

© Redemption

By

John P. Donnellan

We were gathered in the large room with the fireplace. Dr. Mann and Sister Anne sat on opposite sides of the long couch. I sat in the tall red chair. On the center table were several Manila folders, pens, pencils, and an axe still in the wrapper. My doc spoke first about Thorazine's ineffectiveness in taming my sporadic outbursts of anger. They agreed in their concerns for me to learn control. I knew all that already. I just wanted to know what that axe was for.

Dr. Mann had on a plaid shirt with a brown sports coat and matching slacks. Sister was shining radiantly in her white habit, sitting in the sunlight beaming in the front windows. They exchanged a page from one of my folders and talked terms.

"John, since you're so intrigued, you can take the axe there," my doc said.

I sat it on my lap. The yellow Caldor's price tag was still on it, \$5.

"John, Sister and our team feel that after a year here, you still need to work on releasing built-up anger. We've agreed to let you use that axe to cut down trees in the surrounding forest. This will now be part of your continuing therapy."

They exchanged a nod and a smile of agreement. Then he flipped to the front of my folder. They were discussing rules for the axe. I sat impatiently scratching through the plastic to feel the grain of the wood. My hands were sweating with anticipation. I couldn't believe they were going to give me an axe.

Dr. Mann looked at me over his glasses, tapping a yellow pencil to a folder.

"First things first; an axe is not a toy. No other child is to have access to it.

You are not to share it. Do you understand that?”

“Yep. I got that,” I replied eager to get to work on some tree.

Sister Anne cleared her throat and said, “The item will be locked in the athletic closet with the equipment. I alone issue it to you. If I’m not on duty, no one else can give you the item. I’m responsible for the item and assessing your state-of-mind. Questions?”

“So, if you’re not around, I don’t ask nobody else?”

“Correct. Staff is informed and know the rule.”

“Okay, Sista. I got it.”

“John, I’m noting in your file that you understand the rules. Now, when can you have access? If it’s light outside, you can go out for an hour or so after school. If Sister Anne thinks you’re fit to have it. We also realize you’d rather be alone. You’re pretty much a lone wolf and that’s okay. Introverts know their needs. On weekends, go in the forest and work things out.”

“Intro...what did you say I am?”

“People who prefer alone time. They recharge alone. Instead of, well, for you, life in the chaotic dormitory. Am I correct?”

“Yea. I don’t like all the noise.”

“Isn’t that why you work to get put in the padded room? For the quiet?”

“I just like it in there.”

He flipped through a few pages and glanced over at Sister Anne.

“I guess that’s about it for now.”

“Okay,” I replied.

I stood and headed for the nearest exit when they called out.

“Leave the item here,” Sister said. “We still need to talk a bit. You and me.”

I set it back on the table and headed up to the dormitory. Arnie, our counselor, was just lining up the boys for playtime on the blacktop. He was digging through the closet, tossing out footballs and basketballs for some play before dinner.

It was in early April when I took the axe out for the first time. Right after breakfast one Saturday. I filled a canteen with bug juice and stuffed my pockets with coconut macaroons and met Sister Anne at the athletics closet.

“How are we feeling today, young man? We ready to go to work?”

She brushed away the dark curl hanging over my right eye.

“Might be time for that haircut. That curl over that eye is too long.”

“I’m okay, Sista, and you said I could grow my hair out a bit.”

She unlocked the closet. The rank odor of musty gear seeped out.

“It’s right there. Go in and get it out,” she directed.

I leaned in, grabbing the axe. Arnie said the nuns don’t want to touch it.

They all disagreed with Dr. Mann about it. She relocked the closet.

“Your hair is fine for today. Not for Mass tomorrow. A trim is in order.”

“Gosh, when are you nuns gonna learn some cool,” I said, snatching my curl from her fingers. She looked at the canteen at my waist and the axe.

“I hope it eases the hurt in you and gives you a good, strong body.”

“Like Bunyan?”

“Um, probably not like that,” she laughed and went into the dorm.

I took the back staircase to the basement and into the tunnels. In the locker room I retied my sneakers. I put the axe over my shoulder, shoved the door opened and headed out. The children stopped playing when I crossed the blacktop. The axe made me feel taller, older.

“Why you got that?” a boy on a girl’s bicycle pulled alongside.

“Cause I ain’t a kid who plays with toys. See? I got work to do.”

“Oh, go tell it to your mutha,” he said, and pedaled away chasing a girl riding a boy’s bike.

