

SWINGS

By

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An Alex Christmas Story

Pointless, Alex decided. *Swings are kind of pointless*.

He understood why other people liked them. Swings went high, and speed made your stomach feel strange in an exciting way like the moment a rollercoaster tips over the top to begin its roaring descent, or driving too quickly over a humpback bridge; that was always his favourite part of the drive down to the caravan during the summer holidays. And, of course, there was always the chance, however small, that you might go high enough to leave the park entirely and land somewhere else, like another country or planet.

But mostly, swings went backwards and forwards.

Alex leaned back on the swing and dragged the toes of his trainers through the dirt, carving two thin lines that stretched out beneath him like railway tracks to somewhere better. The chains creaked above his head in a tired, metallic way, as if they too were bored of going backwards and forwards and backwards and forwards with no obvious purpose.

Swings were supposed to be fun. Everyone knew that. They were listed somewhere, Alex was sure of it, along with ice cream vans, snow days, and finding money in old coat pockets. And yet, as the swing slowed to a gentle sway, Alex found himself thinking that swings were really just chairs that refused to make up their minds.

Push. Pull. Up. Down.

Pointless.

Gently, Alex pushed off again.

The park was quiet. Not silent, parks were never silent, but quiet in the way that made small sounds seem louder than they should have been. A crow cawed from the fence. A dog barked sharply and then stopped, as if surprised by its own enthusiasm. Somewhere nearby, a wrapper crackled in the wind as it was swept along by the chill breeze. It was time to head home. If he stayed much longer, he considered, then he might end up frozen to the seat and that would mean being out here all night and when they found him in the morning he'd be just like a frozen lolly, only child-flavoured instead of watermelon.

Alex slowed the swing until it barely moved. *Right legs*, he thought, *time for you to get moving*.

He glanced around the park. The grass was damp and flattened in places, the remains of last night's frost still clinging stubbornly to the shadows beneath the benches. A robin hopped near the bins, eyeing a discarded sandwich with suspicion.

It was almost Christmas. You could tell by the way the air felt tighter somehow, like it had been wrapped too early and was waiting impatiently to be opened. Alex's mum had said there were only twelve sleeps left, which sounded like a lot until you thought about it properly and realised it was hardly any at all.

Alex smiled. *Oh, alright then, one last go!*

He kicked off one last time, pumping his legs and tilting his body forward on the way down, so the swing climbed even higher.

That was when he noticed the snow.

This was odd for several reasons.

Firstly, it hadn't been snowing when they arrived at the park and there'd been nothing on the news about incoming snow. Which in itself was unusual because at this time of year there was always a warning on the news, and on the front page of every newspaper, about heavy snow incoming that would grind the country to a halt. This hardly ever happened, but the thought of it still brought him some excitement when the weather forecaster told them to wrap up warm.

Secondly, it wasn't snowing anywhere else in the park.

And thirdly, the flakes stopped abruptly at the edge of the swing area, as if they had reached an invisible wall. The snow appeared to be falling in a very neat circle around the swings only and nowhere else.

Alex slowed his swing.

The flakes were large and soft, landing on his coat and melting instantly, like they'd changed their minds halfway down. He reached out and caught one on his glove, inspecting it carefully.

Perfect.

Naturally, Alex assumed there must be a reasonable explanation. There usually was. Perhaps someone nearby had one of those snow machines left over from a Christmas play. Or maybe the council had finally lost control of the weather entirely, which would explain a lot.

Snowflakes drifted lazily past his face, large and soft and impossibly neat, each one landing gently on his coat sleeve before vanishing. The sky above the park was grey, flat, and entirely unsnowy. The grass beyond the swings was bare and greenish-brown.

The snow fell only here.

Alex slowed the swing, twisting slightly to look around. Beyond it, the park carried on as normal.

“That’s odd,” Alex muttered.

Without warning, the swing lurched violently. Alex shot forward, his grip on the chains tightening quickly; stomach flipping as the chains rattled in his hands and the ground dropped away. The park vanished so suddenly that there wasn’t even time to miss it. Far below, the ground far glittered like crushed glass.

