

A Manner of Speaking by Bonnie Neugebauer

SCENE ONE

Three fabricated monoliths dominate the playground at Grass Lawn Park. Jonah (age 3.5) studied them as we ate our picnic lunch, and as soon as we were finished he headed over to check them out. He traversed from rock to rock, fitting his toes and fingers into some of the crevices, but quickly flopping his arms down and shaking his head, sometimes giving a little kick, and walking away, "Too scary," he said over and over again. "Too scary."

"Are you going to climb one of the rocks?" I asked.

"They're too scary; I can't do it."

A short while later, Schon (age 5) left her water play in the fountains and joined us. With great care and confidence she climbed to the top of the 8-foot rock, and posed happily on the summit. That was all Jonah needed — he had watched her very carefully, studying where she placed her fingers and toes. Slowly, calmly, with just a bit of uncertainty, he made his way to the top to join Schon. They surveyed the world in shared happiness.

And then Jonah just sat there. With his chin in his hand he thought — and he thought.

"Okay, Jonah, it's time to turn over on your belly and climb back down." "I can't do it." "Well, you really need to start — and I'll help you. BUT DON'T JUMP." With considerable encouragement he began to find his toeholds, but it was obvious he was pretty scared. When he was down far enough, he jumped into my arms. We both watched as Schon climbed quickly to the ground.

The next day as they were getting ready to go to a different park for an adventure with Roger, Jonah came to me. "Gramby, could Night Train (that's Roger, you'll have to ask him for the story) take us to Grass Lawn Park so I can show him how I can climb?"

SCENE TWO — Same day. Grass Lawn Park.

All through lunch, Jonah watched the kids, mostly bigger and older, dangling and climbing as the merry-go-round spun ever faster. "Don't even think about doing that," he muttered to himself. "Don't even think about that" over and over again.

SCENE THREE

Farrell MacWhirter Park is one of the places we always go when Schon and Jonah visit. It's part of our rhythm together. They know they can run and they know the animals will be waiting — Sunny, the enormous pig; Eeyore, the donkey; Roamey, the rabbit . . . and we always hope that the cat will follow us like he did one special day.

It was late in the afternoon, so the animals were enjoying dinner and we got to pet Roamey and watch the calf try out a grainy diet. We wandered into the forest, in search of Lady, the pony, and her rider, but we were diverted. Jonah ran ahead to cross the bridge and just to run, and Schon's attention was captured by the stream.

"You can take off your shoes if you want to."

And Schon began to study this little dappled bit of nature. She tested the water with her toes, measuring the depth and temperature, the wetness of it. She found the tiniest bit of fern to share with me. "I'm going to choose some special rocks and then you can choose." Schon picked up one jagged rock. "I like that this one is so kind of broken." "Me, too." She found a tiny, tiny rock, which she carefully shared and then placed next to me. And a third. She crossed the brook, back and forth.

And then she noticed the log laying across it. And so she balanced back and forth, over and over, becoming more playful, more exuberant as she mastered the skill.

By this time Roger and Jonah had returned, so the favorite rock choosing involved both of them. We all talked about why we liked the one we did. Jonah seemed to like the idea of walking across the log, so Schon gave him ample instruction. Back and forth, a bit wobbly, but well-encouraged. "I'll just hold this branch for you and you can go past . . ."

Because these scenarios happened in the same week, thoughts bumped into each other. Perhaps the two most profound reflections for me were how much each child enjoyed exploring the challenges, how thoughtfully they approached the risk-taking, how brilliantly they took care of themselves — and each other. They knew what they were doing; they could figure out which challenges fit their skill set and which adventures had to wait. As an observer, I could almost feel their thoughts as they broke risk-taking into pieces they could master. And the jubilation of reaching the summit or making the crossing!



PHOTOGRAPH BY BONNIE NEUGEBAUER