

Hey Parco! Ep. 4: Best of Gen-X - We Were Toys R Us Kids

(Phone rings)

Ann: Hey, Parco!

Samantha: Hey, Parco!

(Opening music theme plays)

Samantha: Hello friends! Welcome to Hey Parco, the mostly true adventures of two Recovering Gen-X Valley Girls. I'm Samantha.

Ann: And I'm Ann, and we're the Parcos! We've been friends since 1977. Today's discussion in our continuing Best of Gen-X series is We Were Toys R Us Kids.

Samantha: Part One. So we recently discussed some toys that we, frankly, were lucky to survive. Now we're talking about the toys we loved.

Ann: There was one that I loved as a kid. It was called the Magic Window. And the Magic Window was sand that—gray and white sand—

Samantha: Oh! Okay.

Ann: —encased in this plastic oval, and you just kind of moved it around. You're supposed to turn it upside down and make shapes and whatever.

In their commercial, it says: "An exciting toy you turn upside down with tiny Microdium Crystals and watch the ever-changing pictures that stirs your imagination." And in this commercial, they had this kid hanging upside down, just like playing with a magic window. Completely engulfed.

Samantha: Why is he upside down?

Ann: Why does he have to be upside down what? I have no idea. I don't know why that commercial possibly spoke to me. I don't know. I just had him. I was so happy to have a Magic Window.

Samantha: With this Magic Window, you are reminding me of the Etch-a-Sketch, because, again, it's like a little thing that you are being creative

with, right? You're sort of making designs and stuff like that. And I don't know about you, but I was never a world-class at Etch-a-Sketch. I tried. I spent hours and hours with the Etch-a-Sketch. I mean, it always just ended up being some like square-looking something, and then the line went wrong and went across the whole thing, and it was ruined. And so I'd just shake it up and down to make a new picture.

Ann: Right.

Samantha: But you said the Magic Window has some kind of 'Microdium' or something?

Ann: Microdium Crystals, which I think is sand.

Samantha: Yeah, that sounds like a fancy word for sand! It makes me think of the Etch-a-Sketch in that way too, because—I don't know if you know how an Etch-a-Sketch actually works:

So when you look at the screen, it's just gray, right? When it's like blank, it's just kind of gray. And what it is, actually, is that the sand is coating the screen. And then when you turn the dials—one dial goes up and down, one dial goes left and right—and when you turn them, that actually makes a little stylus on the inside press against the inside of the glass and remove the sand that's there.

Ann: Ohhh.

Samantha: So it's actually a negative.

Ann: Yeah.

Samantha: It's having a negative effect. So rather than drawing a line, as we see it, it's removing the sand that's there.

Ann: Right.

Samantha: So that reminds me, you know, Magic Window seems really similar. And the original name of an Etch-a-Sketch, because it was actually invented by a French person, was L'Ecran Magique: which means the Magic Screen.

Ann: The Magic Screen.

Samantha: Absolutely. Yeah, it's the same almost the same thing.

Ann: Why didn't they call it the Magic Screen here?

Samantha: Maybe the Magic Window already existed. I don't know. The other thing Etch-A-Sketches remind me of are Tibetan Buddhists, right? They have this practice—

Ann: Wait, what?

Samantha: Okay. Stay with me. Tibetan Buddhists have this practice of making sand Man-delas or Mahn-delas—

Ann: Or Man-dahlas?

Samantha: Or Man-dahlas, if you will. I mean, I've seen—actually seen—this before in person; where they use sand and they like painstakingly put the sand very precisely into these beautiful, giant, you know, incredibly intricate designs, and they work on it, like bent over, for like days or weeks or whatever. And then once they finish the Mandala, they destroy it. They mix all the sand together and destroy it.

Ann: Wow.

Samantha: It's supposed to symbolize the Buddhist doctrine that, you know, everything is transitory in nature and the material life. And so you just, you know, you have to, you have to make peace with that. You have to maybe celebrate it and find the beauty despite that. And that's kind of what an Etch-a-Sketch is like.

