

*A day at the park gives
new meaning to
“playground safety.”*

Slide

BY CAROL PAIK

WHEN MY SON was a baby, he and I spent an inordinate amount of our time at the 82nd Street playground, which lay like a threadbare patch on the otherwise fairly lush tapestry of Riverside Park. It was lined with gritty asphalt and edged with chain-link fencing, but it had sturdy swings, and a slide, and a superficially clean sandbox, and that was good enough for me, a former child of the suburbs who grew up with swing sets of the flimsy backyard variety with cracked white plastic seats that pinched and supporting poles speckled with bright orange, flaky rust.

On summer mornings when my son woke up at five, we would arrive at the playground well before it was officially open, when green jump-suited park employees were still hosing down the gravelly surfaces and gathering up garbage. I enjoyed the quiet of those mornings, when the shadows were long and cool, and there was no one else waiting to use the swings.

But one bright day we arrived late, and the temperate weather had lured all the mothers with young children out of doors, so we had to wait in line for the swings, which made me think crabby thoughts about New York. When our turn came I wrestled my son into one of the black rubber buckets, maneuvering his curvy legs into the leg holes, and began to push him silently. All around us mothers sang abecedarian, counting, or otherwise educational songs, but I always felt self-conscious singing out loud like that. I had tried it a few times, thinking it would be good for my son, but he had only looked at me with a puzzled, mildly pained expression, so now I just pushed him silently, and he swung silently, but it was a companionable silence. Because they were busy singing, the mothers pushing their children on the swings rarely spoke to one another. That silence was not so companionable, but that was okay with me.

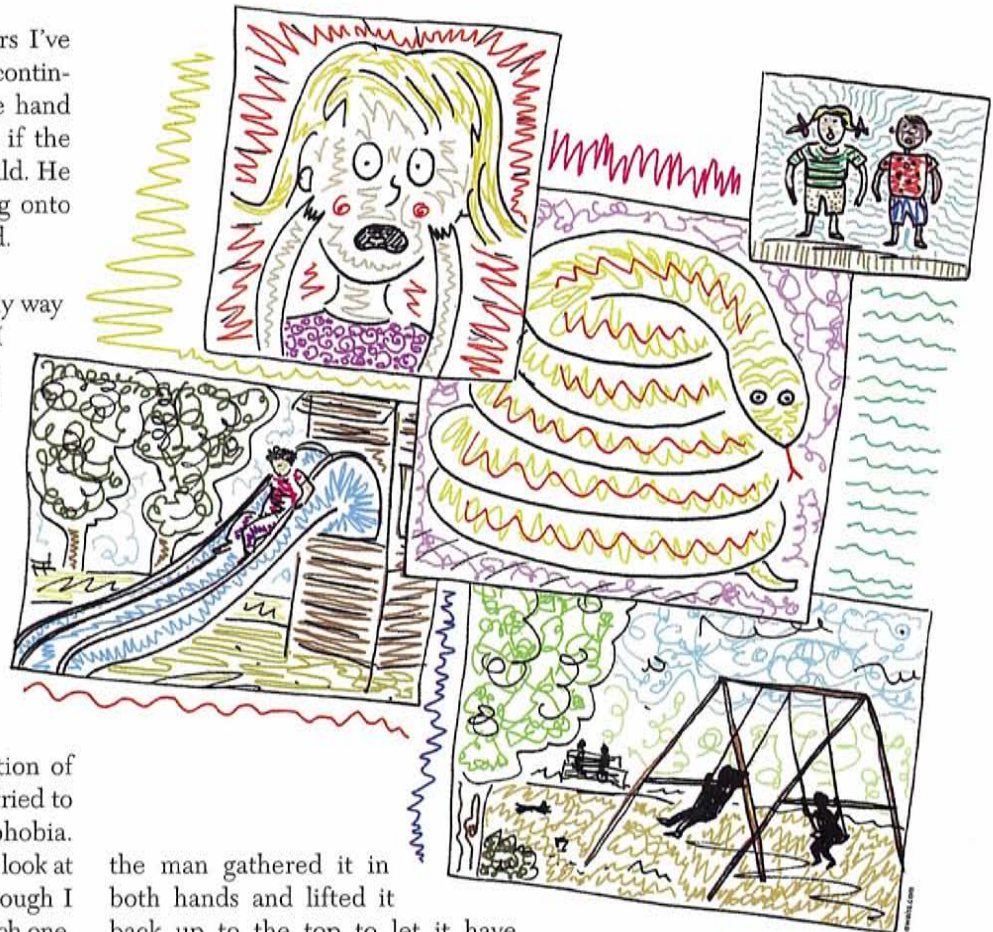
I eventually grew a little bored and starting looking over my shoulder at the activity behind me in the rest of the playground, and across the way I noticed a man walking towards the slide. This was perhaps a little unusual, a man at the playground late on a weekday morning, but not unheard of and not necessarily a cause for alarm. A little more unusual was the man's age (too old to be a father of a young child, too young to be a grandfather) and his attire (neither denim nor khaki). He looked out of place, but he wasn't grinning or

motioning the way the flashers I've encountered in the park do. I continued to push my son with one hand while twisting around to see if the man was accompanied by a child. He was in fact helping something onto the slide. But it was not a child.

It was a gigantic snake.

