

## Stranger Danger

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The sun was up in the cloudless sky as children played together and parents lingered around. Though the forecast had promised rain, it didn't seem to be starting anytime soon by the looks of it. Thus Saturday morning carried on as usual, uneventful. Four in the afternoon was the busiest hour at Sunnyside Park, when progenitors brought their offspring out of their four-walls confinement and away from the damaging influence of screens. It was a place of siblinghood, where long-lasting, two hour friendships were formed in the swings while adults remained in the outskirts, always protecting, on the lookout for any sign of danger.

A woman sat on a white bench near the playground, rocking a stroller. Next to her, also on the bench —yet somehow half of it had lost its whiteness and corroded— was an inconspicuous man. Both their gazes on the children darting around.

"Which one's yours?" inquired the woman.

He jumped, as if he had been absorbed with the view.

"Oh, uhm..." he pointed vaguely towards the slide. Towards a red headed kid, she thought, who didn't appear to be older than six.

"How adorable! They grow up so fast, don't they?" he nodded, anxiously. "Mine is five. They're so pure and innocent at this age. It almost makes you want to cage them in a room and shelter them from the dangers of the world."

He started tapping his foot, worriedly. She could relate to parental worry, yet she didn't think it could affect others so visibly. She then realized she had no idea what this man or his family had gone through, and felt instantly awful; so she rushed to change the subject. "Where's the Mrs?"

The foot quieted.

"Or Mr." she added.

"Actually..." his voice trailed off. "There is no Mrs. But I do have a play date today."

He didn't seem over forty, with his ordinary flannel shirt, jeans and boots. He sounded shy yet charismatic, as one of those salesmen who could get away with selling things that people didn't even need or, let alone, want. Lucky child that must be, having such a charming, present father. She laughed.

The previously calm sky had turned from baby blue to teenage gray: a storm was indeed coming, and some of the parents were already rushing to get their little ones and head back home.

"Dating seems so far away now, I would not dream of coming back to that," she joked. "You're stronger than me. Is it okay to ask what happened to the mom?"

He couldn't bring himself to look at her when he answered.

"It just hasn't worked out in the past, hardly anyone adapts to my lifestyle." His leg was bouncing again. Up, down, up, down, up, down. He clearly wanted to avoid the topic.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to upset you," she replied.

"No worries, it's alright." But he stood up and brushed invisible lints from his shirt, determination set in his eyes. "It was very nice talking to you, but I must go. Have a wonderful day."

"Alrighty then, you too." And as soon as he walked away, she returned her attention to the mini human inside the stroller, blissfully ignorant of his life beyond the bench.

As he assuredly made his way to the climbing wall, it began to drizzle, thundering close by. He approached the child at the top of it and asked, "Hey buddy, do you want some candy? I have some in the car."

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The child nodded enthusiastically and proceeded to accompany this man he had never seen before in his short, gullible life.