



E TICKET

by Lori Sambol Brody

MADDY slips into the back seat of Nancy's VW Rabbit. "Disneyland here we come!" she says. Her voice trails off. Nancy and Lisa wear Jordache jeans and ruffled blouses, blonde hair highlighted with lemons this early in the summer, lavender eye shadow sparkling. Like twins. Maddy had prepared for the hot still air of Anaheim: shorts, a T-shirt, and pristine white K-Swiss tennis shoes, hair pulled into a high ponytail. She's underdressed. For Disneyland.

She'd been so excited when Nancy had invited her but she's already screwed up. What else could go wrong? She folds into herself, hiding in the curved backrest. She loosens her hairband and shakes down her hair,

combs it with her fingers in an attempt to style it.

“What’s up?” Nancy says. She never misses anything, with her sharp brown eyes—eyes that make Maddy think she’s not a real blonde. Nancy attributes her light hair and her dark eyes to her Italian grandmother. Better not contradict her either, or you’ll get kicked out of her group *this* fast.

Lisa is the hinge between Nancy and Maddy—her best friend since Brownies. Because of Lisa, Maddy can have lunch at the Grove in the middle of campus, where the popular kids hang out on benches inside a ring of eucalyptus. Otherwise, Maddy would be eating in the library with her other friends, the smart girls who study through lunch period or meet with the movie club. In social exile.

“Good to go!” Maddy says. Her smile almost feels real.

“Great.” As the Rabbit surges from Maddy’s cul-de-sac onto the main road with a force that presses Maddy into the back of her seat, another car stops short, tires screeching. A preview of Mr. Toad’s Wild Ride.

The air conditioner is on high, redolent with the smell of a new car, plastic and chemicals. Nancy fiddles with the radio dial, moving from KROQ to KMET to KLOS. Lisa’s bare feet rest on the dashboard, toenails painted fuchsia. Maddy listens to the stream of the conversation from the

front seat. “I always meet cute guys at Disneyland,” Nancy says.

“Jill met the cutest guy there at Grad Night. Rumor has it she blew him on It’s a Small World,” Lisa says. Maddy imagines Lisa savoring the gossip like a Jolly Rancher.

“As if Jill has the guts,” Nancy says.

Maddy knows nothing of rumors, but who would do something like that during a ride, It’s a Small World no less, with everyone and the sweetly singing animatronic dolls watching?

Over her shoulder, Nancy says, “Maddy, what do you think?”

“About what?”

“About cute boys.”

In the spotlight of Nancy’s question, Maddy’s that girl with the pink parasol in one of the paintings in the Haunted Mansion elevator: as the elevator pretends to descend, the picture expands to show the girl balancing on a tightrope above the gaping mouth of a crocodile.

“Can’t live with them, can’t kill them,” Maddy says. Her mother was given a shirt with that slogan when the divorce was finalized.

Lisa turns around and narrows her eyes at Maddy. Maddy holds her breath. Has she miscalculated? She’s been trying different masks to fit in at

the Grove because being the smart serious girl just won't work. This is the funny girl mask, the clown with the viper-sharp tongue.

None of the masks feel right.

But Nancy laughs. After a beat, Lisa laughs. Maddy breathes again.

But there are no boys until the afternoon. Or boys Nancy and Lisa deem worth snaring with lip-glossed smiles and hair flips. During lunch, two boys with glasses, button-down shirts, and pimples like constellations across their cheekbones sit down between Nancy and Lisa—just like a ghost appears in each car in the Haunted Mansion. Nancy and Lisa ignore them.

Maddy cringes at the silence, thinking of the fat lady chasing the pirate in the Pirates of Caribbean while the other pirates chase lithe beauties. Then she leans over. “You guys will look a lot better if you move your chairs there.” She points to a table near the concession stand. Nancy and Lisa giggle and the boys blush, move away.

Heady with success, Maddy says, “I could go for a chocolate-covered banana.” She loves those frozen bananas, a surprise every time at how cold and hard the banana is and how quickly it defrosts.

Nancy's sunglasses hide her eyes; the mirrored lenses reflect a

miniaturized Maddy. “You’re really a kid, aren’t you?”

What had Maddy said? She *is* a year younger than Nancy and Lisa, in age and in school, but her age has never mattered before. As far as she knows.

Lisa says, “We don’t eat bananas in public.” Her eyes slide toward Nancy.

Why the prohibition? And then heat flushes across her face. Of course. It’s the shape. She looks at her hands clasped in her lap.

