

### Rosalie's Slide

Gabriel Townsley flicked a tiny white speck of fluff from his immaculate gray jacket sleeve while waiting for the lights to change.

"We're close now. It's just down the road from where we lived." the little girl's voice was excited as she pulled on her seatbelt and pushed her face against the car window.

"Don't do that Rosalie." Gabriel said. "I've just had the car cleaned."

"I'm sorry Uncle Gabriel." Rosalie sat back, folding her hands into her lap and she stared straight ahead.

Gabriel was instantly contrite at his irritation as he sensed the spark slipping from her eyes. If only he could get used to having a young child around and how really unimportant clean windows were compared to the joy the child was experiencing at that moment. Most of all, if only he could stop to remember what it was like to be a kid.

The lights changed and he pulled away too fast in his frustration and her head shot back against the seat. Silence filled the car as he slowed down.

"Dad took me there on his day off and sometimes on Saturdays too. We could walk there together." she said breaking the silence. "It was such fun!"

She's comparing us Gabriel thought and he wished he could have known his brother as a father. He wished that his brother's decision to marry a girl from the "wrong side of the tracks" hadn't caused the bitter family feud that forced him to bring up this lovely little girl in such a lowly part of town. Even the death of his wife from pneumonia shortly after his daughter's birth had not brought his brother back into the family fold and Gabriel regretted that he hadn't reached out to them over the years.

He avoided the drab street of unkempt semidetached houses with corrugated iron roofs, chain link fences and pocket sized gardens where she had lived and where he had picked her up that tragic day of her father's fatal motorcycle accident and entered the road, on which he believed the park to be, from the opposite direction.

"There it is! There it is!" she cried pointing to the right ahead of them and he slowed down and cruised to a stop next to it.

They both stared out the window at the park. Gabriel stunned. Rosalie enraptured.

The park looked quite derelict and forlorn. It had a couple of respectable willow trees and a few mature blue gums that were a little thin in foliage and the shade they gave of little import. The sparse grassy patches that managed to survive the constant creep of dirt and sand had succumbed to yellow flowering weeds. A rutted, worn path running across it emphasized its usefulness as a short cut from one street to the other.

The willows courted some vagabonds who had bought a pint of milk and a half loaf of bread for lunch and sat on their haunches in a group playing some mysterious game with stones that brought loud shouts and laughter to the otherwise quiet bleakness of the park.

Gabriel's eyes scanned the play equipment. The peeling paint on the splintered wooden round-about, the faded red see-saw with its tattered black tire bumpers and the swings where the one seat hung skew from the break in its securing chain.

"It's the tallest, longest, shiniest slide in all the world." Rosalie said.

Gabriel followed her gaze to the centerpiece of the park. The impressive steel slide. It extended high off the ground and its platform almost equaled the lofty tops of the blue gums. The knobbly iron steps looked strong but steep and the slide itself shone like polished sterling silver. It was an impressive but dangerous looking piece of equipment.

"It's very slippery and fast." Rosalie confirmed his thoughts. "Dad used to watch me coming down and if I didn't hold onto the sides to slow myself down, he'd catch me at the bottom so that I didn't slide off into the hole."

Gabriel could see the hole crafted by many feet landing with a mighty bump on the same old spot. He thought of the business contracts he had brought with him to read while his niece played on the play equipment but now he knew that he would have to shed his jacket and take his brother's place. A role he realized, since the untimely death of his brother seven months ago, that was more than simply being the child's legal guardian. He would have to be an uncle and catch her as she came down the slide.

"Well, come on Rosalie, let's go slide!" he said. He got out of the car and removed his Savile Rowe jacket and hung it over the back of the seat of his Mercedes 220SL and then carefully rolled up his Savile Rowe shirt sleeves. He could feel the excitement building up in Rosalie as he took her hand in his and crossed the street to the dusty park. Within seconds his impeccably polished shoes were covered in dust and grime and he grinned at the thought of himself sliding down a 20ft slide with dust covered bespoke John Lobb's.

Rosalie saw the grin. She squeezed his hand. "You'll have fun Uncle Gabe, really you will!" She used her father's name for him and it brought back a long forgotten memory of his brother as a boy in shorts and T-shirt running into the living room from outside shouting "Gabe, Gabe, the fair's here!" and Gabriel had looked up from his book at his beaming face and said:

"Oh Bernard, the rides are old and dilapidated." and his brother, undeterred, tugged at his arm.

"Come on, that will make it all the more exciting! You'll have fun Gabe, really you will!" and they had.

Now, years later, he was standing with his brother's little girl in a dilapidated park and he could feel the vibrations of excitement at just being a boy again, course through his veins.

"Let's do the first slide together." Rosalie said. "I'll sit in front of you and you can hold me. I've always been afraid the first time down."

Gabriel looked self-consciously across at the vagrants hunched together under the willow trees in the corner of the park but they were engrossed in their stone throwing game and apart from them and Rosalie and him, the park was deserted.

"Okay, I'll follow you."

He climbed the stairs after her. The railings were hot from the midday sun but he was pleased to see, once they reached the platform, that the slide part itself was sprinkled in partial shade from a couple of the blue gums and it wouldn't be as hot on the gleaming steel. Rosalie sat down, holding onto the sides and moved down a little with her feet and bottom to give him room to sit behind her.

"You have to lift your feet Uncle Gabe, otherwise your shoes will slow you down." Rosalie said.

"Good advice Rosalie."

Once again he noticed the change from Uncle Gabriel to Uncle Gabe and experienced a strange pleasurable warmth from it.

He stared down the shimmering shaft that plunged almost straight

down and ended in what one could only call a ditch and he stifled a gulp. He tightened his arm around her and drew her close while holding onto the side with the other hand.

Finally he said: "You ready?"

"Yes." her voice was breathless with excitement.

"You can let go now Rosalie. Here we go!" he shouted.

The moment he let go of the side they fell swiftly. With the air rushing passed their ears and driving their hair back from the foreheads, their stomachs somersaulting and Rosalie squealing in delight, they practically took wings and flew downwards towards the hole. Gabriel held Rosalie firmly as he landed spread-eagled over the hole and managed to keep his balance.

"Oh that was good!" Rosalie cried as he set her down beside him. Let's do it again."

Gabriel had to admit it was exhilarating and he needed little encouragement to do it again. He glanced at the vagrants but they were still at their game.

After a few more times of his sliding with her he suggested she do it on her own.

"You'll catch me?" She jumped up and down with excitement, her ponytail bobbing.

"You bet!"

As he watched her climb the stairs he realized his heart was in his throat and when she reached the platform and sat down and smiled at him he became anxious for her. She was so slight. What if she flew off the side of the slippery slide?

"Be careful Rosalie." he warned lamely.

"I will." She sat there holding onto the sides.

"You nervous?"

"I'm scared." she said.

"Don't be afraid Rosalie. I'm right here for you. I'll catch you."

His voice was more confident than his gut. He stood inside the ditch and dug his John Lobb heels into the ground and braced himself to catch her.

She hesitated a few seconds more then shouted: "Here I come!" and she lifted her hands and in a flash she was hurtling towards him, her hair flying, her bellows bouncing around the park.

In that moment Gabriel knew what it was like to really care about someone so much that you were afraid their voice would be stilled forever and he knew that for whatever reason he had been given this child to care for, she had become a precious bundle of joy over the past seven months

since arriving so unexpectedly in his life.

He scooped her up as she reached the bottom of the slide and held her close to him. He looked around the neglected park and it turned into a diamond as he viewed it through Rosalie's eyes as possessing the tallest, longest, shiniest slide in all the world.

*by Pamela McMonagle ©2011*

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