

The Red Playground

Everyone knew the Redwood Street playground was haunted.

Amongst the children, it was an indisputable fact, as certain as the fact that Mr. Grove was a witch's widower, and the oak tree at the end of the street was home to a family of pixies, ripe for catching. Even the adults didn't allow their children to play on the "Red Playground", as it had come to be known, although it was for a slightly different reason.

Ten years ago, a young girl had died, while playing on the slide of the Red Playground. Somehow, by some combination of poor designing, bad luck, and cruel physics, she'd managed to fall off the slide, snapping her neck at the base. Since then, the parents hadn't allowed their children to play on the hazardous playground – which, for reasons unknown to the concerned parents, had not been demolished by the state. And the children refused to play there, for fear of running into the ghost of the young girl.

Eventually, word spread throughout the town that the ghost of the young girl wasn't the only one residing in the playground. It was the ghosts of *all* the dead children of the town, as poor CeCe had discovered one late evening when walking her dog. If one were to pass by the Red Playground at nighttime, they would hear the eerily musical laughter of the children as they ran and played, their spirits forever trapped in mock-joy.

So, after the death of the girl, nobody dared set foot in the Red Playground.

Until Noah Madden's sister died.

It came as a surprise to no one when little Anna Madden passed away; she had been sick for so long, scarcely anyone remembered how she was when she was well. But for six-year-old Noah, her death came as a traumatic shock. Children never expect death – they never see it coming until it's grabbed them by the neck and drowned them.

For weeks following his sister's death, Noah acted as any child would. He was withdrawn, silent, closed-off. He spent so much time locked away from everyone else, his parents accepted that he wanted to be alone when he hid away in his room. So when Noah snuck out the window one night, just after dinner, his parents only assumed he had locked himself in his room and didn't want to be disturbed.

In secret, Noah crept through the neighborhood. He knew, without a doubt, where he could find his sister. For years, Noah had feared the Red Playground and its inhabitants with an equal intensity as the other children. But when the phantoms are your own family, someone you have loved, they cease to scare you. Surely his sister wouldn't let him be hurt.

The air had a certain weight to it when Noah arrived, cold and deadened, like the children that inhabited it. The fall air had a frigid bite, somehow managing to be aggressive in its temperature.

Noah swallowed down years of fear, and slowly took a step towards the Red Playground. Longing, it seemed, trumped any fear.

Noah took a second step, this time crossing the threshold into the playground, and in an instant, everything changed. Gone was the creaky rusted metal swing, faded monkey bars, and plastic jungle gym. The scene in front of Noah was a monstrosity, a clear indication of what it was – the depths of Hell.

While the structure of the playground was practically the same, everything had taken on a new light. A dim, moonlit glow lit the playground, illuminating the jungle gym, which was slick with a rust-colored liquid. Round droplets of crimson speckled the ground, and all of the equipment seemed worn and gashed. In places, the liquid almost looked black in some lighting, while in others it shone ruby-red.

Worse than the blood smeared throughout the playset, however, were the children. Each of them looked horrific, though none more terrifying than the one standing in the center, smiling as she lorded over her playmates.

The girl's dress, which had once been stripped, was faded with age. Her skin was bone-white and nearly translucent, and her head seemed to be nestled on her neck wrong. Her face was permanently turned to the side, and tilted into a crooked position. Despite her obvious deformity, the girl didn't seem to be uncomfortable – her grin was the sadistic one of someone whose world was perfect, in the worst possible way.

Throughout the other playground were scattered other horrific children. One had a mutilated cheek, and a large dent in her cranium. Noah instantly recognized her as the six-year-old who had died following a biking accident just a few years ago downtown.

Each child was coated in blood, although it was clear it wasn't always their own. Some children even looked alive – healthy, even – but for their sallow, translucent skin, and a film of blood –dried, and fresh. None of them seemed to notice. They ran and played, their energy boundless, unafraid to hurt themselves. They grabbed at each other's faces and hair, they pushed each other off equipment, they twisted arms and pulled hair and laughed as they did, enjoying the maiming.

One boy, while chasing another child along the jungle gym, slipped and fell–hard. He didn't thrust out his hands to break his fall, so his face smashed violently against the plastic, knocking out one of his teeth. He looked down at the tooth, giggling, then picked it up and inspected it carefully. Seemingly satisfied, the child stabbed the tooth back into his gums, twisting it until it fit snugly in his pinkish, gummy flesh. Then he smiled, as blood pooled in his mouth, and continued to run after an older boy.

It was a demonic sight, to be sure, but Noah felt no fear. Lulled into a false sense of safety by the knowledge that his sister was here, he crept forward, scanning the faces.

“Anna?” Noah called out, but amongst the chatter and giggles of the undead children, he heard no reply.

“Anna? Where are you? It's Noah,” He called again.

Someone grabbed his shoulders.

“Anna?” Noah asked, turning around expecting to see the smiling face of his sister.

Instead, the girl with the twisted neck stood behind him, smiling blankly at him. A giant clot of blood was glommed onto her cheek.

“Come to join the fun?” She asked.

