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The Swing

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the swing

Tuesday: a summer fun day like any other that July. I was twelve, and I spent my days in the total joy of being free.

I ran across the lot, just as I had the day before and the day before that, eager to get to the playground so I could have my choice of the best swings. I'd been practicing all summer, pumping first in a seated position, then, as I propelled myself, standing and pumping more, all with one goal: to catapult myself over the long, steel bar that supported the swing structure. I was sure, in a very short time, that I would reach that goal.

Such a simple thing. If I just kept practicing, before summer was over, I would be the first on my block to say, "I went over the top."

All my friends claimed they would be the first, but I was the one who committed to get to the playground every morning after I ate breakfast and after Captain Kangaroo went off TV. That was nine o'clock, a time the others could be there, too—if they wanted to go over the top.

But they didn't; not really. I, on the other hand, did. You see, their bodies didn't simultaneously get heavy and light from swaying back and forth across the moving sky. They didn't see that all that blue pushing against my body and all that air cooling my face was a miracle only God could create.

I kept swinging, until my stomach ached both from hunger and from the pain of pumping for longer than could be humanly possible. The pain didn't matter because I had told myself that neither callused palms nor ridicule from those who called themselves my friends would keep me from going over the top.

I closed my eyes and pumped until the steel links bent and jerked and yanked me down to my descent. I pumped again, until I was swinging and swaying in the sun.

So it was: up, swing, down, jerk, up, swing, down, jerk, as I went higher and higher with each swing and each jerk. My body lifted, unencumbered, free, and I knew that I was on the threshold of something unique: Today would be different; today I would go over.

My body tingled and my heart thumped at the thought. I began to sweat with the thrill of it. I opened my eyes to see if any of my friends were near. Not one. The thick, thudding jerk of the steel links was the only sound. In between the space where I breathed, I realized no one would notice this moment. And, no one would believe me.

For a second, I thought I should stop—not go over until I had an audience to witness my achievement. I feared that my body might not be able to perform this feat again. But, the momentum kept me pumping anyway. Then, a woosh of wind pushed at my back and gave me all I needed for that extra lift. I was over!

I gripped the steel links until I thought the calluses would burst and bleed. My head reeled with the upside-down sensation, and my feet that once pushed against the wooden seat were now flapping in the air. I held onto the links. The pull of my body's weight strained my arm muscles and shoulder blades, stretching every sinew and tendon. Air pressed against the canals of my ears, and I heard another thud as I was yanked down to the gravel. My heart thudded in sync with the thud of the links. My legs, clad only in shorts, raked through the gravel and slid the full length of the landing strip. Suddenly, my body and I came to a complete standstill.

My hands, still gripping the links, burned as I slowly released each finger. Through half-closed eyes and complete stillness, I looked at my thighs, then my legs, then the mix of red blood and gray gravel. In that silence, I lifted my eyes to the top of the swing, to the bar that had been my challenger, and beyond to the sky that had been my flight path, and I smiled, victorious.



MARY ANDERSEN

pug
scratchboard drawing