Ann: It definitely is.

Samantha: And there's actually, there's a woman called Princess Etch, who is a master of the Etch-a-Sketch. So she actually recreates Renoir paintings—

Ann: What??

Samantha: —and like van Gogh's Starry Night—

Ann: Wait!

Samantha: —and like the Taj Mahal.

Ann: No way!

Samantha: Not kidding. And they're extraordinary. I've seen actually a video on YouTube that I would recommend someone checking out, showing different examples of her work. She'll work from teeny-tiny little Etch-a-Sketches up to the biggest size they make. And she does have a way of saving her work, if she wants to, which is basically to kind of break the Etch-a-Sketch so that the stylus is no longer in contact, then the sand will stay in place. I don't know how else she does that. She must put something on it. Then she actually sells some of these works of art.

Ann: That's amazing. What is her name?

Samantha: She calls herself—this is easy to remember—Princess Etch, obviously not her real name.

Ann: Princess Etch. I gotta, I gotta see.

Samantha: Yeah, check her out on YouTube. Because it's really amazing.

Ann: Oh my god!

Samantha: You're looking already!

Ann: I am! She's amazing!

Samantha: She's amazing, yeah. And I don't think she's the only one. I think there are other artists. It just makes you completely reevaluate yourself, doesn't it? Because I never got better than making like a really crappy-looking puppy—

Ann: Oh, no, I couldn'T even make a frickin' line!

Samantha: —or I could make stairs, could make stairs all day.

(Lively Jazz music plays)

Samantha: The coolest toy I ever had—and I really think that means I really peaked early on this one, because I was only about five years old. It was a gift from my biological father—I have a complicated father situation, maybe I'll explain some day—but my biological father and I had recently been reunited and, he bought me a Big Wheel.

Ann: Oh!

Samantha: A real Big Wheel. Yeah, it was huge. My little brain exploded. I mean, really to this day, I can't believe I ever actually owned a Big Wheel.

And I mean, I beat the hell out of that Big Wheel. I rode that thing constantly. I spun out on it, racing up and down. I'm sure it drove all the adults crazy: Braking, sliding. I had the little storage box. Like the little trunk thing in the back, and I would just find things that I could put in it—

Ann: Awwww.

Samantha: —to store while I rode around my Big Wheel. Yeah, it was the best. It was the absolute best. I mean, I know it was all plastic and I know. And what happened to my Big Wheel is what happens, I think, to all Big Wheels eventually, which is: that hard plastic of the wheels breaks.

Ann: Right.

Samantha: You just wear it out, because you use it up.

Ann: Yeah.

Samantha: Right. So did you have something like that? Like a Big Wheel type thing?

Ann: I did not have a Big Wheel. I was able to ride one on occasions, if my neighbor, my neighbor would let me ride it.

Samantha: Oh yeah..

Ann: But what I had, and I loved it—I too was about four or five years old—was a red Hippity Hop.

Samantha: Ohhhhh yes!

Ann: Yeah.

Samantha: It's like a big handball. Isn't it?

Ann: It's a giant, big ball with handles and you hop around everywhere. Hippity Hops are still made.

Samantha: That makes sense.

Ann: Okay, but you want to know what's even better? They now make

adult sizes.

Samantha: Well, you know that makes perfect sense!

Ann: I'm going to get a Hippity Hop. I got a park right down the street. I'm just going to start hopping on the grass. I want a red one again.

Samantha: Oh, wow. That's very particular.

Ann: Well, you know, my Hippity Hop was red, and if I'm going to go for something nostalgic, I'm gonna go for the red Hippy Hop.

Samantha: Sure, yeah. Excellent. So who who's producing them?

Ann: I think it's off-brand at this point, but there is a website called Hop Balls, where I could purchase my adult Hippy Hop. They sell kid's ones too, and they sell ones now that have emojis on it. And I'm not about to—I just want my plain old classic red.

Samantha: What do you mean by emojis?

