

# Swing Little Girl



The sky was blue, and the clouds were puffy cotton balls of white. The sun was shining brightly. It was a good day for a visit to the park. It was a perfect day to swing, Amanda thought, as she made her way into the playground and looked up at the sky.

For most children, the playground, with its red slide, colourful roundabout, and its double swing frame, was just a place where kids came to cut loose for an hour or so after school or on the weekends. But for Amanda, it was once more than that; it was her special place where she came to escape the world.

Four years ago, for five straight weeks, there almost wasn't a day that went by that she wasn't here. And she wouldn't just spend an hour or two here either. She and Charles spent most of the day taking turns sliding down the slide, sometimes going down it together. Or they would go round and round on the roundabout, most of the time lying down on the yellow base and looking up at the sky while spinning. Other times they would be doing the thing she loved the most, swinging on the swing set. Sometimes swinging in time with

each other, and other times racing one another or pushing each other. All the while, they talked about their hopes and dreams of the future and what they were going to do and be when they grew up. But most of the time they just sat on the swing and Charles listened to her as she read to him.

For the past four years, Amanda only came to the park once a year. It was still her special place, but it was no longer the happiest place on earth as it had once been. For the past four years, Amanda would only come to the park and head straight for 'her' swing, where she'd sit for hours in silence. Today, however, Amanda would try and make it like it was when she was a nine-year-old: the happiest place on earth, and for her and Charles, it was their Disneyland. So as Amanda entered the park, instead of going straight for 'her' swing, she walked over to the slide.

Amanda took hold of the ladder to climb the steps. She had to steady herself as the rickety ladder wobbled slightly. Amanda carefully climbed to the top, which seemed to take her far less time than it used to. She sat down, placing her hands on the warm metal sides. She looked down at the friendship bracelets she wore on her right wrist and closed her eyes and then pushed off and slid downwards, her long, blond hair covering her face as she went.

When Amanda reached the bottom, she stood up and combed her hair back from her face with her fingers as she made her way over to the roundabout. As she took hold of the red metal bar, she pushed

once, and the roundabout turned slowly and then came to a stop. Amanda pushed it again and watched as the round metal object with its four yellow divided sections came to a halt once more. Amanda grabbed hold of the red bar and began to run with it. She ran as fast as she could until she could barely keep up with it and then jumped onto the yellow platform. Her hair flew up, and her pink cardigan puffed out as the roundabout began taking her around and around. Amanda grabbed onto the other bar, then pulled herself downwards into a sitting position, carefully placing her legs through the different dividing sections. She lay back, looking up at the bright blue sky and the puffy white clouds. Suddenly she was no longer thirteen anymore and as the roundabout turned around and around, the years rolled back too. Amanda let out a heartfelt giggle and wondered to herself what Charles would have thought if he was with her. 'Those clouds look so bouncy I'd like to jump on them.' Amanda found herself wondering if you really could bounce on puffy white clouds and if they were as soft as people often said they looked.

As the roundabout came to a stop, Amanda got to her feet. When she stepped down off the roundabout, she had to steady herself, as her head was still spinning and her legs wobbled.

When she felt her legs stabilise, she began slowly walking over to the swing set. On the way, she enjoyed wondering if you could bounce on clouds, even if it was childish. But that's what she did with Charles. He was always thinking of silly things like that, but

whenever he said something, he always made her smile or laugh. He didn't speak much, but when he did, he made it count.

Amanda sat down on the swing on the left of the swing set, as she had done nearly every day during the five weeks they had spent together, and began to rock backwards and forwards slightly. As she did, she took hold of the empty swing next to her and started pushing it.

Suddenly she stopped and looked around, just in case anyone was watching. No one was watching. Two thoughts occurred to her; first, whenever she and Charles were in the park, it was always empty, no matter how hot it was, except that one time. It was just like he said to her, 'This will be our special place, the happiest place on earth, just like Disneyland.' It was whenever they were here together.

