

## **A Day at the Park**

By: Kahlo Smith

So there I was, seated on the wooden bench that stood in the middle of Honeysuckle Park, my notebook open before me. The sky was gently overcast, and the moisture in the air promised rain. The mass of vines that gave the tiny park its name perfumed the air with a faint sweetness.

I pushed the hair out of my eyes and bent over my book, pressing my pen down and twisting it in broad spirals across the page. I stared off across the park and began to spin the ballpoint around with my fingers. A slight breeze ruffled the leaves of the willow overhead, and the tire swing, the park's only attraction, began to shift from side to side.

I closed my notebook, sliding in the pen to mark my place, and walked toward it. The chains creaked in mild protest as I sat down. Staring over the row of hedges out into the quiet street, a memory came flooding back to me. This was the same place where I had sat, five years before, and watched Emelina Guthrie run away from home.

I hadn't known it at the time. It was just a girl from school, walking past the park. Maybe she was going to the market. It didn't really matter. I didn't feel the need to wave to her, as we didn't know each other well. We had different groups of friends. We had shared no classes. We never would- Emelina didn't come back.

We never saw her again, and for the next year, the town was abuzz with rumors. Over time, the rumors died away. The police stopped looking. Her parents took down the missing posters.

One day, I went over to their home with my mother. While searching for the bathroom, and opened up a closet with a pile of posters at the back. ‘Missing: Emelina Anne Guthrie. Reward offered for information.’ At the top was a picture of her smiling, arms around the neck of the family dog, eyes sparkling with laughter.

I began to swing slowly, pushing against the chains that held the worn tire up with my half-bent arms. My feet shuffled in the pebbles below. I lifted my legs into the air and began to twist the swing from side to side, winding it up and letting it come undone. I twirled back and forth, the park becoming a swirling mass of blended colors, until I began to grow dizzy and squeezed my eyes shut.

When I came to a stop and let my feet fall back to the ground, they couldn’t reach the pebbles below. My arms were stretched out, my fingers barely hooked around the chains, and the swing suddenly seemed much bigger than it had only a moment before.

I opened my eyes to a familiar day- but not the one I had expected. The sun shone brightly down through the cotton ball clouds that drifted across the blue expanse of sky above, and the honeysuckle vine had just begun to bud. Off to my left, Jillian Baker and Marcus Ackerman played house with a troop of Barbies and G.I. Joe figurines. Jillian’s short, wispy hair was tied up in two pigtails, and she wore a red-checked sundress.

Jillian had been wearing pigtails the last time I saw her, too. Long, curling pigtails, with the tips dyed black for her fourteenth birthday. I had forgotten that dress, though. Five years gives you time to forget things.

Allen Blackwood swung himself around on the trunk of the little willow tree and dashed off down the path toward the climbing rock, with Ivan Brand in hot pursuit. Jessica Mendanz braided sections of Lily Water’s silky blonde hair.

Across the street, a pastel pink backpack across her shoulders, Emelina Guthrie walked with her head down. Her hair was fastened in a loose bun. She wore a baby blue shirt, and white khakis. I remembered that backpack.

I thought for a moment, and then got off the swing and strode to the wall of shrubs. The journey took far longer than the five steps I had expected. I peered through a gap between two hedges.

“Emelina!” I shouted. My voice sounded strange to my own ears. She came to a halt, and lifted her head up to look at me. For a moment, there was silence. Then, I reached a beckoning hand through the wall of greenery.

“Come and push me on the swing!”

She hesitated only a moment before dashing across the street and pushing through the row of hedges. We walked back to the tire swing, and I sat down on it.

“What teacher do you have?” I began as she started to push me back and forth.

“Mrs. Plot,” she quietly replied.

I lifted my legs up into the air, and the wind pushed my hair back from my face. I closed my eyes. When I brought my legs back down, my feet were planted firmly on the ground. I opened my eyes.

The park was quiet. The weather was overcast. The honeysuckle vine was in full bloom. A girl sat at the table beneath the shade of the willow.

“Are you almost done swinging, Mary? Daliah, Allen, and Ivan are already headed for the pizza place. We should get going soon.”

I let my breath out slowly, and then grinned at her. “Push me, Emelina!”

She did.