

The Park at Dusk

Several years ago, during a conversation with a group of co-workers, a woman insisted that it was easy to be a man. She claimed that men did not have to worry about stereotypes. Nor did men have to prove themselves repeatedly because others remained stubbornly suspicious of their abilities.

I still remember her naive assertion, and with that, I recall a particular walk in the park. It was late fall, and the sun was setting earlier with each passing day. Daylight Savings Time was about to end and so every evening I took my dog to a nearby park, hoping to stretch out the post-work sunlight.

When I arrived, I noticed a neighbor and her friend in the parking lot waiting for a ride home. My neighbor was perhaps 12 – I was never very good at judging age – and she recognized me immediately. Without addressing her, I began my walk.

The daylight was fleeing faster than I had anticipated and it was already dusk. As I walked my dog around the macadam track, I noticed that the practice fields were empty of children and coaches, and all that remained were some Indian men playing a game of cricket. After about fifteen minutes, I happened to glance back at my car. In the distance, I saw that my young neighbor and her friend were still waiting for their ride.

That is when a question dawned on me: What should I do if I finish walking my dog and she is still waiting for her ride?

Although the park was located in a relatively safe neighborhood, I would not feel comfortable leaving two young girls in a dark, abandoned park.

My neighbor lived in the apartment across the hall from me, and although I engaged in small talk with her father on occasion, I did not know her parents that well. I never spoke to the girl, because I was single and middle-age, and made it a policy to keep my distance from children.

I was still some distance away when I began to consider my options. I could not offer her a ride home even though our front doors were only a few feet apart. And she would be foolish to accept a ride from anyone she did not know very well.

What would her parents expect me to do? Would they want me to wait

with her until they arrived? If they pulled into the dark parking lot and saw me standing next to their pre-teen daughter what would they think?

I imagined that if I just walked up to their car and told them the truth – that I did not feel comfortable leaving their daughter alone in a deserted park and so I decided to wait with her until her ride arrived – their suspicions would be dispelled. They might even appreciate the fact that I was concerned for their daughter's safety.

That is what I envisioned. However, everyone is different, and what one person considers appropriate behavior in such a situation another might find disturbing (What are the true intentions of a man standing near our twelve-year old daughter in a dark park? Are they as noble as he claims or is he secretly up to something?). While it would be unlikely to get into any legal trouble, a simple accusation could be enough to ruin my reputation. I could never un-ring that proverbial bell.

The arc lights were on and the park was nearly empty as my dog and I slowly approached the two girls. As we drew closer, I grew increasingly anxious. I decided to slow my pace, hoping to prolong the moment and spare myself a difficult decision.

Fortunately, just moments later my apprehensions were lifted as her parents pulled in and she and her friend hopped into the back seat of the vehicle.

I literally sighed in relief.

I wonder what my female co-worker would have done in my situation if she had been born a man. But more importantly, I wonder if she was even aware that there are such circumstances where being a man means that others assume the worst about you – justifiably, for their own safety. And those suspicions are not easily assuaged over time because of your age, your achievements, or a lifetime devoted to honor and decency. They will always stubbornly remain, simply because you are a man.

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