Second, she told herself not to care. Even if a hundred people were watching, big or small, she would do it anyway; for Charles, she would do anything. He'd like what she was doing, and that was all that mattered. He was her best friend! Even from their first meeting, deep down, she knew he was a good one. She just would not allow herself to believe it at first. However, as soon as she did, there wasn't a day they weren't together. He was always there for her. He saved her every day from the first day they met, especially on the first day.

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Four years earlier, nine-year-old Amanda Curtis tore open the front door of her two-story detached house and ran down the path as she escaped the clutches of her father.

If someone had come along and told her that summer was going to be the best summer ever, she would have given them the middle finger. And if that same person had told her she was going to find her best friend, the best friend she'd ever have, she would have either given them a fist to their mouth or some saliva to their face. There was no summer! As far as Amanda was concerned, summer meant bright blue skies (even in England) filled with days out in the sun and lots of fun. It was never sunny or bright, in Amanda's opinion, even when it was very bright and sunny. And she certainly didn't have any friends. Not real-life friends anyway. Her friends were Dickens, Austen, Dahl, and many other people whom she only knew from the pages of her books. She had no real friends. She didn't even have a mother.

To Amanda, a mother was as real as Santa Claus or the Easter Bunny. When she was at school and saw other mothers dropping their children off or picking them up, they didn't seem real. The only person whom Amanda had was her father. And she didn't want him, ever! Today she was going to finally make that clear.

'You get back here right now!' her father raged, as he lunged forward out of the house and onto the path.

As Amanda reached the far end of the path, she spun around, her cheeks hot pink, her blue eyes full of rage as tears welled up in them.

‘No! I never want to be near you again, do you hear me? Never again!’ Amanda screamed back at him. She looked to her right and eyed the red sports convertible, took the few steps towards it, and began kicking.

‘Never! Ever! Again!’ she yelled, kicking the side of the car.

‘Why you little fucking shit!’ her father hissed at her through gritted teeth and began to run down the path after her. Seeing him coming, Amanda turned and ran down the road, her father’s legs slowing as she did so.

When Amanda was well out of range, her father scanned the street carefully, checking to see if any onlookers had witnessed the commotion. No one was watching. Amanda’s father sucked in a deep breath and then let it out. He took a few steps over to his beloved convertible. He inspected the wheel and the area above it where Amanda had kicked at it. Just a few scuff marks and a small footprint from her Nike trainers, he thought, rubbing at the footprint and seeing it come off on his hand.

Amanda’s father sighed heavily and straightened up. He turned and began to walk back up the path. As he got halfway up the path, a light wind began to blow. Feeling a chill, he looked around and quickly pulled his trouser zipper up and continued walking up the path towards the house. He stepped inside and closed the door with a snap.

Amanda ran across the road. As she got to the other side, she turned to see if her father was coming

up behind her. When she saw he was nowhere in sight, she paused to catch her breath for a few moments. She turned down a side road, making her way up a small alleyway. Coming out of the alley, she came onto a small, caged playground.

She made her way over to the entrance and walked through it, passing the slide and the roundabout. She didn't even notice the little black boy who was lying down on the yellow platform, looking up at the sky as the roundabout slowly turned around. Amanda stopped as she approached the red-framed swing set and sat down on the yellow plastic seat.

She sat there rocking back and forth ever so slightly, thinking how rubbish her life was and wondering if it was this way for other children. *'If my mother was alive, would this be happening?'* Amanda wondered. Even though this thought often came to her, she always came to the same conclusion: her mother didn't even stick around for her arrival. As soon as Amanda appeared, her mother went. She was as dead as a doornail before Amanda stopped crying, still in the arms of the nurse.

Over the years, whenever Amanda's father mentioned her mother, he'd always say, 'Be grateful, little girl. She died so you could live.' And Amanda went with it for a while. But as Amanda got older and that phrase floated out of his mouth, Amanda thought the real reason that her mother died was to escape him.

Amanda often found herself wishing that she would have died, too. But death seemed too painful, and she didn't need any more of that.

Besides, death meant never reading *Oliver Twist* or *Pride and Prejudice* or *Matilda* again and never being able to be with the only things that made her comfortable. Worse than death, she didn't know if you could read in heaven. If death came, it came. She wouldn't do it herself, but she didn't shun the idea either.

