



Dear Reader,

I am writing to you from a Howard Johnson's in Greensboro, NC. We're here for another dance convention – our daughter's obsession, remember? – after spending hours yesterday hoofing around downtown Greenville, SC, shooting video for an architecture documentary my husband's making.

This morning, we dropped Amelia off for a long day of dance classes – her competition's tonight – and now Jeff and I are holed up back here at HoJo's, working on Lowcountry Weekly. Welcome to life among the "creative class." I suppose you could say we're livin' the dream. I just can't decide if it's a *good* dream or a *bad* one. (Ask me later, after I've had a nap.)

I must say, this Howard Johnson's has impressed me, reader. As far as cheap hotels (motels?) go, this one is right up there with the best. You may trust me on this, for I have sampled my share. Last summer, we stayed in a California motel – it shall remain nameless, as I can't afford to be sued – that made your heart sink when you walked through the door, so chintzy and oppressive was its atmosphere. Slimy, slippery bedspreads that kept sliding off the bed, blank plaster walls (not even a tacky floral print, which at least says, "We tried!"), tiny towels that wouldn't dry a leprechaun, and just an overall air of inhospitality. Being there felt like a lingering slap in the face. We spent our entire trip finding reasons to stay away.

But this Howard Johnson's feels more like a hug from your favorite elderly aunt. She's not fancy, but she cares. The room is small, sure, but it's clean and even cheerful. We've got a microwave, a fridge, an ironing board and a blow dryer. The bedspreads are fluffy, and so are the towels, and the coffee maker works. (Not always a given.)

And here are the big ones: We got free breakfast this morning, and right now, I'm enjoying free WiFi. Jeff and I – who don't *always* stay in cheap hotels – have often wondered why it is that the more elegant the establishment, and the more you pay to stay there, the fewer perks you get. Does that make sense? Back in October, when we attended our first dance convention, we actually stayed at the host hotel – we were newbies, and didn't know any better – which was the Renaissance in Orlando. Was it ever swanky! Stylish rooms, gorgeous grounds, a dazzling lobby . . . and boy, were we paying for them. As usual, we needed to work while we were there, and were chagrined to learn we'd have to pay something like \$15 a day for WiFi service in our room. There was no free continental breakfast, either, though the Renaissancians were more than happy to charge an arm and a leg for breakfast in their restaurant, or direct you to the Starbucks in their lobby. We were not happy. Despite the luxury of our environs, we did not feel loved.

So now, for less than half the price, we're happily ensconced here at HoJo's, with our free food and WiFi, our comfy beds and our HBO . . . and I even ventured down to the fitness room this morning. For free. I feel like a princess!

Now, grant me a brief digression, if you will, reader. I think I can bring us full circle if you'll bear with me.

Last week, I received a friend request on Facebook from the girl who was my best friend in elementary school. I say "girl," because I can't seem to think of Charlotte Thornton as anything else. Even though I've now seen recent pictures, it's hard for me to fathom that she's a middle-aged woman. (Of course, I have a hard time fathoming that I'm one, too.)

Though we both grew up in Decatur, Alabama, Charlotte and I were from somewhat different worlds. I lived in a nice house in a nice neighborhood with a lawyer father, a homemaker mother, and three younger sisters who were all very . . . nice. Charlotte lived in a trailer park off Highway 31, with her parents and two teenaged brothers. To me, Charlotte's house was the most exotic locale on earth. Not only were there teenagers there . . . but even the name was exciting! While I was wasting away and withering on the vine at 1803 Brookmeade Road . . . Charlotte was having adventures at Paradise Trailer Court!

And sometimes, I got to have adventures with her. The trailer park was this magical kingdom unto itself, with all sorts of quirky characters hanging about on stoops and working on old cars. They all knew Charlotte, and they were always glad to see us coming. Charlotte's neighbor Jill

Jordan was a year or two older than us – a wild, black-haired beauty whom we worshipped – and together, we three girls explored every inch of that trailer park, looking for "clues" and interviewing "suspects." We were Nancy Drew fanatics, and we were determined to find a mystery. The deal was that we'd take turns playing "the lead," but Jill usually did the honors. Charlotte and I were happy enough to be George and Bess, just trailing along after Jill's fearless Nancy.

And then, there was Charlotte's home itself. I had never been in a trailer before, and I found the whole concept enchanting. Warm and snug like a Hobbit hole . . . or Mr. Tumnus' Narnian cave. I remember Charlotte had a canopy bed in her little room – pink, or maybe burgundy? – and I coveted that canopy. Heck, I coveted her whole life! Her parents were country people; they didn't sound like my parents when they spoke. They were gruff, but kind, and they always made me feel welcome. I loved it there.

I don't remember when – or why – Charlotte and I grew apart. I know we went to different high schools, but the drift started long before that. Maybe when our "different worlds" became just too different? Just too far apart? I know my mom worried about me when I played at Paradise Trailer Court. I didn't understand why at the time, though, sadly, I guess I do now. I'm a mother, after all.

Ironically, today I'm the one raising her child in a hobbit house in an "interesting" neighborhood that might give her friends' parents pause. I would be lying if I said that didn't bother me sometimes. You can take the girl out of upper-middle class suburbia, but you can't take upper-middle class suburbia out of the girl. I may not belong to that tribe anymore, but I am well acquainted with their particular fears and prejudices – both founded and unfounded. In some dark place, I suppose I still harbor them myself. But that dark place is not where I live. It's more like my attic. Or, better yet, my basement. Sometimes, I think my writing is an ongoing quest to shine light on that dark place and all the ugly creatures curled up in there. Those creatures can't live in the light, you know. They shrivel up and die.

So, what does any of this have to do with Howard Johnson's? Not much, I guess. It's just that being here at this HoJo's – and thinking about my old friend Charlotte – reminded me that a place doesn't have to be elegant or expensive to be a very good place. Kids seem to know this instinctively, but for some reason, we grown-ups need reminding.

Just last week, my daughter's oldest friend Bella spent the day at our house. Bella lives in a big,

beautiful home on Cat Island and Amelia loves going there to play. There's plenty of space, lots of cool stuff, and a lovely, safe neighborhood to explore. But on this particular Spring Break day, the girls were at my house. I was working on the paper, and didn't have time to take them on an excursion. I worried they'd be feeling bored and cooped up. But they sat on the living room floor for hours playing board games, watched a movie, talked and talked and talked . . . and seemed generally quite content.

At one point, Bella plopped into the old green chair she calls her "favorite," asked for a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, and said, "Miss Margaret, your house reminds me of a warm, cozy blanket."

Music to my ears, kiddo. Music to my ears.

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