Ann: That the big balls look like, you know, the winky face emoji or the happy face emoji or the big two heart eyes emojis.

Samantha: (laughing) Oh that's cute!

Ann: There's a picture of an older man on a Hippy Hop, and the Hippy Hop has a picture of a man with a big mustache. I mean, it's just kind of stupid.

Samantha: In the best way.

Ann: In the best way, yeah. Oh, absolutely. In the best way. Believe me, I love good stupid. You know, it's 25 bucks. I should get the Hippy Hop.

Samantha: Sounds worth it. Especially if it comes a mode of transportation.

Ann: Where I live, someone commuting via Hippy Hop would not seem weird. There's a gentleman that walks down my street that is dressed like a 1700 Spanish military member complete with the weird helmet and everything.

Samantha: That's very specific. How did you know it was a 1700s Spanish

military—?

Ann: Because I looked it up.

(Laughter)

Ann: I was like: "old-timey Spanish military outfits." And, of course—

Samantha: How did you know it was Spanish?!

Ann: Because, you know, here's the weird thing: I know it was Spanish because my girlfriend's parents had these Spanish paintings of weird military men.

Samantha: Of military men? Wow.

Ann: They were like soldiers or whatever. What I'm saying is I could commute via Hippy Hop and no one would bat an eye.

Samantha: What kind of distance is your commute?

Ann: Let's say it's probably about four miles.

Samantha: That is a long way to be Hippy Hopping on your hmm-hmmm.

Ann: I think I just want to hop around.

Samantha: Yes, I think you want to keep it to recreational Hippy Hopping and not commuting.

Ann: Because it would be bad if I were Hippy Hopping and then broke a hip.

Samantha: And it'd be very confusing to explain to the paramedics.

(Lively Jazz music)

Samantha: As for me and what dolls I actually had: I never had many, and I never had the queen doll: I never had a Barbie. But I did have a cheap-o Barbie knockoff called Stacey. And instead of a blonde, Stacey had red hair.

Ann: Uh-huh.

Samantha: She looked a lot like Barbie, at least in my memory, she looked a lot like Barbie.

Ann: Right.

Samantha: She's long gone, so I really couldn't say any more. I know that, in the end, I cut off all her hair, but, um, when I was really little and she still had a head of hair, I would take her to my next door neighbor, who was kind of my best friend at the time. This is back in, you know—

Ann: What!?

Samantha: Before I ever knew you!

Ann: What!?

Samantha: Before, before, before we ever met, dear.

Ann: Okay.

Samantha: It was like first grade, and she would have these Barbie-Qs. These were gatherings of neighborhood girls to her house—

Ann: Oh, that's adorable.

Samantha: —and everyone would bring their Barbies. Then, you know, you would, they would pretend, right?

Ann: Right.

Samantha: And the reason I say *they* would pretend is that I was terrible at this game. Even though I was an imaginative kid and I played a lot of make-believe and stuff like that, when it came to the dolls, I felt really stupid. Like making them talk and like, like, you know, the other little girls, they were like enact like adult life, like mommy life, you know?

Ann: Right.

Samantha: And I was just bored to tears with doing that. So, I would make jokes and I would make my Stacey do silly things. And so, once in a while, I would, um, perhaps have Ken and Barbie get very friendly with one another.

Ann: Yes! Oh yes, of course!

Samantha: Yeah, I got banned from the Barbie-Qs. We were still friends, but I was not allowed to come over when she was playing Barbies with the other girls.

Ann: Oh my God! That's hilarious!

Samantha: So yeah, that's how it went for me with dolls. I did also have a Farrah Fawcett head very briefly too.

Ann: Oh God! Those were great! Where you could style the hair?

Samantha: And put on makeup and stuff.

Ann: Yeah, that was fun. I had the Skipper that went through puberty.

Samantha: I've never even seen one of those! What the heck?

Ann: When you raised her left arm, she would grow an inch, with a little waist, and she'd grow boobs.

Samantha: So what was she called? Skipper Puberty? I mean, what was she called?