He was no longer swinging over dirt and grass. He was swinging over nothing. Literally nothing!

White stretched in every direction, dazzling and endless, broken only by drifting curtains of snow. The air was sharper here, colder, slicing into his lungs as he gasped. The swing groaned, hanging impossibly in mid-air, the chains humming faintly, as if alive.

Alex clutched them tighter, knowing that if his grip slipped then he’d fall and fall and fall.

Below him, the white surface rippled.

He screamed, briefly, before remembering that screaming rarely helped.

Below him, something moved.

A shape rose from the snow, tall and hunched, wrapped in layers of red fabric trimmed with white fur. A massive sack bulged over one shoulder,

and a long beard streamed out behind it like a banner caught in the wind.

The figure looked up.

“Oh no,” said Alex.

Santa Claus squinted against the snow, shading his eyes.

“Ah,” Santa said. “You’re early.”

“I was on the swings,” Alex replied automatically.

“Yes, yes,” Santa said, waving a gloved hand. “They all say that.”

The swing slowed, hovering impossibly in mid-air. Alex dangled, gripping the chains tightly.

“You’re not supposed to be here,” Santa continued. “This section is strictly staff only. North Sector. Weather Control. Experimental.”

“Experimental what?”

Santa sighed and reached into his coat, producing a clipboard.

“Christmas,” he said. “We’re trialling a few upgrades. Snow-on-demand. Festive atmospherics. Dramatic entrances. Unfortunately, something’s gone wrong.”

Alex glanced around.

“You’ve lost the ground!”

Santa nodded sadly. “Gravity reduction. That was Phase Three. Don’t worry though, I’m sure they’ll have it under control in a minute or two.”

The snow beneath them began to crack.

A deep rumble echoed through the white expanse, and something enormous shifted below the surface.

Alex swallowed.

“I don’t suppose,” he began carefully, “that’s normal?”

Before Santa could answer, the snow exploded upward.

A creature burst free, shaking ice from its antlers. It was shaped like a reindeer, but far too large, with glowing blue eyes and hooves that cracked the air when they struck together. Frost steamed from its nostrils as it snorted.

Santa groaned. “Blitzen,” he said. “I told you to stay in the pen.”

Blitzen lowered its head and charged.

Alex didn’t think. He kicked his legs and the swing surged forward, chains rattling wildly as he shot past Santa’s hat and narrowly avoided being skewered by an antler the size of a lamppost.

The wind roared in his ears.

The white nothing twisted, reshaping itself into a frozen forest below, trees racing up to meet him. Alex yanked on the chains and the swing arced sharply, narrowly missing the top of a pine that shattered under Blitzen’s hooves moments later.

“Stop that!” Santa shouted. “You’ll destabilise the magic!”

“That’s not my fault!” Alex shouted back. “You started it!”

Blitzen leapt again, snapping at the swing with icy teeth.

Alex felt a strange tug in his stomach, the same feeling he got when the swing went too high at the park and the world tipped just slightly the wrong way. The trees blurred. The snow stretched.

And then—

The swing slammed forward and Alex tumbled off, landing hard on something solid.

Grass.

Frosty, damp, very familiar grass.

The park snapped back into place. The swing creaked gently behind him, snow gone, sky grey and ordinary once more. The robin was still by the bins. The dog was still barking.

Alex lay there, staring up at the clouds.

A single snowflake drifted down and melted on his nose.

He sat up slowly.

“Alex?”

His mum was calling from the bench, waving.

“Time to go. It’s freezing.”

Alex stood, brushing grass from his coat. He glanced back at the swings.

For a moment—just a moment—he thought he saw a red sleeve vanish behind the climbing frame.

“Gravity restored,” he whispered. “Nice!”

They were going to love this story down at the Chess Club!

Swings, he decided, maybe weren’t pointless after all.

Especially at Christmas.