

Big Slide

by Brendan Garbee

He could extend his unemployment for another six months. But he'd lose the house. No getting around that. He was already three months behind. Even if he found another job immediately, there were other expenses. The bank had been around. They had let him know what was coming. He sat in the backyard, enjoying the hot night, and he looked at the trenches he'd dug for an irrigation system.

He sat naked in the lawn chair and closed his eyes. If he made an effort at this, and only this time of night, he could pretend that he was alone. It was the time when people stopped tossing and turning in their sleep. Even the insomniacs lay still and silent. And it was before the sprinklers started, and before the men who delivered the newspaper started driving through the neighborhoods. Before the trash collectors started banging around in some far-but-near place. Only occasionally would he hear the low moan of the train.

He could pretend that his children weren't inside, in their beds and in their rooms that were not really theirs, not really his anymore. That his wife wasn't inside, wrapped in the sheets but not fully asleep. Occasionally he'd think about all the people around him, all the strangers he knew and did not know, and he'd feel a creeping panic. There were so many people in the world! All around him! Suffocating! A low growl from the sky caused him to jump. Above him, an airplane.

He slept. The next thing he knew, the sun was beating down on his bare flesh, waking him up just as it became unbearable. He went inside. His children were in the kitchen hollering and eating breakfast.

"Hi, daddy!" His daughter yelled. She had on her pink swimsuit, and her pink sunglasses, "Princess" written above the lenses. The boys,

following their older sister's lead, screamed out their "Good mornings." He smiled and kissed each of them and hurried upstairs to his bedroom. His wife was wearing a church dress, doing her face in the mirror.

"You're not wearing that to the water park, are you?" He asked as he pulled out his swim trunks.

She gazed at him in the mirror, and slowly smiled, tired. She closed her eyes, and dragged the blue eyeliner slowly across her lids.

"Have fun," she said.

The water park was on the southern edge of town, built on top of one of the dozens of old mining villages that had once covered the hills and had gone bust and died a hundred years ago. The screams and howls of other people's children set him on edge. But he struggled to stay cheerful. They had season passes, so the visits there cost nothing and it had consequently become a weekly tradition to go. The children had not, as far as he could tell, recognized things that had changed in the family. To extend their contentedness for as long as possible, he focused on routine, on fun. He made jokes and wrestled with them and pushed his face against their fat bellies and tickled them. They had hot dogs and ramen noodles every night. Every Saturday, he packed lunches for them and took them to the water park.

"Daddy," his daughter said, after she and her brothers had been playing for about an hour in the pools and on the little slides, all familiar territory for them. "I want to go on the big slide."

She was six. He looked up at the slide she referred to. It was at the top of a long stairway, and it twisted and curved down into a big, deep pool. He frowned.

"Okay, sweetie," he said. "Okay. You can go ahead. I'll be able to watch you go up there."

She looked up at it, but hesitated. "Can you go with me?" She was scared, excited. She wanted to go, but she didn't want to go alone.

"Of course," he smiled at her.

He took his sons out of the pool and sat them on a bench next to where the big slide would let out. He told them that he was going to come barreling down the slide, and that it would be incredible. "Watch for daddy to come out of there!" He pointed at the outlet for the slide. "Tell me if I look like a dufus, okay?" They giggled when he tickled them. "Hold hands, okay? Don't go anywhere, or else you won't get to see me on the slide!"

He was practically walking backwards up the stairs, to watch his sons and to make sure nothing happened. There was a line. His daughter was jumping up and down and squealing at first. But as they got closer to the mouth of the slide, she got quiet and held his hand tight. They got closer and closer to the front, and for a few minutes he thought that she was going to get out and go back down. But then she didn't. She sat at the top of the slide and, with sudden determination, pushed off. Screaming joyfully, she disappeared around the bend.

And he was alone at top. The teenager lifeguard sighed, nodded at him that it was his turn to go, and he sat down in the jets. They pummeled him, but he weighed too much for them to move. Grunting, he pushed himself closer and closer to the drop of the slide. Fump! His body went flying down the white plastic, tumbling around in the water as if suddenly weightless, rushing, rushing, rushing. Then swoosh! He went hard into a turn and rolled around in the warm water and the sunlight and he heard himself laughing. No, not even laughing. Giggling.

Oh my God, he thought. Dear Lord. Never, never. Never let me reach the end of this.

