

## Playground Stories

I am sitting by the playground I used to play as a child. The red paint on the bench hasn't dried yet. Of course, I didn't notice that before I sat down. There is a sign screaming wet paint, but I was lost in my thoughts and memories. Oh, well, I am wearing black pants anyways.

To tell you the truth, this is not the same playground I used to play with my best friend, Anna. It's the same park. Not the same playground though.

We used to burn our butts sliding down those metal slides. I can still feel the pain. Wearing skirts was never a good idea. The boys always tried to peek under it too. I liked wearing pants anyway. My favorite ones were red with a little brown bear on the front.

If you were lucky, you didn't fall on your knees after your slides. I usually wasn't lucky. Landing on the concrete was painful. Needless to say, my knees were bruised all the time. I got up right away every time. Smiled and we were running around with Anna like we ruled the playground. I can still see her smile and little brown pigtails in front of me.

Nobody burns their skin on these new slides anymore. Everything is padded and ergonomic. The ground is soft and squishy. You can hurt yourself even if you fall. But kids rarely fall. Everything is EU-comfort and digitally protected.

The swings have safety looks now. They are childproof and safe. The moms don't even have to push their children. The swings work through an app. They swing the children safely. Not too low. Not too high. Just right. The parents can adjust it so they know their kids are safe.

How can they have fun like this? I wonder. Anna and I used to fly high in our swings. She could even make it go around the bar. Her mother was so upset when she saw it. She yelled at her so loud. "Anna, you could've fallen. You could've died." "But mom, I was holding on." She was grounded for a week.

I admired her for it though. I was always too scared to do things like that. Scared and uncoordinated. She was such a tomboy. She climbed trees. She ran fast. She liked blue and green. She wanted to cut off her hair one day, but her mother never let her.

I don't see kids running around on this playground. Everyone has their little tablet or phone. I am looking at a group now. They are about five or six. They are sitting quietly in the sandbox playing on their phone.

Oh, the sandcastles we used to play. Until we grew out of it. We still loved coming to the playground when we got older. We used to sit on the ping-pong table reading magazines and chatting until. We rode our bikes home. We tried not to be late. Anna's mother used to get upset when she was late.

My mother didn't care. She was never home anyway. Always with a new boyfriend. Or working the streets. We always had food at home though. She got me food. Even books. Never love though. Anna's mother was very strict, overprotective, and involved. Mine barely existed. Neither of us had a dad around though.

I wonder if any of these kids really know their parents. They get dropped off at the playground after school or whenever their parents need a break. No parental supervision is necessary. The playground is monitored by apps and AI. There is always one or two human supervisors as well. The children are safe. No kidnapping occurs.

Noone cared about kidnapping when we were young. That craze came later until they developed a technology that can protect kids from it. We roamed around the streets freely. As kids, Anna and I ruled the playground. As teens, we ruled the streets.

We took long walks and ate ice cream. We went to the movies to catch the latest independent flick. That's where she held my hand for the first time. She didn't kiss me yet then. That happened later at the arboretum. My first kiss. Before she got sick.

These kids will never go on walks, eat ice cream, or watch movies like that. The last cinemas close two decades ago. Nobody ever went anymore. Everything is online at your fingertips. You can order ice cream and it shows up in two minutes. You don't have to go for a walk for a scoop.

Anna was my first kiss. My only kiss from a woman. I will never forget it. I like women, but I could never look at another woman like that after her. Men I don't compare at least.

One day she fell ill with stomach pains and weakness. She was dead within three. Liver cancer. Maybe she was lucky it went so fast. I held her hand at the hospital until the nurse kicked me out. A few hours later I got the call from her mother. She will never know how much I loved her daughter.

A few months later, after my eighteenth birthday, I packed my bag and flew across the ocean to Annapolis. I took an au-pair job with a rich family. I have never left the US since. I never came back for a visit. I couldn't bear the memory of her.

Until now. 65 years later, I am an old woman now. I am finally dying too. I have a few weeks to live at the most. I needed to be close to her. And here, by this playground, I can still hear her laugh.