Noah frowned, unnerved by her unblinking eyes and distorted neck.

“No. I'm just looking for my sister, Anna,” He explained quietly, anxiety creeping into his stomach.

“Anna!” The girl exclaimed, clapping her hands together. “Oh, I know *Anna*! Come with me,” She said.

She latched onto Noah's arm with her cold fist, and pulled him towards the jungle gym.

The girl pushed Noah up the jungle gym steps, and sticky, bloody hands grabbed at him, pulling and pushing. Down the slide they went, then back up again, then down, and then he was being pushed into a swing. He held on tight as a short boy with tightly curled hair shoved him violently, until he tumbled off the swing. The boy laughed, and then hands grabbed him again, and pulled him over to the merry-go-round.

For hours they played. Noah was dragged from game to game, until he was laughing along with the children. At one point, someone shoved him off the fireman pole, and dark blood began streaming from his nose. Despite the throbbing pain, he just giggled, and readjusted his nose until he felt the bone crack into place.

Immediately, he sprang back up and continued to tumble about, playing. How marvelous it was to be part of a clawing mass of children, screaming and running and tugging at each other's hair. Every now and then, something or someone would break, but it didn't matter. Nothing mattered here. The afflicted would simply bounce back up, reveling in the pain, and then there was more running, jumping, shoving, playing, falling, spinning, chasing, pushing, grabbing, laughing, pulling, pulling, pulling.

Noah couldn't remember why he'd come here in the first place, but he was filled with such an ecstatic, druglike happiness that it didn't matter. He would stay here forever, playing games, breaking other children's fingers and jumping from the slide.

Why had he feared this place before? It was a wonderful paradise full of pain and pleasure, chaos and merriment.

He began to pull at other children in return, grabbing and shoving them until they bled. He shoved a young boy into a swing and pushed him until his face was bloodied on the ground, and then continued to run with the teeming mob of children.

Breaking, cutting, snapping, scrapping, stabbing. Laughter.

Here, it didn't matter who you were, or what your past was. Whether you were rich or poor, sick or well, dead or alive, you could take part in the maniacally beautiful games. Noah was on top of the world – or rather, below it.

But all of his giddiness melted away when he caught sight of a familiar face.

She looked so different, but Noah would recognize her anywhere. It was his sister, Anna, still dressed in the pale hospital gown she died in. Oddly enough, in death, she looked healthier. Her skeletal, ghoulish face was replaced by a full, lively one. There

were new scars on her forearms, and an unsightly gash distorted her face, but she was still the same Anna.

“Anna?” Noah asked, stumbling forward. Children tugged at him, trying to drag him back into the throng.

“Play! Play! Play!” The kids screamed, but he wrenched away from them and sprinted towards his sister.

When he reached her, he reached forward to embrace her, but Anna flinched away.

“Go,” She said, her voice oddly serious for someone so young. She stared at him with an expression so grave, she almost looked alive.

“But I want to stay here. With you. With my friends,” Noah whined. “It’s just so fun here. There’s nothing to fear, not even death,”

Anna was unrelenting. “Go,” She hissed, as the children began creeping forward, hands outstretched and maimed faces grinning deviously.

“No!” Noah screeched. He was not leaving, not now, not ever.

He knew it wasn’t her fault, but he’d never forgiven Anna for leaving him. Two years older, Anna had always been Noah’s protector. No matter how sick she was, she always had time and energy to spare for her baby brother, who clung to her like a joey to its mother’s back. His sister was his entire world, and if she didn’t get to live, then he didn’t want to either. He would stay here forever, where both life and death were suspended.

Noah flung his arms around Anna, holding on tight to her stomach. He would hold on so tight, she’d never leave him again.

“I am never going, never, never, never!” He shouted

The children continued to scream in the background, fighting each other as they shoved their way towards Noah. They begged him to return to the games, they shouted and screeched and grabbed, but Noah ignored their cries. The games could wait.

At first, Anna stiffened at his touch, taken aback by the gesture. Noah had never hesitated to show affection towards his older sister, but he rarely hugged her. When she was sick, she was so fragile, and he was afraid if he hugged too hard he would break her. But now, none of that mattered, so he wrapped his arms around her as hard as he could.

Slowly, she began to soften, curving towards him and lovingly returning the embrace. She had missed him too, Noah knew. She wrapped her arms around him and hugged her little brother. Blood from her gash smeared over his hair, but what did it matter? Blood, skin, bones, they didn't matter any more. Break them, tear them, drink them, do whatever you want. Noah didn't care.

Abruptly, with a strength unparalleled to her age, Anna shoved him backwards, hard. Noah stumbled back, shocked and hurt, and tumbled over the small wooden border surrounding the Red Playground. His arms flailed widely, trying to grab onto something, anything, that could keep him in the playground.

He landed sprawled on his back in the grass. The air had been knocked out of him, and he coughed on the remaining blood collected in his mouth. The children, and the intoxicated feeling were gone, and all that was left was the full moon, twinkling back at him from the sky. The spell was broken; he had escaped.

His nose hurt.