotten me the meeting was too busy to get together, and the agents who had bandied about the idea of turning my unproduced movie into a TV show and name-dropped Charlie Sheen were noticeably silent. The way I saw it, there were two viable courses of action – cut my losses and rebook myself on the next flight home to my husband who was waiting for me in Brooklyn, New York, or go to Disneyland.

The idea of spending the day alone at "the Happiest Place on Earth" seemed at once immensely exciting and totally creepy. What would people think of me spinning alone in a teacup? Surely the captain of the Jungle Cruise would make jokes at my expense. Then again, going to my favorite theme park alone would be sort of like realizing a childhood dream. As kids, my younger sister and I had come up with an elaborate scheme in which we'd secretly depart our hotel room in the middle of the night while our parents slept and ride the loop of the Disney monorail to our hearts' content. "*Por favor manténgase alejado de las puertas,*" we repeated, like a top-secret code.

Up until this point in my career, I'd had a few false starts in my quest to take my writing to the next level. The realization that this trip out to the left coast had been for naught hadn't totally sunk in, but I probably knew it in



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my heart. There was only one way to make sure my six-hour cross-country journey, and the money and confidence it had taken to get here wasn't for nothing. I polled my friends on Facebook: "Going to Disneyland by yourself for the day – pathetic or awesome?" "Awesome!" was the unanimous reply. So I drove my rental car onto the Goofy level of the Mickey & Friends parking lot, and feeling very much like a kid again – albeit one with her own American Express card – purchased a one-day pass.

Going to Disney – most often Disney World, in Florida – was a happy family ritual for me as a child growing up in suburban Long Island. All those memories captured in photographs – swimming in the pool with my dad at the Polynesian Village, my sister and I wearing Donald Duck caps as we sat

on Main Street waiting for the Electrical Parade. But would it still be fun without my sister sitting behind me on Space Mountain or my mom alighting with me in Peter Pan's ship?

Hell yes! As I made my way down Main Street, the California sun shining down on me, I bypassed the slow-moving families, making my way from ride to ride, stopping for a cheeseburger when I felt like it because, hey, there was no one I needed to check in with; no one else's needs I had to accommodate. I was free to experience Disney my way. So what if I got stares from the happy couples or the tour group of women in their matching T-shirts?

If I wanted to sit through the Tiki birds 10 times – who was stopping me? Ice cream followed by an extra gooey chocolate chip cookie? Who was watching? **Continued on page 88**

## MY WORD

Continued from page 22

This was better than the Griswolds going through Walley World with John Candy at gunpoint. It was my fun, my way.

Many people feel uneasy in their own company. When dining alone in restaurants, we scroll through our iPhones. When traveling on business, we feel awkward sightseeing alone. Without someone to validate our experiences we are stranded – lost at sea.

I made my way through Adventureland, into Fantasyland and headed right toward Tomorrowland where a live band played. I spent the afternoon happily bouncing through the park, beholden to no one except myself. I soon discovered that being a single rider allowed me to go to the head of most lines. No longer extra-neous, my role was to fill in a space left vacant by a family of three on a log flume. I experienced the rides

with these strangers, connected to their shrieks of delight, but also noticeably separate. I even played third wheel to a couple necking on the submarine into Finding Nemo's Tomorrowland Lagoon. For a while, I felt the urge to cling on, or walk with a crowd to appear not-so-alone. Then, I let even that small urge go.

I stayed until the sun set, and then, why not? I decided to stay longer, going back to revisit rides that had taken me through the magic of childhood to the startling reality of life as adult – as a writer who still believed in all the possibilities in the world but had no guarantee of finding success. Riding alone in the back of a boat through It's a Small World, I watched the family sitting in front of me – a young couple with a baby girl – and smiled as they pointed out the sights that were as much a part of me as the house I grew up in or my first grade teacher. As I sailed alone through this animatronic world, the

lilting refrain echoing through me, I knew one day I would bring my own babies here and it would be fun. But it also struck me that this day, alone, was one of the best I'd ever had.

I stayed and stayed, lost in the swirl of activity. I was one of the last to leave the park when it closed at midnight.

Back in my hotel room, I walked out onto the balcony, exhausted after nearly 12 hours on my feet, but still floating. The sights and sounds of the day – a family chowing down on turkey legs, couples soaring past on flying ships, the castle lit up jewel-like under the fireworks – mingled with the echoes of visits past. My flight was first thing in the morning, but I knew I wouldn't be able to sleep. Instead I sat on my balcony and spent the next few hours marveling at the sparkling stars above Los Angeles.

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*Ronnie Koenig has written for Redbook, Cosmopolitan, and The Atlantic ([ronniekoenig.com](http://ronniekoenig.com)).*