

A photograph of a playground slide, viewed from the top looking down. The slide is made of polished metal and reflects the surrounding environment. The background is a light-colored, textured ground, possibly sand or concrete. The text is overlaid on the upper right portion of the image.

Beginnings

Nat Rogers

*The
simplest
things
were
difficult
once.*

"Hey! What's your name?"

Nikki looked uncertainly at the friendly-looking boy in neat blue jeans and crisp button down yellow plaid shirt who'd sat next to her that morning, "Nikki Fielder." She paused, "What's yours?" *He's the boy I've seen playing across the street with the other kids.*

"Jeff Forrester." He looked around, "Let's slide down the slide, ok?"

"Sure."

"Come on," Jeff tugged her hand, "it's nothing to be afraid of. See? The sides are tall, and you won't fall off."

How did he know I thought I might fall off?

Jeff didn't wait for Nikki, but she followed him when he tugged her hand. He paused at the bottom of the ladder, "Do you want to go first, or do you want me to?"

"You go ahead." She looked at the tall ladder with discomfort.

"You be right behind me." Jeff was already climbing the ladder, looking as if he couldn't wait to put himself in harm's way.

"OK." Nikki stepped to the ladder behind him and gripped the smooth metal piping that served as handrails as if her life depended upon not letting go. *It did.*

At the top of the ladder, Jeff leveraged himself onto the slide with one quick movement by throwing his feet in front of him and slid quickly to the bottom. He jumped off the end and looked back to the top to find Nikki. She climbed the steps slowly, one foot at a time, clinging to the rails. "Come on! You can do it."

Nikki reached the top of the ladder. Clinging to the rails, she sat down carefully with her legs in front of her. And she sat. Chewing her bottom lip. *Today's the first day of kindergarten. I want to do it right. Jeff's on the ladder behind me. Is he going to push me?* She clung more tightly to the rails. *He's at the top.* She stiffened.

"Hey," he said so quietly nobody could hear, "you gonna go down today or spend the night up here?"

She laughed a little but didn't loosen her grip.

Still quietly, he said, "It's your first time, isn't it?"

She nodded.

"I was afraid to let go the first time, too. My big brother made fun of me and pushed me anyway. I hated that, so I'm not gonna do that to you. But, really, it's fun. You *have* to try it. I'm telling you, it's a blast. Just relax and let go."

Nikki relaxed as Jeff talked. Carefully, she let go of the rails, but she didn't slide. Jeff had an answer, "See, it's best if you throw yourself a little when you first get to the top." Nikki could hear kids behind Jeff complaining, but he didn't sound rushed, "What I'm gonna do, if it's ok with you, is give you a little push to get you started. If it's ok, just nod your head."

Nikki nodded.

She felt Jeff's small hand on her back, and he pushed. She started to slide but stopped after about a foot. Jeff had another idea, "Put your hands in your lap, I'm coming right behind you, and I'll push you down."

In an instant, he slammed into her back, and she shrieked in surprise, her legs rising into the air and her upper body falling backward into Jeff's chest, but in an instant, she was laughing as they reached the bottom and fell in a heap. Jeff pulled her away from the bottom of the slide just before the next kid flew off the bottom of the slide and helped her brush the dirt off her legs and dress, grinning, "See?"

She grinned back, "Yeah, let's do it again!" The bell rang, and Miss Barber yelled for everybody to line up to return to class. They took longer than Miss Barber wanted to get into line. She seemed impatient, but it was their first time. *What does she expect?*

Nikki was confused, and then she realized she was supposed to be standing in line between the two people who sat next to her in the classroom. She smiled shyly at Jeff, and he grinned back. The boy on the other side of her had shaggy brown hair and wore rolled up jeans and a bright red T-shirt. She tried to remember his name. *It's Timmy.* They made an erratic line as they shuffled back inside. Miss Barber looked frustrated and kept pushing loose hair out of her eyes. Back in the classroom, they each gave her a nickel for milk. After drinking milk, it was naptime. *I'm not tired. Why do we have to take a nap? I don't have any pajamas. Everyone knows you can't sleep without pajamas.* Nikki looked doubtfully at her rug, but she laid down on it after everyone else

did. *Everyone else has their clothes on. Maybe it's ok. Jeff acts like it's normal. He seems to know about a lot of things. Does Daddy know about this? Should I tell him? I don't dare ask Mother.*

They spent the rest of the day learning what they would do each day. At lunchtime, they went home. The first day of kindergarten was over. Nikki began walking home by herself. She stopped at the corner and looked carefully. First one way and then the other. *Nothing's coming.* She crossed the street. Jeff came up beside her as she reached the other side and asked, "Do you live this way, too?"