Amanda walked back with the swing underneath her, setting it in motion. She began pumping her legs back and forth as she got the swing moving. Amanda stood up and started working the swing hard and fast, back and forth, as tears began to roll down her cheeks. She worked the swing harder, going faster and faster and higher and higher. Suddenly Amanda felt herself losing her balance. She grabbed for the linked chains and caught hold of one, but she felt her foot slipping from the seat. Amanda began to fall when suddenly she felt something stabilise the swing and herself.

As the swing came to a stop, Amanda turned to see a small black boy holding the swing in place for her.

'You know, you should be more careful. You could really hurt yourself doing that. This is concrete,' the little boy said matter of factly, as Amanda sat on the swing. But when the boy saw that Amanda had been crying, his tone changed. 'What's wrong?' he asked softly, his voice full of concern.

'Nothing!' Amanda snapped, wiping her tears.

'It's okay. You can tell me. We could be friends,' the boy said, putting his arm around Amanda's shoulder. Amanda flinched at his touch and jumped off the swing.



‘Don’t touch me! I don’t like it.’

‘W-what, what did I do?’ the boy asked, confused at her reaction.

Amanda walked over to the chipped red swing frame and slid down onto the ground into a sitting position. As she leaned against the frame, she covered her face with her hands and began to cry. The boy saw her beginning to shake and walked over to her.

‘Would you like me to take you home?’ the boy asked, crouching down so he was level with Amanda.

‘No!’ Amanda shouted, looking up at him as she wiped at her tears.

‘I could help you; I’m a helpful boy. We could be friends.’

‘I don’t need your help, and I don’t want to be your friend,’ Amanda said, getting to her feet and walking over to the empty swing seat. Amanda sat down, rocking back and forth on her heels, staring at the ground, tears still lingering in her eyes.

‘Are you sure you don’t want me to take you home? I can do it, you know. I’ve been crossing roads all by myself for two years now.’

Amanda shook her head softly. ‘I’m not going home. I’ll stay right here.’

‘Can I stay with you?’

‘Do as you please, I don’t own the park,’ she said, still staring at the ground.

The little boy stood watching Amanda for a long while.

‘You gonna stand there staring at me all day?’ she asked, finally looking at him.

The boy shrugged and walked over to the empty swing, climbed up on it, and sat down.

‘What’s your name?’ the boy asked, not knowing what else to say.

‘Amanda.’

‘Well Amanda, I’m Charles; Charles Nicholas Carter, and it’s very nice to meet you,’ the little boy said, holding out his small hand for her to shake while giving her the brightest smile he could muster.

Amanda eyed the little boy’s hand for a long moment, then took hold of it. ‘I’m Amanda Alison Curtis.’

When she shook the little boy’s hand, she really looked at him for the first time. He was a few inches smaller than Amanda. Where her feet were firmly on the ground, his toes just missed it. He had a little unkempt afro, and his blue jeans were well worn at the knees. He wore a jumper, which was ripped at the shoulder and badly frayed at the bottom. He was sporting a black and blue bruise around his right eye; eyes that, even without the injury, looked dull and tired. Looking at him, Amanda thought to herself that the name Oliver would have suited him better than Charles.

‘You know your name is the same name as my favourite author.’

‘What’s his name?’

‘Charles Dickens.’

‘Who is he?’

‘He’s my favourite author.’

‘What’s that?’

‘An author? Don’t you know what an author is?’

Charles shook his head.

‘It’s someone who writes books,’ Amanda said simply.

‘Oh yeah,’ he said quietly.

After that, the two children sat quietly for a long time.

Eventually, Charles dug his hand into his pocket and took out a package wrapped in tin foil and unwrapped it to reveal two custard creams and held it out for her to take one. ‘Would you like a biscuit?’

Amanda reached out to take one, then stopped.

‘You only have two,’ she said, letting her hand drop back into her lap.

‘That’s okay. You look like you need it more than me. I love custard creams; they are so yummy, and they make me happy,’ Charles said, grinning happily.