I took the bridge across the creek and weaved my way into the thick forest. I searched for and measured many trees, settling on one atop a small hill. I paced in circles around it looking for the right place to begin.

I wiped my nose, spit in my hands, got a good grip, and swung like the Babe. Whack! It hurt my hands. I hacked away. After just a few minutes, sweat ran down my face. I removed my light jacket, guzzled cherry *Kool-Ade* and ate the macaroons.

The gash in its side gaped pale and glistening. Deeper the cut, the quieter the axe. I wondered what it sounded like to the kids up on the blacktop. A few of the younger kids stood at the fence up there looking down.

After hours of chopping and resting, the tree began to lean. The early winds had eased to a gentle stirring of fallen leaves. I paused, sitting on the stump of an old tree, staring at the pale gash and the leaning shadow. The air felt different. It was like the other trees were watching all that I was doing.

I removed my shirt, tearing it in pieces to wrap around my blistered hands and resumed. The axe flew from my grip. I rewrapped my hands and started again. After a few minutes, the cracking began like popcorn cooking. Then it came.

I stood fearfully amazed, watching it rip down, breaking branches of the trees close by. A second or two before it reached me, I jumped out of the way. A powerful thump shook the earth with a gust of wind about my knees. It rolled and fell still. Torn leaves followed it down. I knelt, hands on the moist bark and

bowed my head.

“Those guys said this would be good for me. I am sorry about it.”

Then I stood atop it, grinning, axe raised to a slate sky and inhaled into my toes. I roared like I had slain a dragon. The thunderous treefall was far louder and more powerful than my little voice.

I gathered my things and put the jacket on, zipping it up, hoping Sister wouldn't notice I had no shirt. I waited at the hall closet for her. She was in the dorm distributing meds. She set the tray in the nurse's office and locked the door. Then, Sister Anne unlocked the equipment closet. I set the axe in the corner. We moved to my clothes-closet, number five.

“How was your time out there today?”

“It was a'right.”

“Jacket.”

I unzipped it and handed it to her.

“Child, where is your shirt?”

“I used it on my hands.”

She took my hands, turning them over and saw the blisters.

“Oh, boy. Let's get those clean. Go to the sink. Wait for me.”

She returned with cotton balls and a bottle of Merthiolate.

“Sister, can't I just shower?”

“Oh. Yes. Of course. Go to it. I'll tend to those later.”

We walked back to closet five for my change of clothes.

“Did you work things out and have a little fun in the forest?”

I held my blistered hands out.

“Yea.”

She nodded with a smile.

“Well, maybe they should have listened to us nuns for once.”

I turned for the shower.

“Sista, you’s guys ain’t nobody. Even the priests don’t talk to you.”

She stared me down, squinting playfully, and then walked away.

The third Sunday in May was Visitation Day. The day Greyhounds bused parents up from Port Authority and the kids behaved so well days before. Standing at my window, looking down at the blacktop, his heavy steps approached my door with his key ring tinkling. The door opened. It was Arnie.

“Good, you had breakfast. Kid, I don’t want you hiding behind those curtains when the buses roll in. Enough already. Don’t do it anymore.”

I slouched in the small chair in the corner, looking into my hands.

“I’m taking out some clothes. Take your axe. Go into the forest. You just can’t stand at that window anymore punishing yourself. Okay?”

“Yea. Okay,” I said looking at the floor.

“Good boy.”

“Arn, if-if you was my dad, wouldn’t you c-come visit me? At least once?”

He shuffled his feet, rubbing his stubbled chin.

“Well, I can’t say. I-I, well. I-I can’t imagine why I wouldn’t visit you.”

“I just want people see that I got a pretty mother, too. But she drinks and forgets to get on the bus.”

“Yea. I know. That’s not your fault, kid.”

“Thanks. I’ll change. I was gonna go to the forest anyway.”

“Is it helping you, being out there?”

“Arnie, I know nobody’s ever comin to see me. It’s just hard. That’s all.”

“Why you up so early then?”

“I feel sad if I miss the sun waking up. At least he always shows up. So I show up for him.”

“For being just twelve, there’s old man wisdom in your heart, kid.”

“You get that from being smart. Right?”

“Not unless you’re smart enough to learn from mistakes and let ’em go.”

“The nuns always talk that. I don’t get how you know what’s a mistake.”

“Maybe not today. Give it ten-thousand more sunrises,” he turned for the dorm. Minutes later he returned with my canteen of *Kool-Ade* and a bag of peanut butter cookies. We walked to the hall closet.