Ann: Ummmm...what was she called?

Samantha: Pubescent Skipper?

Ann: No...

Samantha: Oh, here we go!

Both: Growing Up Skipper!

Samantha: Oh my God.

Ann: I loved that—I loved that doll! And I loved that doll because I got it as I was starting to go through puberty.

Samantha: Oh, okay!

Ann: And my mom, my mom got it to try to start teaching me, because I was developing very early, okay?

Samantha: Right, right.

Ann: By the time I was in fifth grade, I was wearing a bra.

Samantha: Right.

Ann: So my mom and—and I was so freaked out and embarrassed, and I just was not having this puberty thing so young.

Samantha: Right.

Ann: And I—it was really scary for me and awkward and whatever. And so my mom got me that doll.

Samantha: That is so cute.

Ann: This was before my parents got divorced. So it is one of my lasting memories—

Samantha: Yeah.

Ann: —that my father was so angry at my mother.

Samantha: What?

Ann: Yes. So angry at my mother for getting me this toy, because he—I'm guessing, I don't have many memories of my father, but I'm guessing he didn't want his little girl growing up.

Samantha: Guess what, Dad?

Ann: I do remember. I do remember my mom going: "She's going through the change early. She needs to understand. You got to lay off." You know? So I loved my Growing Up Skipper. I loved her.

Samantha: That's sweet.

Ann: I really did, because it made me feel better.

Samantha: Aw.

Ann: Yeah.

Samantha: That's really sweet that your mom got you that, and that she

understood—she had enough insight to. Yeah, that's cool.

Ann: Well, yeah, she was very concerned about it. I mean, even the doctors were concerned. I think it's because my mom fed me Deviled Ham and Spam.

(FX record scratch)

(Laughter)

Ann: And things out of a can. Like no fresh food. I think I was going through puberty early because of the bad food that my mother—I mean—

Samantha: I'm not sure there is correlation between bad food—and Spam specifically—

Ann: I appreciate—I don't know. Well, Spam could've had Growth hormones in it.

Samantha: What?!

Ann: I mean, think about it.

Samantha: No, it didn't!

Ann: I don't know, but I have the Internet here!

Samantha: Were they were even doing growth hormone stuff in those days?

Ann: Spam. Well, I don't know. I'm making that up. I'm making that up—

(Laughter)

Ann: —but I'm just saying. So from what I see on a stupid website. That Spam is raised in a CAFO, a horrible way of raising animals to eat. And I know you're a vegetarian and there is very good reasons to be vegetarian. And the pigs are fed growth-promoting drugs.

Samantha: Yes, but, darling—

Ann: So I'm thinking maybe those growth-promoting drugs—

Samantha: Wait—

Ann: —and all the Spam. I ate Spam every day!

Samantha: Hello? Miss? Excuse me.

Ann: Yeah? What?

Samantha: That's that's now you're reading about. That's now. That doesn't mean that's how it was when in, you know—

Ann: Well, that's true. We didn't even use fructose corn syrup.

Samantha: This is what I'm saying. The way farming is done today and the way farming was done in 1970 or something is, you know, kind of different.

Ann: My hypothesis is my mother raised me on Spam, Hamburger Helper, blue Mac and Cheese, and Deviled Ham. And I think—

Samantha: Which basically makes her a member of her generation. For our moms, moms' generation, it was miracle food, that you could have vegetables in a can and meat in a can, you know?

Ann: Yes!

Samantha: You know?

Ann: And they were working moms—

Samantha: You have to be fair to them.

Ann: —they had to do it. No, I am being fair to them. I'm not saying I'm not, I'm not—

Samantha: Well, you're saying your mom fed you Spam and gave you early boobs.

(Laughter)

Ann: My mom gave me early boobs. I'm just saying, Spam is the reason for my breasts.

(Lively Jazz music plays)

Samantha: Did you have an Easy Bake Oven?

Ann: No.

Samantha: No, I didn't either.

Ann: No, but my neighbor did.