Amanda smiled as he did, noticing that he was missing a tooth, and she took a custard cream from the tin foil package. ‘Thank you,’ Amanda said and held it in her hand for a long moment as she rocked back and forth.

‘Aren’t you going to eat it?’ Charles asked, watching Amanda eagerly as though he had made the biscuit himself and was waiting to see what she thought of it.

‘Let’s eat it together,’ Amanda replied.

‘Yeah, that’s a good idea,’ Charles said, smiling as the two children began to eat their custard creams.

‘Good, ain’t it?’ Charles said, his eyes full of delight.

'Yes, very,' Amanda agreed.

'What happened to your eye?' Amanda asked.

'Oh...my brother did it,' Charles replied, and the silence returned.

'Do you come here often?' Amanda said, feeling the need to break the silence.

'Yes, every time I don't have school. It's my special place. You know, if you want, it could be our special place. We could be friends; we could be a team. That's our roundabout, and that's our slide and these swings. That can be your swing and this mine,' Charles said earnestly.

'And what if someone else wants a go?' Amanda asked, playing along.

'We won't let them on; it's our place.'

'But what if someone comes when one of us is not here? What then?'

'I will keep it safe for you. Don't worry, this place is magic. Like Disneyland.'

'Have you ever been?' Amanda inquired.

'To Disneyland, no. But I see it on the TV, and it says it's full of magic and it's the happiest place on earth.' One day I'm gonna go. Or maybe if you want to be my friend, we can go together. We can meet all the gang, Mickey, and Goofy, and Donald, and we can go on all the rides and have lots of fun and eat lots of sweets, like ice cream and cakes and chocolate! It will be so much fun. That will have to be when I am older because then I'm going to have lots of money. Right now I don't have any so I can't go. But when

I'm older, I will. If you don't have money, I'll pay for you. I will, honest.'

Amanda nodded, smiling briefly and humouring him.

'But now we have to settle for this place. I don't mind, though,' he said, smiling back at her.

'I guess that would be fun,' she replied, and then stood up off the swing.

'I'm gonna go now, but it was nice talking to you.'

'Really?' Charles asked disappointedly.

'Yes.'

'Oh, okay,' Charles said softly. 'It was nice meeting you too, Amanda.'

Amanda lifted her arm and waved at him and then turned and started walking away.

'Amanda!' Charles called out, and she turned to face him.

'Yes?'

'Why do you have a fish on your bracelet?'

'It's not just a bracelet; it's a friendship bracelet.'

'Do you have lots of friends?' Charles asked with disappointment in his voice.

Amanda shook her head. 'It's called a friendship bracelet. I made it myself. The fish is my sign,' Amanda said, lifting up her sleeve and showing him the threaded pink and green friendship bracelet with a pink fish charm hanging from it.

'You made that?' Charles asked in awe.

'Yes. I really enjoy making these.'

'You must be very clever,' Charles said, impressed.

'Goodbye, Charles,' Amanda said and turned back towards the gate.

'Amanda?'

'Yes?' Amanda said, beginning to feel annoyed.

'I'll be seeing you.'

'Huh?' she replied in confusion.

'Tomorrow. Will you come tomorrow?' he asked with hope in his voice.

'Maybe,' she replied.

'Okay great, I'll be seeing you,' Charles said, grinning as he waved at her. Amanda waved back and then turned and walked out the park gate.

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Charles didn't see Amanda the day after they met or even the day after that. Amanda didn't even give Charles another thought after she left the park that day. Why should she? Amanda didn't need another friend. She had all the 'friends' she wanted. If it wasn't for the 'friends' she went to buy the week after she had met Charles, Amanda probably wouldn't have given Charles another thought ever. However, after the bookshop, Amanda decided to stop by the corner shop and buy some chocolate. That required passing by the park.

As the park came into view, Amanda glanced in that direction. Her heart leapt into her throat, and she broke into a sprint. She saw a boy even taller than herself, putting Charles in a chokehold! Amanda

ran into the park, and threw her book bag down on the ground. She ran to where Charles was held up against the red swing frame. She grabbed the back of the bully's t-shirt and yanked him away. The boy stumbled backwards, partly due to surprise and partly because of Amanda's strength.