“I thought only Annie could get it.”

“She’s assisting with an unruly hellion over in the Josephites,” he joked.

“Them little kids are going off?”

“Yep. I know. Sometimes, a strange energy sweeps through this place, sets you kids all on edge. Like dogs at full-moon. I just don’t get it.”

“We ain’t dogs, Arn. We’re just kids nobody wants to bring home. Cause I’m all messed-up. Right?”

He looked away, ignoring the question. He handed me the axe.

“You name this little thing?”

“Yea, uh-huh. Her name is Fury.”

His eyebrows rose in feigned surprise.

“Fury. Well, it’s in you. Be careful crossing the blacktop. Carry it low.”

“I know. Not over the shoulder until the forest. I know the rule.”

As the door shut I whispered, “Ain’t no dang fury in me. It’s just me.”

Between the cemetery and Astor creek, I found the tree I had worked the

day before. A tall oak. I removed my jacket and tossed it aside. The sky, changing by the minute, hung with fierce gray clouds. I placed my fingertips in the gash I'd made yesterday; a gooey amber stuck to my fingers. "Tree blood."

I put on the gloves that used to belong to Arnie's wife and took a grip, leaning back, I let the axe slice in. Each time, it was my foster mother's face that met Fury. Each time. Other times, not a lot, I saw my pretty, drunk, mother.

I continued working into the guts of the tree, swinging, crying, and screaming. It hurt my hands but I had some callous build-up. I stopped for a drink and cookies. Each time I paused, everything seemed changed, like it was a greener and prettier forest. In the creek I washed the blisters, and felt something watching me.

In the distance a rumble of thunder rolled across Dutchess County. I tossed the gloves aside and drove the axe in with a madness. After several minutes, I stopped to catch my breath, thinking I'd heard my name called. Then I saw someone moving through the forest. A balding head. He came into the clearing.

"You got visitor's, kid."

I dropped the axe and nearly jumped in his arms.

"I do? Me? For real? For really real?"

I was hopping on the air.

"Yes. They just drove up from the city."

"Who?"

"Who you been waiting on since last summer?"

I took his meaty hand, pulling him toward the bridge.

"Well, come on, Arn. My ma's here. My ma." I was so excited.

We doubled-timed it up to the crowded blacktop as thunder rolled closer. A few families were heading into the gym because of the threatening sky. He was at

my side.

“Well, Arn, where’s she?”

He looked around. I watched his eyes as he scanned the playground.

“Blond hair. Blond hair,” he said, puzzled, searching about.

“Blond hair?”

My stomach fell into my feet. My mouth ran dry. Then I saw her: icy blue eyes and that voice calling out: it was Lu. I only felt my first few steps and the rain patting my face. Suddenly, I was across the bridge with no memory of how I got there. I continued into the forest and hid behind the tree, my face even with the gash. It smelled of a wet sweetness. I watched for her coming, listening, and struggling for breath. “She’s coming, she’s coming...”

I peed myself. A rip of thunder and a burst of rain came at a slant. It felt comforting. I removed my shirt and grabbed hold of Fury.

“You come!” I screamed, daring Lu or the lightning to even try hurting me.

“You come!” Over-and-over, I’d curse, swing and spit. “Come on!”

I heard Lu’s voice in me, “Don’t defy me, boy. Don’t defy me.”

I paced around the tree a few times, anxiously dragging the axe.

“Nobody understands, tree. Nobody understands nuthin. Why, tree? Why?”

The water felt electric on my flesh. I lifted and swung, sucking in the air. Arnie told me to breathe out on the swing. Not to hold my breathe in. I felt stronger when I breathed. Pain hurts less.

The tree began to crackle ever slightly. Looking up into the thick, leafy branches, cool, gentle drops fell. I was so rapt to the pitter-patter, I didn’t hear the footsteps. At first I thought it was a deer. I peeked from behind the tree.

Sister Anne stood looking-up at the tree, clutching her cross. I turned away,

setting the axe on my shoulder. Inside the pale gash, I felt the ridges of my cutting.

“Child, do you just have something against shirts or what?”

I didn’t answer. I was lost, feeling the tree like it was talking in me.

“It’s time to go. It’s unsafe in this weather. So let’s pack it up.”

I didn’t turn or answer. I let my hand rest on the sticky sap. I smelled and tasted it: sweet and bitter. I did hear her talking. Heard the thunder too. At times. She approached and playfully bumped me aside. I faded back, staring down at her muddied black shoes.