Samantha: Damn, that damn neighbor had everything!

Ann: I had two neighbors! One of whom I still speak to—

Samantha: And they had it all.

Ann: They did! They did! I remember going to her house, she had just gotten her a little Easy Bake Oven, lucky her.

Samantha: Yes.

Ann: And we made a little cake via a light bulb.

Samantha: Yes, that's how it's done.

Ann: The light bulb that heats it all up.

Samantha: Yes?.

Ann: So it was this little cake and we had like the little—

Samantha: Was there any egg in those cakes?

Ann: I don't remember.

Samantha: Was it just like water and powder?

Ann: Yeah, I think it was water and powder. I think it was like an Easy Bake thing and it probably had dehydrated eggs in it.

Samantha: Just a slight little aside here: I think it was Betty Crocker. When they came out with cake mixes, they found that housewives felt guilty about using their cake mixes, because they felt like they were cheating, right?

Ann: Oh.

Samantha: So they just made one change, which was: add an egg. And

once they had the recipe, so you would add an egg, people were happy with it, because now they felt like they were actually cooking instead of cheating.

Ann: You are kidding me?

Samantha: Not kidding. Absolutely true.

Ann: Wow.

Samantha: So that's interesting, it just goes to the Easy Bake was probably what the Betty Crocker mix would have been, if you didn't have to add the egg.

Ann: Maybe it was the Betty Crocker mix!

Samantha: It probably was. I don't know.

Ann: And they had to figure out a way to get rid of it.

(Laughter)

Ann: No, think about this—think about this logically.

Samantha: Uh, oh.

Ann: I mean, cause wasn't it—wait a second, I've got to look up the Easy Bake Oven.

Samantha: Oh, no!

Ann: Because, wasn't it—Okay. Hold on a second. So I'm on, I'm on a cooking website.

Samantha: Yes?

Ann: And the Easy Bake thingy is white sugar, flour, baking soda, salt, unsweetened lemonade drink mix, shortening.

Samantha: No egg in sight.

Ann: No egg in sight. And I will tell you this: I was not very impressed by the cake. I was more impressed by the frosting. But I am always more impressed by the frosting, anyway.

Samantha: Yeah, you're kind of like that.

Ann: I am a totally frosting person. I am not denying that. I own, I own my love of frosting! Don't give me the BS whipped cream frosting..

Samantha: I'm not—no judgment—

Ann: Give me the real buttercream frosting.

Samantha: If that's what you like, then that is what you like.

Ann: It's my secret desire.

Samantha: It's not that secret, I gotta tell you.

Ann: I got not that long ago, but it was one night I lived in West Virginia. Times were very stressful. You know, my mother was dying, I was in school full time. You know, and everything else.

Samantha: Yes.

Ann: So I kept chocolate fudge frosting under my bed—

Samantha: Uh-huh.

Ann: Where I would watch bad chick flick movies, just to try to shut my brain off, because I had too much going on. And I would secretly eat my frosting, and anytime I heard anybody making noise towards my door, I'd quickly hide it.

(Laughter)

And that I always had a paper towel, because, you know me, every time I eat chocolate, I get it all over my face. And I think I'm, I'm good, but I get it all over my face. So I always had, you know, like a little paper towel to really wash off my face.

Samantha: Uh-huh.

Ann: So one day—you know where the chocolate always stays? Right in the middle between my lip and my chin, that little place. It's like, it's like a

—

Samantha: A little oasis there.

Ann: Like my soul patch, like I have a soul patch.

Samantha: Right.

Ann: And one day my son came into the bedroom to ask me a question and I had a full-on chocolate soul patch.

(Laughter)

Confessions of a stressed out woman!

(Ending music plays)

Samantha: We Were Toys R Us Kids continues in our next episode of Hey Parco! We'd love to hear your stories of being a Gen-X kid. You can contact us on our website heyparco.com. There you'll find links to our Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook, along with images and info related to this and other Hey Parco episodes.

Thanks for joining us! See you next time.