

PLAYGROUND

by Andrew O. Dugas

Marie half runs, half skips, toward the playground in the dying light.

This time she is going to be smart about it. Last time she almost got caught. Mom still looks at her funny, but nobody else. Everybody even the police blamed some drifter and after all, bad people do bad things to kids all the time. Just watch the news.

For today, Marie has borrowed her father's old hunting knife. She can clean it and get it right back in the stupid box where he keeps all his old Boy Scout patches and things. Not that he ever opens that box. He's always away on business anyway.

The knife is a heavy thing and weighs down the hood of her coat, where it's hid. The weight pulls the collar against her throat but she can deal with it.

"Deal with it!" That's what Father always says to Mom when she complains.

Marie did practice with the knife. She's not stupid. She almost cut herself at first, but now it's easy to pull the hood up so the knife handle slides forward onto her shoulder where she can grab it with the same hand pulling up the hood.

It's pretty sharp. Look at what happened with Oscar, the neighbor's cat. He died instantly. Well, almost instantly. He still managed to sink three claws into Marie's wrist, one right through her LIVESTRONG wristband. She left him in the arroyo behind their development, another present for the coyotes.

She turns into the playground, and there's Jordan on the swings, waiting for her. Just like she told him to. Even in the graying light, his hair is golden, almost white where it's cut short over his ears. He looks up and smiles in that squinty, Jordan way.

He's so cute, she almost changes her mind.

"Where's Candace?" he asks, looking past her. "You said she was coming too."

Candace. Of course. First stupid word out of his stupid mouth.

Like yesterday at recess when she saw Jordan and went over with two Capri Suns. He took the juice and didn't even say thank you before asking, "Do you think Candace likes me?" Like Candace would ever even offer him a juice.

Jordan pushes himself back, then swings forward and pops out on his feet. "Is she coming? What did she say?"

Marie shrugs. "Maybe she's just late. Come on, let's wait by the jungle gym." She runs over and starts climbing. The jungle gym is closest to the path that goes into the woods and down into the canyon. She has to get him into the woods somehow.

Jordan doesn't follow her, just stares toward the parking lot gate. "Maybe she's not coming."

Marie spots a red dodge ball on the ground, climbs down and picks it up. She aims the ball at Jordan. "Maybe her Mom won't let her out."

"I think I better go," Jordan says. "My Mom's gonna get mad if I'm late for dinner."

"Come on, just wait."

Jordan turns and squints at her. "What did she say exactly?"

Marie shrugs, and fires the ball at Jordan, who doesn't even try to catch it, just holds his arms up all scared. No wonder he never gets picked for games.

"Hey!" The ball bounces off his knees, hits the slide, and rolls back toward him.

"Come on, Jordan, don't be a girl! Get the ball!"

Jordan's eyes sharpen and he scoops up the ball. Marie sees how everything will unfold. How easy it will be.

Jordan feigns a couple of throws and Marie moves sideways so the jungle gym and the woods are behind her. He fires the ball and she catches it easily and instantly fires it back, but makes it slow enough so that even stupid Jordan can catch it.

He does and whips it back hard. She dodges, and the ball sails into the woods.

So easy.

"Marie! Why didn't you catch it?"

"Sorry. It's not like you catch every one either." She looks into the woods. "Well, you threw it so you go get it."

"Uh-uh. You shoulda caught it!"

"I'm not going in there alone!" She makes a pout. "You're the boy, you should go."

Jordan shakes his head and crosses his arms.

"Well, let's go in together then," she says. "Before it gets too dark."

Jordan huffs the same way Father huffs when he's tired of trying to explain something to Mom. "Okay, okay, let's go." He walks over, and Marie lets him take the lead toward the path.

This is it.

Hot tingles race across her scalp and all the way down to her thighs. She pulls her hood up and the knife handle nudges forward into her fingertips. Practice makes perfect.

A car horn blasts. Twice.

Jordan freezes. "Shit!"

Jordan's mother is leaning out of a Volvo station wagon by the gate. "Jordan Vollmer! You get over here this instant!"

"Coming!" Jordan turns to Marie. "Listen, tell Candace..."

Another blast. "JORRR-DANNN!"

He runs to the car. Marie watches him disappear around the passenger side, watches the inside light come on as he gets in. The light goes out and the Volvo drives away.

Marie lets her hood fall back, tugged down again by the weight of the knife. She sits on a swing and kicks sand. She was so close. Her vision turns black and she squeezes the chains until her hands hurt. She wants to scream.

The air shifts. A chain creaks.

Marie looks up. A man is sitting in the swing next to her.

"Sorry, didn't mean to scare you." He has a Giants baseball hat on. Same team Father likes.

"You didn't scare me."

"That's good," he says. "You okay, sweetie? You look kinda sad."

Marie says nothing, just pouts a little more. She relaxes.

"You should get on home. Your Mommy and Daddy are probably worried about you."

Marie shrugs and crosses her arms. "Maybe YOU should get home. Maybe YOUR Mommy and Daddy are worried about YOU."

"Nah, they don't care about me. They just fight all the time. How about your Mommy and Daddy? I'll bet they don't fight at all."

"Are you kidding? They fight all the time." She turns away so he can't see her face. "They had a big fight at dinner last night."

"I'm sorry. That's rough, huh?" He swings slightly. "Hey, I bet I got something that'll cheer you up! You like kittens?"

Marie smiles. "What kittens?"

The man tilts his head toward the woods. "There's a Mama cat just had a litter of baby kitties right in there."

Marie looks back at the woods. "No way!"

"Yes way! Right in a big, old hollow log." He points at the path. "Right in there."

Marie jumps from the swing. "Can I see? Maybe I can keep one?"

"Why, sure, of course! Come on."

The man rises and they walk together toward the path.

Marie stops. "It's dark in there. I'm scared." She reaches up, grips the sleeve of his coat. Corduroy.

"It's okay." He shifts his arm, takes her hand. His skin is rough and moist. "I'll keep you safe."

"Okay."

A few yards into the woods, she pulls her hand away.

"What's the matter?" the man asks.

"Nothing," she says. "I just want to pull my hood up."