“Space Mountain?” Lisa suggests.

Maddy knows Lisa’s question is meant kindly, to draw Nancy’s attention away from Maddy’s faux pas, but a twinge of anger courses through her like an electric shock. Why does Lisa believe she needs to protect her?

Maddy says, “Yes, let’s go to Space Mountain.” But Maddy really wants to go on all the rides she’s loved since she was a child, not the rollercoasters. Especially Adventure Thru Inner Space, the science geek ride that shrinks passengers through a microscope into the atoms of a snowflake—or at least, Maddy really believed she had been shrunk when she was younger. She cannot suggest that ride now. Since science is not

cool, Inner Space must not be cool. Nancy probably doesn't even know what an atom is.

In the line for Space Mountain, three boys hover behind them. Nancy smiles at the cutest one, blonde hair long like the surfers at school, eyes like the blue raspberry salt water taffy sold at Candy Palace on Disneyland's Main Street. He responds as if an invisible string connects him to Nancy and her smile is a tug bringing him close. The two other boys follow. The second cutest is all arms and legs, the kind of guy who just had a growth spurt and isn't used to his new body. The third's hair is too curly to be stylish, a jewfro. They wear O.P. shorts and T-shirts with the logos of skateboard and surfboard companies and bands. The cutest boy, Mike, wears a Zogg's Sex Wax shirt, a slogan Maddy has always found disgusting and titillating, even after she finally figured out (not so long ago) that Zogg's was surfboard wax. The gangly guy, Steve, wears a Dogtown shirt with its distinctive cross; the third, Dave, sports the swooping logo of the band Yes.

Standing in line for Space Mountain, as if to board a space ship, red lights flashing, somehow the boys sort themselves so each pairs off with a girl. By the time the loudspeaker says, "This is mission control. You are go for launch," Nancy sits on the front seat of the rollercoaster with Mike, the

cutest guy, Lisa with Steve, the next cutest guy, and Maddy with Dave, the boy who's left. He licks his lips as the harness clicks down.

At the end of the ride, Dave throws his head back. "Now that's an E ticket!"

Maddy's heard that phrase before, usually when the boys skateboarding down the hill near her house have a fast ride, but it's kind of dumb to use it on a Disneyland ride that's actually an E ticket ride. She makes a mental note to check her ticket book, to see if she's used all her E tickets, the tickets for all the fun rides, the roller coasters, Pirates of the Caribbean, and the Haunted Mansion. She hasn't used any of the A and B tickets, the tickets for the really lame attractions, like Sleeping Beauty's Castle and Swiss Family Robinson's Treehouse, which aren't really even rides.

Maddy thinks they will ditch the guys, but Nancy says, "On to the Matterhorn!" and all six of them stand in line. Mike flips a quarter around his fingers and tries to teach Nancy the trick, Nancy so close to the boy that their cheeks almost touch.

On the Matterhorn they have the same seating arrangements. When the twists of the rollercoaster throw her against Dave's side, Maddy flinches from the damp skin of his bare arm. Then to Fantasyland where

they ride the tea cups. “I can’t believe I’m so dizzy,” Lisa says, leaning against Steve. Maddy refrains from rolling her eyes. Nancy and Mike hold hands on Mr. Toad’s Wild Ride. Maddy makes stilted conversation with Dave. She only bothers because she doesn’t want to seem rude. It’s not his fault that he’s not as cute as his friends.

The boys pose with Snow White for a photo, arms around her cinched yellow-clad waist. The two cutest boys on each side; Dave throws his arm around Steve’s shoulder. After Nancy takes the photo, Snow White shrieks and starts forward, shrugging from the embrace stomach first. “Keep your hands to yourself boys,” she says. She smooths her yellow skirt over her butt. The rouged circles on her cheek brighten.

“Watch out, she’ll sic the dwarfs on you,” Maddy says.

Dave winks at her. “I can take them. Bring it on.”

Maddy, assessing his spindly arms, thinks not.

After Peter Pan, the girls go to the bathroom. Maddy corners Lisa at the sinks while Nancy is still in her stall.

“These guys,” Maddy says.

Lisa whisks pink lip gloss on already shiny lips. “What about them?” She inspects her face in the mirror, then opens her compact, dusts powder

on her forehead and chin, paying attention to a blemish at her hairline.

“So we have to hang out with them? It’s not like we’re ever going to see them again.”

Nancy bangs her stall door open. She’s laughing. “That’s a good one,” Nancy says.