"Yes. Just around the corner on this block."

Jeff nodded seriously, "I live one block further. How come I've never seen you before today?"

"I'm not allowed to cross the street." Realizing she'd just crossed a street, she amended, "Until today ... to come home from school."

Jeff still looked puzzled. "I come down this street all the time to play at the playground with my brother. I should have seen you sometime."

Nikki watched her feet closely, "I don't know. Maybe I wasn't outside when you came by."

Dismissing the subject, Jeff said, "Probably." He brightened, "Hey! Maybe we can play sometimes?"

Nikki lifted her head, "Maybe." *If my mother will let me.* "That'd be fun. I have to turn here."

"That's ok. I'll walk home through the alley. It's just as close for me. I'll walk you all the way home."

Nikki's house was a two-story built around the turn of the century and, like most of the other homes in the area, it had a living room, dining room, entry hall, and kitchen on the first floor. Upstairs, it had two good-sized bedrooms and a bathroom. With minor variations, usually in porches or garage locations, that was the layout of the neighborhood. The variations were single-story shotgun or dog run styles. When they reached the alley, Nikki pointed at the house across the gravel pathway, "That's our house. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Bye!" After a quick glance both ways, Jeff dashed across the street and ran down the alley.

Nikki watched him briefly, smiling, before turning and walking up the sidewalk. Looking up, she saw her mother standing inside the screen door, and though her good feeling melted away, she fought to hide it from her expression.

"Who's that boy?"

"That's Jeff. He sits next to me. He showed me how to slide down the slide. It was fun!"

Her mother nodded, "Go upstairs, and change to play clothes. I'll have lunch ready when you get back downstairs."

"Yes, Mother." Nikki started to run up the stairs.

"Walk!" Nikki slowed to a walk. When she got to her bedroom, she changed into a matching short set, carefully hanging her new school dress on a hanger. Barefooted, she went downstairs to the kitchen and slid into her place at the table where a peanut butter and jelly sandwich and a glass of milk waited for her.

Her mother came in from the back porch with a laundry basket of clothes fresh off the line. Putting it on a chair, she began to fold clothes. "What did you do in school?"

Nikki drank a sip of milk before answering, "We put our things in bins and found out where we sit. We're supposed to sit in the same chair all the time. And we're supposed to stay there and not get up to play with the toys. Unless Miss Barber says we can. Jeff sits on one side of me and Timmy sits on the other. We have to line up like that too before we go outside to play. They call it..." Nikki stopped to think, trying to remember the word.

"Recess?"

"Yes. That's it. Recess. We do that on the playground. Outside. That's where Jeff showed me how to slide down the slide."

Her mother nodded as she shook one of her father's undershirts with a snap before sprinkling it and rolling it in preparation for ironing later. *She doesn't really care what I have to say.*

"After recess, we have milk. Then we have to take a nap. With our clothes on. Isn't that silly?"

Her mother pursed her lips in what passed for a smile, "Yes. I suppose it is silly." She finished folding or preparing the clothes for ironing. The ironing board was already set up in the dining room.

Nikki finished her sandwich and carried her plate and glass to the sink. Reaching up as high as she could, she slid them onto the counter next to the sink. She took a deep breath and turned, "May I please play outside this afternoon?"

Almost ready to push through the swinging door into the dining room, her mother paused, "Why don't you play up in your room instead."

