

Busy Doing Nothing

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I had been casually watching our neighbour Tom for about half an hour. I was working in my study, but Tom was obviously more interesting than the piece I was writing. I'm not sure how old Tom is but he's certainly old enough to be my father. He's also quite petite, not a word you would often use to describe a man, but it seems to fit Tom. I paint this miniature pen portrait of Tom because he had been working on his ten-foot-high beech hedge like a six-foot bodybuilder a quarter of his age and I couldn't help following his progress.

It had occurred to me to nip over and lend Tom a hand, the article I was writing wasn't going anywhere fast and I was looking for an excuse to escape from it. But Tom seemed to be coping very well on his own, in fact remarkably well. The hedge didn't stand much of a chance.

It was also rather cold and miserable but the weather doesn't seem to bother Tom. He's seen it all before, been there, done that and bought the thermal vest.

There was also the matter of my tennis elbow to consider. I've been nursing my right arm for several months now and it would have been a shame to spoil its progress for a five-minute fumble with a beech hedge.

Which reminded me, the strap, or brace I was wearing on my forearm required some adjustment. It was at least half an hour since I had fiddled with it so I slipped it off and without thinking took it apart. Considering it fulfils such a basic function – essentially it shortens the length of the extensor muscles, it's quite a complex piece of kit. In fact just to remind myself how efficient it is I Googled it and found a fascinating article that drew a clever analogy between the physics behind the brace and playing the guitar, fingers shortening strings etc.

“That looks really boring,” said my wife from behind me, making me jump, “I thought you were really busy, don't you have a deadline to meet?”

I explained how the arm brace had suddenly fallen apart and that I was in the midst of an emergency repair.

“Thrilling,” replied my wife, “that'll get your piece written.”

“I thought you were painting?” I said.

“Tom must be very strong,” said my wife, peering out the window, “amazing when you think he must be old enough to be your father,” she continued.

Apparently she had also been distracted by Tom's Herculean task.

“He must have a lot of stamina,” she added, “and think of all that exercise and fresh air he's getting.”

“Tennis elbow anyone?” I said holding up my right arm and wincing, “and anyway we don't have a hedge, not like that anyway.”

Suddenly there was great excitement. Another neighbour, Margaret, had stopped to speak to Tom.

She had her two Collies with her and for some reason she pointed at our house. For a moment they both stared at us staring back at them. We ducked down and when we surfaced Margaret had gone and Tom was sweeping up.

“Better get on with our work,” said my wife smartly.

I had a about an hour left to finish my article so I made another cup of Cinammon and Apple tea, read the back of the packet again, hovered over a box of Jaffa cakes and then went to the loo.

For some reason the toilet seat wouldn't stay up properly. This was disappointing as it's relatively new and I only fitted a couple of months ago. With great difficulty as I recalled. Curiously it now seemed to have slipped over to one side. You would almost have thought someone had removed it and then put it back on squint. An investigation was called for.

My wife looked at it and shrugged.

"It was always squint," she said, "I just didn't like to say."

Baffled I had a closer look and discovered I had fitted it wrong. Obviously I couldn't leave it like that so I got some tools and dismantled it.

The structure of the seat was almost as interesting as my arm brace, it turned out there were several different ways it could be fitted. After going through them all I discovered that only one really suited the shape of our bowl, a subtle point I had failed to grasp on my previous encounter with the seat. Once I was happy with its new position I invited the inspector through to give the seat the once over.

My wife was impressed and asked if I could tighten the door snib so I did and then I hoovered the toilet, the hallway, the kitchen, the living room our bedroom and my study.

By the time I got back to my desk I only had twenty minutes left to finish my article, this one in fact. I was flushed with panic, but the article poured itself out. I used to think a tight deadline was the best thing for focusing the creative mind but procrastination is actually much more productive.