'Leave him alone!' Amanda shouted angrily, stepping in front of Charles and blocking him from harm.

Charles's hand went to his throat, and he began rubbing it as he panted, struggling to recover his breath. The bully regained his footing and made a grab for Amanda, but she slapped his hand away and started pounding him with her fist in a frenzy. The bully curled up defensively as Amanda kept pounding him, not caring where her fists were landing, until the bully finally turned and ran from the park. Amanda walked away from the swing set, breathing hard, her cheeks pink.

'Amanda!' Charles called after her as she walked. Amanda turned around to see him.

'Where are you going?'

'To get my books,' she replied and then turned back in the direction of her book bag, where two of the three fat novels lay scattered on the ground. Charles walked quickly towards her.

'Thank you, Amanda,' he said, catching up with her. Amanda said nothing as she bent down and picked up a book. Charles reached down and picked up the other book and held it out for Amanda as she picked

up the carrier bag. She took the book from Charles and stood there staring at him. He wore a black t-shirt with Mickey Mouse on it that was far too big for him and reached halfway down his red shorts.

‘What happened?’ she asked softly.

‘He wanted to use the swing and I said he couldn’t.’

‘Why didn’t you just let him use the swing, it would have saved you a lot of trouble?’

‘Because it’s your swing, remember? I was saving it for you,’ Charles said, looking past Amanda towards the swing.

‘You were saving the swing for me?’ Amanda asked, surprised.

‘I said I would, didn’t I?’ he said, sounding offended.

‘All week?’

‘All week,’ replied Charles as he began walking over to the swing set. He stopped when he realised Amanda wasn’t following him. He turned and beckoned her over with a small wave of the hand and Amanda finally began to walk towards him.

Charles pointed at the swing set, smiling as Amanda looked at it too.

Then she noticed a white piece of paper taped to the seat by two stickers of football players at both ends. Written in untidy scrawl were the words, ‘This swing is not in use. Manager of the Park.’

‘Pretty good idea, huh! I got my mum to help me with the spelling,’ Charles said, grinning. He was pretty pleased with himself, already forgetting that



all but moments ago he was nearly choked to death because of it.

‘Wanna race me?’ Charles asked, smiling hopefully, as he looked up at her. Amanda tilted her head to the side, thoughtfully, and then nodded.

‘Sure, why not.’

‘Great!’ Charles said as he climbed onto the swing. Amanda placed the book bag by the frame and walked back over to the swing. She stared down at the white piece of paper with its messy scroll for a long time before she sat on the swing.

‘Are you ready?’ Charles asked, smiling at her as she nodded. ‘Okay on three! One, two, three,’ Charles counted softly as they both began to swing. Pumping their legs as fast as they could, they both went higher and higher. Charles giggled a lot and Amanda began to laugh, too.

Charles won the race to the top, but as their swings slowed down, neither said anything. They just went back up again, swinging higher and laughing harder. They did it five more times before they had to stop and catch their breath. As they did, Charles’s eyes fell on the book bag again.

‘Those books sure are big; they must have lots and lots of pictures in them!’ Charles said.

‘They don’t have any pictures in them. Well, one does. But the other two don’t have any,’ Amanda replied.

‘No pictures?’ Charles exclaimed in bewilderment. ‘If they have no pictures in them, how are you meant to know what’s going on?’

'You use your imagination. As you read, your imagination will show you everything,' Amanda said.

'I don't read so good,' Charles said, barely above a whisper.

'I love to read. For me, there is nothing better. You see, reading is like playing. When you play, you imagine, right? Well, that's just like books with no pictures. When you read books with no pictures, you imagine what you want to, not what the pictures tell you to.'

'Yeah but the pictures go with the words!'

'And so does your mind.' It went silent as Charles thought about what she was saying.

Amanda got off the swing and walked over to the bag of books by the swing frame. She picked it up and walked back over to her swing and sat down. 'Okay, Charles, where would you like to go?'

