

Hostage with Better Snacks: A Memoir

By: Annalisa Wilson

I remember standing on that melting tar sidewalk, waiting in line for an hour and a half for that ride. I had to unstick my shoes every time the line inched forward. We shuffled ahead like a fat, sluggish caterpillar inching toward its cocoon for a long-overdue nap. The sun was beating down so hard, I was sure it was burning a hole straight through the thick mass of my wavy, knotted hair and into my scalp.

Those stupid, plywood-shaped waves had my stomach threatening a full-scale revolt: a hot dog, a nacho-drenched soft pretzel, chocolate soft-serve, and a whipped-cream-loaded Belgian waffle all fighting to escape. Were those waves taunting me?

They looked like gigantic, evil, sideways, snarling smiles, mocking me, hissing, “You’re going to die. We’re going to kill you.” My legs were shaking, melting Jell-O towers barely holding me up. I was white-knuckling the molten railing, willing myself not to collapse. If I let go, I wouldn’t have been surprised if my fingerprints melted right off.

Those freaking waves wouldn’t shut up. They kept laughing and chanting, “Na-na-na-boo-boo, you’re going to die!”

My friends were yapping a thousand miles an hour about how fun this was going to be and how they were such bad-ass daredevils. Meanwhile, I was trapped in a mental slideshow of all the ways this could go horribly wrong: seatbelt malfunction, unexpected loop failure, or a freak gust of wind hurling me to my doom. My parents would absolutely kill me if they found out I died on that ride.

My wardens weren’t exactly eager to let me go in the first place. They couldn’t understand how any parent in their right mind would allow a group of sixth-grade girls to skip freely through an amusement park *unsupervised*, on a Saturday, no less. My parents were experts at conjuring up epic, totally improbable disasters, just convincing enough to keep me home “for my own good.” They called it protecting me. I called it a hostage situation with better snacks.

If the pavement cracked open on that very day and I fell straight into the depths of hell, I would still be grounded until I was thirty.

I begged. I pleaded. I dusted and scrubbed every surface in that house to prove how mature I was. I figured if I showed them how responsible I could be, they'd finally trust me. Besides, if I finished my weekend chores by Friday, I'd be free. Otherwise, I'd be what my father called "winding around like a bum."

Eventually, they caved, begrudgingly. It only cost me my dignity and the rights to my firstborn child. They unlocked my shackles and set me free for what I thought would be ten hours of fun and frolic.

Lost in my thoughts, I didn't notice we were now just three couples away from impending doom. Was I numb, or had I suffered a stress stroke? I kept checking to see if I'd peed myself because I genuinely couldn't feel anything below the waist.

It was finally our turn.

I stepped onto the platform, sweating like a turkey the day before Thanksgiving. Tears were burning behind my eyelids, and no matter how hard I tried, my legs refused to move. Time stopped. Everything around me slowed. I stared at the time-worn, empty seat as Julie waved her arms and squealed for me to get in. In slow motion, she looked evil. Her voice dropped three octaves. Her eyes glowed red. Was she speaking in tongues? Why hadn't I ever noticed how massive her mouth was? And why did it look like she had more braces than teeth?

The seat belt checker appeared out of nowhere, yelling at me to get in. His leathery face twisted into something demonic, I swear he had horns, a tail, and a forked tongue.

Then, as if sent by God himself, an angel rescued me. I was turned around, lifted off the tar, and practically flew back through the line. I don't think my feet even touched the ground.

When I finally escaped the pit of souls trying to drag me back, I found myself once again standing in front of those stupid waves, only now they looked like flames. Everything was red. It felt even hotter than before. I gasped for air, trying to fill my asthmatic lungs without tipping into full-blown hyperventilation. The last thing I needed was to faint, crack my skull on the tar, and have my brains spill everywhere, mixing into the gooey blacktop like some horror-movie milkshake, totally unsalvageable. I'd be an empty-headed body wandering through life with no ability to think or work or –

Oh God.

My parents were right.

Everything they said would happen was *coming true*.

I blinked hard to refocus, but every time I looked at the ride, it still looked like the bowels of hell. The waves were fire. The loop was ablaze. The riders were cackling and chanting, “I hate you forever, Anna!”

When I finally regained control of my faculties, my friends were walking off the ride, flapping their arms and clucking like chickens. For the rest of the day, I was treated like a leper. Nobody said two words to me. At one point, I sat alone on a bench under the bridge to the log ride, secretly hoping someone might kidnap me.

I don’t think I ever spoke to Julie again. Two weeks later, she moved back to Maryland and never said goodbye.

I *really* hated that stupid ride.