Maddy’s not sure what she means. Perhaps never seeing them is the point. They can be anything they want, do anything, without seeing the boys again.

“Relax, Maddy. You’re so uptight,” Nancy says. Her sunglasses are pushed on the top of her head, her hair falling perfectly over each ear like two curtains. Her curls have not unraveled in the heat. Her bronze tan gleams in the florescent light.

“Try some lip gloss.” Lisa hands Maddy the tube.

“You’ll need it.” Nancy elbows Lisa.

Maddy strokes the wand on her lips. The sticky gloss smells like fake strawberries. Sweet and cloying.

“Have you ever been kissed, Maddy?” Nancy asks.

Maddy blushes. She imagines offering Nancy a poisoned red apple. There’s no way Maddy’s telling Nancy “no.”

“The guys are waiting for us,” Lisa says to Nancy. Her hands on her hips.

Nancy turns her spotlight eyes on Lisa. “I’m just having fun.” She pushes her sunglasses down over her eyes. The bathroom door swings shut behind her.

Lisa examines Maddy “Close your eyes,” she says and the velvet of Lisa’s compact sponge brushes her forehead and cheeks. “That’s better.”

The powder is stiff on her skin, like a mask. How bad had she looked before?

A year ago at a sleepover, before Maddy had started high school, she’d asked Lisa how Nancy kept her skin so clear of pimples. Lisa smirked and said, “Bathing in the blood of virgins” and both of them laughed, rolling in front of the television’s blue glow (*The Love Boat*, Maddy recalls). But now, Lisa’s like that fake fire in *Pirates of the Caribbean*—seeming so real but the fire’s just tinted lights on strips of cellophane blown by a fan. Nancy’s the real flame everyone’s trying to copy.

The boys and Nancy are laughing outside the bathroom. The boys eat churros. Cinnamon and sugar dusts their lips.

“Want a churro?” Dave asks Maddy.

Maddy, remembering the frozen bananas, declines.

“Adventure Thru Inner Space?” Nancy says.

Why would Nancy want to go on Inner Space? Maddy gives a little jump and then calms herself. “Yeah, why not?” she says.

Mike hooks arms with Nancy. “Lead on my lady,” he says.

And Nancy leads them back to Tomorrowland, like Snow White leading the dwarfs.

The lobby to Inner Space reminds Maddy of the bridge of the Enterprise, all curving wall—an opinion she keeps to herself, because Nancy and Lisa do not watch Star Trek, do not care about Kirk and Spock and Bones. That’s something for boys who wear thick glasses and carry books on Egyptian hieroglyphics, not girls who hang out at the Grove.

Above the winding line, a snowflake in fiery colors glows on one wall, with the words “Miniaturization Control” below. A huge microscope looms above a petri dish of molded white plastic mimicking snow. Curving chairs, the atommobiles, run on a track into the end of the microscope. Part of the tube of the microscope is translucent. Inside, a line of miniaturized atommobiles and their passengers run through the scope. The atommobiles are blue, ridiculous, dated in the way Star Trek is dated. Sleek

rounded shapes that were thought to be space-age in the '60s but no longer are, now that it's the beginning of the '80s.

The two cuter boys elbow Dave into position next to Maddy. Maddy didn't know guys could giggle.

On the loudspeaker, a voice narrates, "We wish you an enlightening experience. For though your body will shrink, your mind will expand."

"Got that, Maddy? Your mind—and perhaps your body—will expand," Nancy says.

"Got it," Maddy says.

Nancy turns to Mike, touches her lips as she whispers to him.

Lisa talks quietly with Steve, glancing at Nancy every few minutes.

"Have you been on this before?" Dave asks Maddy.

"A couple of times," Maddy says.

"Pretty hokey isn't it? I can't believe I used to think I was really shrinking," he says.

"Yeah," she says, "It's pretty obvious that we're not. With that fake eye at the end." But the words make it real, take away the mystique. When she was young, she couldn't stand still in line, holding her father's hand, waiting to be shrunk to see the magic of being *inside* of an object. That objects

which appear solid are not.

Passengers board the atommobiles and move steadily along the track into the opening of the microscope.

And then it's their turn. Dave climbs into the atommobile, and Maddy follows him. The bar lowers on their laps, jerking to a stop six inches from their bodies. Dave grabs the bar and tries to shake it. "Let me out!" he says and looks at Maddy to gauge her reaction. She deems it best to smile.

Nancy and Mike are in the atommobile in front of them, Lisa and Steve behind. "And we're off!" yells Mike, as if this is some kind of race.