I dislike snakes, which is my way of saying I'm afraid of them. I am afraid of them in a way that forces me to rethink many of the adjectives I like to apply to myself, such as practical, rational, calm, mature. This one fear renders my entire self-image wobbly and questionable. Even a photograph of a snake, if for example I come across one while casually flipping through a magazine, can cause me to shriek and drop or throw it, a reaction of which I am not proud. I have tried to educate myself out of this phobia. When given the opportunity to look at a snake up close, I do so, although I have not so far been able to touch one, and there was no way I could sample the hideously uniform oval medallions of rattlesnake that my husband thoughtfully ordered for us at a restaurant in Colorado. I have put myself through and survived the reptile house at the Bronx Zoo. But the unexpected sight of a snake can still raise a strangled noise out of me, and start my heart pounding.

And this was a really big snake. Stretched out, it took up most of the length of the slide. It was thick as the man's arm, and a mottled grayish-brownish color that must have served as effective camouflage in the wilds of wherever its ancestors called home, but did not do it much good here in New York. It slithered down the slide in a leisurely fashion, and when it started to pile up at the bottom edge



the man gathered it in both hands and lifted it back up to the top to let it have another go.

I looked around at the other mothers. It was not possible that I was the only one who noticed the five-foot-long snake sliding down the slide. I tried to catch the eye of someone—anyone—but no one looked at me. No one seemed to be looking at anyone, although I thought I detected an acceleration in the pace of the swinging, and a rise in the pitch of the songs.

Finally, I spoke. "Excuse me, did you notice that man over there...with the snake?" I asked the mother standing nearest to me.

"Oh—uh-huh," she said, smiling.

"Well," I said. "Do you think...we should do something about it?"

"Do something about what?" she asked, brow furrowed. "It's not as if

he's bothering anybody."

Was that true? He was bothering me. Was he not bothering anyone else?

"I just don't know that there should be snakes in the playground," I said.

"I think it's kind of great," she said. "I'm going to take my son over for a closer look when we're done swinging."

I understood what she was saying to me. She was telling me that I was being narrow-minded. This was a teaching moment, and I was not taking proper advantage. We live on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, where people are educated and tolerant, where we teach our children not to be childishly afraid, and to think outside of the box and to get to know

IMAGINE

EXPLORE

DANCE

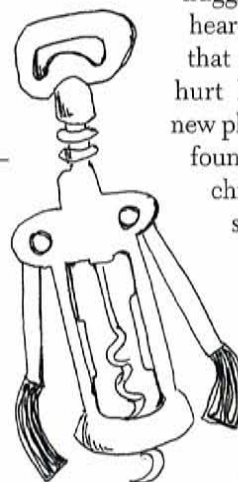
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the local serpents and share their playground equipment with them. Here on the Upper West Side, we don't judge our fellow creatures by their mottled gray-brown attire, or exclude members of our community simply because they slither. I wondered briefly if that man had ever taken his snake to the playgrounds of the Upper East Side.

I didn't say anything more. I could have argued that given the fact that people are expected to tether their dogs and park their bicycles outside the playground, it was inconsistent for this man to bring in his reptile—about whose background and tendencies and diet we really knew nothing, after all. But I didn't. This was partly because I was afraid that the reason I objected to the snake's presence had more to do with my weakness than its wrongness, and I didn't want to admit that. It was partly because I was wary of the out-of-place man, and I didn't want to admit that, either. After a few more turns on the slide, the man wrapped the snake around his waist and his



neck, and quietly left the playground. They never tried out the swings, or the sandbox, or the seesaw. It hadn't appeared to me that either of them had enjoyed their outing very much, and I never saw them again.

A year or so later that playground was renovated. The asphalt was replaced by a black, spongy material, the wildly banging seesaws gave way to docile rideable animals on springs, railings were installed on ground-hugging climbing apparatus. I heard about a study that found that children did, in fact, get hurt less frequently in these new playgrounds. The study also found, however, that because children had to exert themselves so much harder in order to have any fun on the boring equipment and slow surfaces, those injuries, when they did occur, were not merely bruises and scraped knees but broken bones. Yet, when the playground reopened, parental response was universally enthusiastic, and everyone seemed to agree that these new features went a long way toward keeping our children safe.

CAROL PAIK's essays have appeared or are forthcoming in *Tin House*, *The Gettysburg Review*, *Fourth Genre*, *Literal Latté*, and *Literary Mama*. She lives on the Upper West Side of Manhattan with her husband and two children. This is her fourth essay in *Brain, Child*.

This episode took place a number of years ago, and for me it represents an age of innocence, when my concerns for my son's safety could be addressed by padding the playground or simply by picking him up and carrying him home. Now that he's eleven, and kids his age are riding the subway and hailing cabs by themselves, I have given up on the notion that I can somehow guarantee his safety by controlling his environment. Not that I ever really believed that was possible.

I wrote this piece because I think a great deal about safety these days, but have not yet reached any particularly useful conclusions. I find it interesting that at times when we are forced to address safety issues—when we would benefit most from a sense of clarity and consensus—the element of fear often makes us even more befuddled and isolated than usual. The only thing one can do, really, is try to have a sense of humor about it. If this were a short story, I would never get away with anything as heavy-handed as a snake in a playground. This is one of the reasons I love nonfiction.