It was a statement. Not a question. "OK." Nikki masked her disappointment and turned for the hallway and the stairs. Once upstairs, she pulled her desk chair over to the window and looked longingly down the alley across the street. She saw a group of kids playing. She'd seen them before but didn't know who they were. Now she saw Jeff, an older boy and girl, Timmy, and three other kids she didn't recognize. They played a game. Everybody but one would run and hide while the one person hid his eyes while standing with a foot on a coffee can. After a while, the person who'd had his foot on the can started looking around. If he found someone, he touched them, and the person went and stood by the can. Sometimes someone would run up and kick the can, and then everyone would run and hide while the person waited again. She kept watching. One time, the finder tagged everyone, and the first person tagged had to be the finder while everyone else hid. She kept watching. One time Jeff was hiding in the bushes around the Turner's porch across the street. He looked across at her house. When he saw her in the window, he motioned for her to come out. She saw the finder coming up, and she motioned rapidly, trying to get him to look behind himself. When he finally did, he turned and raced around the house, emerging on the other side, racing for the can. He almost beat the finder, but not quite. The finder tagged him. Instead of waiting by the can, Jeff jogged to the dividing street, stopped, looked both ways, and ran across, slowing to walk up her sidewalk and onto her porch. She heard the doorbell and her mother opening the door. She crossed her fingers.

"Nikki! Come down here."

Nikki ran down the stairs.

"Don't run on the stairs. You'll fall. Do you want to play outside?"

Nikki stopped at the bottom of the stairs, "Yes, Ma'am." She hesitated, "I have to cross the street to play with Jeff and his friends. They live on the next block. Is that ok?"

Jeff said, "We can play on this side if you like, Mrs. Fielder."

Her mother hesitated, "Don't go beyond the next block."

"I won't." Nikki ran out the door. Once across the street, they approached the gang of kids hanging out by an overturned coffee can.

"Hey. This is Nikki. She's gonna play with us." Jeff pointed to the taller boy and girl, "That's my brother, Mike, and my sister, Karen. You know Timmy." He pointed to a boy between Mike and Jeff's size, "This is Timmy's brother Sam, and those two are George and Connie. George and Connie are in our class, but they sit at a different table."

"Hi."

"You know how to play?" The boy named George asked the question.

"I think so. I watched from my window before Jeff asked me to come out."

"I'll keep her with me and tell her how we do it. Don't worry. Let's go. Connie's it, right?" Connie nodded and began to count down from fifty. All the kids scattered. Jeff pulled Nikki along with him, "Come on. We have to hide." Together, they ran around one of the houses and found a hiding place behind some bushes.

Before the afternoon was out, Nikki had taken her turn being "it." Too soon, she heard her mother calling. She called good-bye to her new friends and ran home, stopping to look both ways before crossing the street. After quickly washing her hands, she slipped into her chair at the table. Soon afterward, her father joined them, and her mother served dinner. "So, Kiddo, how was your first day at school?"

"Oh, Daddy, I learned to slide down a slide, and I met some new friends. This afternoon I played kick-the-can. But we had to take a nap on rugs on the floor with our clothes on. Aren't we supposed to put our pajamas on before we take a nap, Daddy?"

Her father smiled while she related this story, "Not when you're in school, Kiddo. In school, it's just a short rest."

"The Forrester boy in the next block came to ask her to play. He sits next to her in school."

Her father nodded, "I know Stan Forrester. His kid should be ok." He looked at Nikki, "You make sure you always stop, look, and listen before crossing the street. Now that you're in kindergarten, you've earned more responsibility. We expect you to live up to our trust, ok?"

"Yes, Daddy. May I please be excused?"

He nodded, "Put your dishes on the counter by the sink. Then go upstairs, take your bath, and put your pjs on. You have another day at school tomorrow, and you need to get your sleep."

Nikki dutifully carried her dishes to the sink and scampered upstairs to take her bath. Afterward, her father read her a story before tucking her in, kissing her on the forehead, and turning out the lights. She knew tomorrow would be easier. She'd made it through the first day of school, the first day crossing the street alone, the first time sliding down a slide, finally being allowed to play with somebody, and playing kick-the-can. Jeff would be there tomorrow. He was fun. He made hard things seem easy.

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Biography

Nat Rogers' life experiences have prepared the author to do nearly anything or find someone who can. After working with computers, networks, communication circuits, and even helping attain international agreements, the author is happiest at home with cats, dogs, spouse, and trees. Reach the author at nat.rogers @ mercury ranch.org (copy address and paste into To: line, then remove spaces). Catch a glimpse of current work or thoughts at <http://blog.myspace.com/natrogersauthor>.