At the entrance of the microscope, a strobe light pulses. They enter into darkness. The atommobile shakes. Maddy imagines that the atommobile is getting smaller through the tube of the microscope.

"Through the Mighty Microscope, you will travel into the incredible universe found within a tiny fragment of a snowflake," the narrator says. He's a scientist shrunk on a journey into a snowflake, like those doctors injected into someone's body so they can cure him in *The Fantastic Journey*.

Nancy giggles. "Oh Mike," she says. Is Nancy chiding Mike or teasing him?

Although Dave does not touch Maddy, she feels him beside her, his

shoulders, his side, his thigh. Can hear the sharp intake of his breath, see a stray curl from his jewfro.

Snowflakes are projected on the walls, whirling and whirling. No two alike, although Maddy's never seen snow. The snowflakes grow larger, merge to form a wall. "Can I penetrate this gigantic prism?" the narrator says. Dave giggles. Boys. All they need to hear is the word "penetrate."

Dave's thigh presses against Maddy's. The atommobile is too small for her to move away.

"I can see nothing is solid, no matter how it appears," the narrator says.

But it is solid, his thigh. It's heavy against hers, and her whole body is centered on the slight pressure of his skin. She wishes she had not worn shorts. She doesn't know what to do.

She doesn't know what she *wants* to do.

The ride is now in darkness. From Lisa's car behind them, a sigh.

Maddy knows now: this is the make out ride. How could she have missed that?

Dave's hand on her thigh now, slightly sweaty.

Fuzzy spheres, like loose balls of wire, surround them. Molecules.

Then atoms appear, two hydrogen and one oxygen, with electrons running across the surface like racecars.

Something wet in her ear, like a slug, and Dave kisses her neck. She winces. “Come on, Maddy,” he whispers. “Nancy said you were fun.”

Fun. What does that mean?

They’ve shrunk so much that only electrons race around them. “Can I possibly survive?” asks the narrator.

She turns to him and he kisses her, his tongue quickly in her mouth. “Relax,” he says. She tries, she knows that Nancy and Lisa are kissing their boys and why not kiss someone? What is she going to tell Nancy and Lisa, that she is not *fun*? Or relate to them the wonder of her first kiss?

But there is no wonder. When Maddy watched the sex scenes in *The Blue Lagoon*, with loin-clothed Christopher Atkins, a heaviness grew between her legs. She couldn’t take her eyes off the muscles in his back. Dave is no Christopher Atkins; she doesn’t even *know* him. He’s just a tongue prodding her mouth and a sweaty hand inching up her thigh, a wannabe Mike. Just like she’s a wannabe girl at the Grove, a Nancy. No, not even Nancy. A Lisa.

She pushes him away. The sides of the atommobile close in; even at

the opposite end of the seat, Dave's too close. The atommobile moves so slowly, she can jump from it if she gets out of the lapbar, stands on the seat. And without even thinking about it, she does: twisting out of the lapbar, scraping her side against the metal, until she's squatting on the seat, and then she launches herself out, one hand pushing from the lapbar, the other from the curved top of the atommobile. She has the sensation of falling through layers of electrons, protons, neutrons. When she hits the floor, she's surprised it's solid.

“What the hell?” Dave says.

Lisa and Nancy pull from their boys, smeared lips open in wide zeros. Mike's hand up Nancy's blouse.

The electrons whirl. Ahead is the pulsing center of the atom, the nucleus.

She needs to say something. To make Nancy and Lisa laugh, preserve her position.

“I bet—I bet you think you're an E ticket ride,” she yells at Dave. Her voice echoes.

Nancy leans back in her atommobile. Her bruised mouth a pale line. Lisa turns away.

Dave mutters, “You’re crazy.”

Security will be called and when the guard escorts her out of the ride, Nancy and Lisa are chewing gum with arms crossed over their chests. The boys are gone. Maddy knows she’d blown it. In the fall, when they pass her in the halls, they will whisper *not an E ticket ride*.

But now, the atommobiles carrying Lisa and Nancy and the boys whirl down the track, where the snowflake melts and the passengers return to their normal size. Maddy walks toward the nucleus of the atom. Orbiting electrons project on the walls like stars in the Milky Way, that one time when she went camping and saw the entire night sky so wide above. Her heart syncopates to the beating of the nucleus. Her heart, her skin, her muscles, all built of trillions of nuclei, all the atoms stuck together and electrons racing like comets. All pulsating and alive.

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