

How Things Can Suddenly and Collectively Go Wrong

By David Silver

It all started when the house next door got burgled. Suddenly everyone in our little road became security conscious and for the next few weeks there was a steady flow of police investigators, security advisers and alarm companies. We had all our external locks replaced with the latest anti-drill, anti-hack, anti-slam anti-whatever versions, and after many years of thinking 'we ought to get a burglar alarm fitted' we actually did it. Necessity is the cure for procrastination.

I had purchased some proximity swipe tags which allow you to set or cancel the alarm system without having to key in a number. One chilly March Monday evening at around 8pm Wife went out to call on a neighbour and in the meantime I decided to test the new tags which I'd just received from the alarm company. I was in the hallway standing by the alarm control panel preparing to do the first test when Wife came back into the house, letting herself in through the front door with her keys as per normal.

"Hold on" I said, "I'm just about to do a test, could you just go back out into the porch for a moment". This she did, but (and this is crucial to the tale) briefly darted past me further into the hallway before going back out into the porch as requested.

I waved the tag at the alarm control panel which beeped to acknowledge that it was arming itself. I followed Wife into the porch, pulling the front door closed behind me in order to simulate a real exit from the house. We waited until we heard the alarm control beep its state of readiness.

"Right" I said to Wife, "open the front door, let's go back in and I'll ensure the tag cancels the alarm".

"I can't" she said.

"Why not?" I said.

"I've left my keys in the house. Can't you use yours?" she said.

"I can't" I said.

"Why not?" she said.

"They're upstairs. I assumed you had yours with you because you'd just let yourself in through the front door".

"I did let myself in but I put my keys on the hall table when you asked me to go back out into the porch".

Me: "Why did you do that?"

Wife: "Well, I assumed you had yours with you because I saw you holding something in your hand".

Me: "That was just the tag, not my keys. OK, phone Son or Daughter and ask them to come round with a key".

Wife: "I can't".

Me: "Why not?".

Wife: "I don't have my phone with me".

Me: "I don't have mine either, I left it upstairs with my keys".

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There is a brief altercation about the value of mobile phones if they are not mobilised.

Me: "OK, let's go to B over the road and phone from there".

At this point we discover that the porch is locked and we can't get out. To be clear, we can't get into the house and we can't get out of the porch.

Me: "Why the f*** is the porch door locked? You just this minute came in through it".

Wife: "I always lock it at night since the burglary".

Me: "So we're trapped?"

Wife: "Yes, and that's not the only problem".

Me: "For God's sake, what else?"

Wife: "I badly need the loo".

Silence prevailed as we pondered our situation. We were trapped in our porch with no means of telling anyone our plight or of calling for help. We could be there all night, in a house in an unlit road with no passing traffic. But three factors come to our attention.

i) Something good - the outside light was on, illuminating us standing in the porch so if anyone did hear desperate cries they would see the cause. Something bad - we must have looked a right pair of lemons.

ii) The porch had a narrow opening window at ceiling level. When we'd had it built we'd envisaged the need for ventilation due the storing of stinking muddy boots and shoes (not that that ever happened, they seemed to get stored in the kids' bedrooms). So we determined that we could open the window, shout for help and perhaps be heard. The bad news was that with the window open it was now freezing cold. I valiantly kept a stiff upper lip as hypothermia started to set in because I was only wearing a thin shirt with no coat.

iii) Just then the alarm system, still working its way through some teething problems, decided to spontaneously go off, activating both the internal and external klaxons.

This was bad: a deafening racket from two directions and our cat shrieking with fear inside the house. I peered through the letter box and saw him dashing around in panic. I vainly shouted some calming words through the narrow slit and probably made matters worse because he whooshed out through his cat door. But it was also good: perhaps someone would hear the commotion and come along.

Someone did indeed come along. One of our neighbours, M, walked part-way up the garden path, saw us standing in the porch and realised it wasn't burglars. She smiled and waved and turned to walk off. We desperately rapped on the glass and shouted "M, don't go" through the narrow window opening. She came back and stood there smirking as we explained our situation.

There was a problem: We didn't know Son or Daughter's phone numbers by heart. But there was also a solution: I had recently given their numbers to B over the road for use in emergency. We asked M to go across to him and ask him to phone S and D. She went off, shoulders shaking with barely suppressed laughter.

The alarm timed out and silence descended.

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Some considerable time later B came over, beaming hugely. He whipped a camera out of his pocket and started taking photos. "Never mind the bloody photos, phone our kids" I said. He assured us he had done and continued taking photos just to aggravate us. It seemed Son was working late in London and Daughter was, as usual, on voicemail. By this time Wife was hopping around on one leg trying to control her bladder. An engineering diagram appeared in my mind's eye. It involved some rubber tubing leading from a bucket, through the letter box and attached to a funnel placed at a strategic point on Wife's anatomy. I was about to ask B to see if he could provide the necessary materials when Daughter arrived, looking by no means as amused as the neighbours.

Fate provided one final problem which it hoped would scupper us: Daughter attempted to unlock the porch but because we'd had the external locks changed and not had time to give her a copy, her key didn't work, but she managed to scupper Fate's plans by posting her front door key to us through the external letter box. We grabbed it, opened the front door and got back into the house. Thank the Gods we hadn't had the front door lock changed too.

There is a moral to the story:

- To assume makes an Ass out of U and Me.
- Be on good terms with your neighbours

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