'Huh?' Charles asked.

'I'm gonna read to you.'

'Really?' Charles said happily.

'Yeah, sure. Why not?'

'Wow! No one has read to me since my dad left.'

'Your mum doesn't?'

'No, she has never read to me.'

'What did your dad read to you?'

'When I was very young, about four or so, we would read *The Tiger Who Came to Tea* and *Not Now, Bernard*. Picture books, see. But I'm not sure if that was real because when I asked my mum to read to me and...and she said no. I told her that I liked my father

better because he would and then she told me to shut up and that I was talking nonsense.'

'Doesn't your father live with you anymore?' Amanda asked softly, seeing his eyes become glossy.

Charles shook his head and looked down at the ground.

'Was he a good man?'

'The best,' Charles said, swiping at a tear and then looking up at her. 'He would not only read to me, but we played games, watched movies, and we would eat popcorn. Then one day I woke up and he wasn't there anymore. So now it's just me and Mummy,' Charles said.

'And your brother,' Amanda added.

'My brother...Oh, yes me, Mummy, and my brother. Just us three. No father to play games or watch movies or read to me,' Charles said, allowing one tear to fall and then swiping at another.

'It's okay, Charles. I can read to you,' Amanda said softly. 'Where would you like to go first? We can go to Narnia, or we could go and see the Bennet's in Hertfordshire or we could go to Maycomb.'

'Can I see the covers?' Charles asked, and Amanda pulled the books from the bag and handed them to him. He could see the covers of *The Magician's Nephew*, *Pride and Prejudice*, and *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Charles chose *The Magician's Nephew*.

As Amanda began to read to him, Charles was no longer in the park but transported to Narnia with Digory, Polly, and the Wicked Witch, and the strange

and magical creatures of Narnia. Amanda sat reading while Charles sat listening, not uttering a word.

Amanda stopped eventually, and they sat in silence as the sun began its descent.

‘I best get going,’ Charles finally said. ‘It’s getting dark. Would you like me to walk you home?’ he asked.

‘No, but maybe I should walk you home,’ Amanda replied.

‘It’s okay. It’s only down the path, around the corner past the shop, then up the road, down the road, and round another corner and then I’m home.’

‘Only?’ Amanda said, a small smile playing on her lips. ‘Let me walk with you. I’ll feel much better,’ Amanda said.

‘Okay, but I’m a big boy, you know. I can cross roads and everything.’

‘I know. You told me that when we first met last week,’ Amanda replied as the two set off from the park.

They walked down the path, around the corner, past the shop, then up the road, down the road, and round another corner to where Charles lived, not saying a single word. Even though they didn’t say anything, they both enjoyed the walk as they thought over the day’s events.

‘That’s my house,’ Charles said as they came to a row of houses, all identical with small front gardens and brown wooden fences. Charles pointed to the house at the end of the street with the overgrown weeds and a broken cooker in the garden. Amanda

walked Charles to his front gate. As Charles pushed the broken brown picket gate open, it scraped across the concrete path.

‘Thanks for today, Amanda. Thanks for saving me from that boy.’

‘It’s okay. I’m glad I did, after that we had fun, didn’t we?’ she said.

‘Lots,’ he agreed. ‘You know, one day I’m going to read just as good as you do. Because you took me there, it felt like I was really in Narnia.’

‘And we aren’t even finished yet,’ she said, smiling.

‘So, you will read to me again,’ Charles said, his brown eyes dancing with happiness.

‘Tomorrow.’

‘Wow, wicked! So, I’ll be seeing you.’

‘I’ll be seeing you,’ Amanda replied, waving to him. She watched as Charles scraped the gate closed and turned to walk up to his front door. He turned to her once more, waved, and then gave her a thumbs up. She raised a hand to him and smiled. Charles grinned happily, baring his missing tooth, and then turned and put his key in the door. As Charles went in and closed the door, Amanda began walking down the street. She felt a strange something in her that she could not remember ever feeling...happiness.

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The next day when Amanda got to the park, she saw Charles sitting on the roundabout as it turned