



A swing in the darkness

Leo Alder whispers

Thomas Bonin illustrates

THINGS

Occasionally my father asks me what I've been getting up to in Canberra. And occasionally he asks me if I can put together an article for his magazine. The following story is my attempt to address both of these things. It happened a few years ago now, and I like to think I've grown to make more sensible decisions since then, but it still stands an interesting tale of when misguided good intentions go bad.

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Walking back from a friend's place one cold, wintry night, I cut through a park nearby my house. Warmed only by a woozy state of inebriation, and a too-light ill thought-out jacket, the darkness of the park represented the much needed shortcut I needed to finish off a long march home. I'd already shivered my way across a few different suburbs and was eager to smash out the last few steps of my trek as quickly as possible, inky darkness be damned.

By daylight it's about as pleasant as a dinky suburban park can really get. A little burst of greenery hemmed in on all sides by suburbia and packing the suburban standard issue children's play equipment — slide, swing and spring rocker. However, night shifts the look of even the most innocuous of faded playgrounds. Yet, even with the presence of darkness, something about the swingset appeared further changed. I stopped to scrutinise it. Peering into the dim half-light of the road's distant lamp, I realised that some manner of insidious neighbourhood hooligan had systematically and deliberately twisted the swing around its horizontal supporting beam, tightly pinning the seat to it, thus rendering the entire device inoperable to even the most determined of children.

I was cold, and I wanted to go home, but something about the situation grabbed me. Being rather tall, I realised that I was uniquely positioned to best assist in rectifying this situation, as given that I could only just reach the twisted seat myself, most if not all the neighbourhood fathers would surely have had no chance. Why not save them the effort of lugging out a chair to stand on, and finally give back to my community?

So I stood on the tips of my toes, pressed my fingertips against the taut seat, and pushed. I had expected it to make a full rotation, but I guess I hadn't hit it with enough force, and with a resounding "CLANG" it came down hard on the support beam, echoing out into the darkness.

Now, it was about 11 at night in dead-

silent suburbia, and I didn't want to wake anyone up, so I quickly realised that this method of swing-set surgery was unsustainable. Without a doubt, the more sensible option would have been to come back in the morning and try fixing it then, but I knew there was a good chance that once out of sight, I'd never get around to doing it.

For whatever reason, then and there, in that moment, I wasn't willing to be a quitter. So, I decided that the best course of action was to climb up onto the support beam and gently fix the swing from a closer vantage point. I'm still not sure how I managed to hoist myself up there, but I did. Precariously squatting like an owl, high up off the ground, I shimmied over and attempted to swing the seat around with one hand, while supporting myself with the other.

The first few rotations of the seat around the beam were easy enough, or as easy as it can be squatting unsupported on a thin beam three meters off the ground, but each rotation was taking longer than the last. Eventually one of them cleared it, but only just, and as the seat scraped its way past, another terrible "CLANG" rocketed out into the night. The second clang is what did it. Two suspicious noises in a row definitely warranted investigation, and I watched in horror as the outside light of a house bordering the park turned on, and a man with a flashlight emerge.

My deep-repressed evolutionary monkey instincts immediately kicked in and I clung on terrified, peering out into the darkness at this unknown threat.

I knew they'd never believe me. They'd never believe that I was up here on this cold night for completely charitable reasons. I was young, suspicious, and they'd definitely assume that I was the one that had cruelly twisted this swingset up. I watched as this man began his patrol, first combing over his garden with his torch, then begin to expand the search outwards. I felt like a frightened animal in the treetops, watching a predator slowly sniff them out.

Of course I quickly planned my escape. I'd just wait for him to turn, then drop into the darkness, and quietly scuttle off into the night in the opposite direction. The swing would remain unfixed, but I'd at least got it slightly untangled.

It was, at the very least, better than nothing. But just as I was preparing to jump, right in the direction of my salvation, another outside light turned on, and another man came out equipped with a torch.

My mind boggled, it was a sustained assault on two fronts. Suddenly the prospect of being caught and having to try and explain what I was doing perched on a swing and making loud noises in the depths of the night seemed like a very real possibility. I watched this new man begin his own search, looking around for the source of the noise.

Fortuitously, it seemed like he too had not yet suspected that it'd come from the park. However, they both knew the other was out there, and if they decided to meet up and pool information, they'd have to walk through the park to see each other, and that'd be it. There was simply no way that they could miss me. As far as I could tell, I had two options.

The first was to just try and wait them out and hope that they gave up and went back inside. However, this carried the risk of one or both of them walking through the park to talk to the other, or to just investigate it, and surely seeing me, squatting up there like some sort of seedy, discount batman. I didn't want to even imagine how it'd play out after that.

THAT GO CLANG IN THE NIGHT

My second option was to take a chance and make a move now. This was a high risk, high reward strategy. If one of them panned their torch across in the moment of my escape, I'd surely be seen, but at least I wouldn't be seen in a precariously vulnerable position. As I watched them patrol, I realised that I couldn't risk waiting. It'd have to be the second option. They were moving systematically and purposefully, and there was order to their movements.

I watched carefully and chose my moment. I hit the bark with a louder than expected thump, but there was no sudden yell, no light in my eyes. A success. I booked it over to the slide, and positioned myself close to the ground, beneath its supporting structure.

From here I had a lucky break and watched the first guy go back inside, but he kept his outside light on, and I could vaguely see the occasional flutter of his curtains, as if he was just lurking on the other side of them, ready to peer out suddenly at any time. Still, it was enough to clear a safer path to freedom.

When the second guy turned around to shine his light in another direction, I took off sprinting, making a break for the treeline. As I plunged into the darkness, waves of relief broke against me. I'd made it. The darkness was suddenly my friend. It was safety and security, and running a few blocks out of my way to be safe, I clung to it all the way home.

I thought about my pursuers, those who braved the darkness to chase away villains in the night. They'd wake up in the morning and see the state the swing was in, and they'd probably notice that the wretched perpetrator hadn't successfully twisted it up completely.

Maybe they'd even feel good knowing that their patrol had chased the villain off before they could finish the job. ■

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