She softly set her hand inside, feeling the rough edges. Her hands were pale as the insides. Then her hand just fell, as if it couldn’t bear the weight of any more rain. She inclined her head, water ran from the edges of the habit as she shook her head whispering, “Dear God.” She turned on her third incantation.

“Why, why this one?”

With a shrug, “Why not that one?”

She glanced at my shirt soaking in a mud puddle and then to me, watching the cool rain run down my boyhood skin in rivulets. I lowered the axe. Her eyes followed the contour of chest-to-shoulder-to-arm-to-hand and to Fury held firm.

“Notice anything about this tree?”

“It’s a tree.”

“Come’ere. Stand with me.”

I switched the axe to my other hand, in case she tried to snatch it away. I wasn’t done yet. She put an arm around my shoulder as we stood side-by-side staring up.

“Look with me.”

“This gonna be like one’a them raw-shack card thingys?”

“Shush it, boy.”

I did as she said, drops batting our eyes.

“What do you see?”

“Geez, man, a tree, Sista.”

“No. That’s not enough. I did not mean that at all. Look closely, boy.”

She looked about, her gaze falling on a blackened tree that had been rend by lightning. One side was dead. On the other side of it, trees had joined, connected like vines and flourished, bringing back the good half.

“Look there. Then look at this one. Use those smarts of yours.”

I looked back and forth a few times with a shrug. Her arm lowered.

“John, you must understand living from dead. Yes?”

With a glance upward, I understood and took a few steps back.

“This tree is alive. You were to cut down the dead trees. Dead.”

I bolted forward. “You guys didn’t say nothing but to cut down trees.”

“Well, we thought that common sens... Never mind that now.”

“Oh, damn I feel stupid, Sista. I really am retarded.”

“Then child, something has been learned at a high price.”

“What do I do, Annie? Can it still heal with its insides all cut away?”

She shook her head, ignoring the nickname. Dreamily she said,

“Seems it’d take a miracle to heal this thing. It’s just...so done.”

She touched the tree, her face was hung in sadness as her lower lip quivered. With a hand in the gash and one on the bark, she closed her eyes in prayer.

Axe across my shoulder, a foot away, I studied the clear rivulets running around her cute nose, gathering at the corner of her full lips. I stared at the rising

of the jugular, purple pulsations sweeping beneath marble paleness. She caught me studying her neck, blushed and stepped away to gather herself.

“I don’t know much about damaged trees. I seem to know even less about damaged boys and what blessings it takes to heal them.”

“Prayer can’t fix this, Annie. It can’t even fix me. Shit, you know it.”

She thought a moment, wiping a tear or the rain from her blue eyes.

“Best you finish it. It’s traumatized. Practice mercy in all things, John.”

I stepped back and lowered the axe and fixed my grip.

“I didn’t mean now. You’re going to get sick without a shirt or coat.”

I lifted it onto my shoulder and stepped toward her. A peel of thunder startled her and a flash overhead lit the darkening space between. She extended her pale hand, palm up, water dripping from each gentle finger.

“I want that item. I want it now, boy. In my hand. You hear me?”

I gripped harder, shaking my head, staring at that purple pulsing. I closed my eyes, imagined it. She backed away protectively pulling her raincoat about her. She still had her hand out. I shook my head once.

“Mother f... I said no!”

She took several steps back and folded her arms.

“Okay. I’m going. I am not happy with you. Finish it. Kick it. Beat it. I just don’t care what. But I’ll tell you. You killed a beautiful thing of God’s. The only path to redemption, use what you damage. It can’t just lay in the mud because you didn’t know any better, you city boy,” she said in disgust.

As she continued, the rain worsened. I turned my back to her to drown out a lecture I’d heard before; the road to redemption. After a bit I looked back and she was gone. In under twenty minutes the tree thundered down. I didn’t

look at or stand atop it. I gathered my stuff and headed up the hill for the Marist dormitory just as the bells in town struck three. Because I didn't follow the rule and return the axe when told to, I got a night in the padded room. Arnie let me out for breakfast. Then he said to me and a few of the other boys, "Let's go, men. We got redemption work."

"Oh, no," came the chorus and the boos.

"Ten minutes. Back exit. Be there," he instructed with laughter.

We filed down and headed for the creek. Frank, a counselor from another dorm, and Arnie fired up two chainsaws. They cut away the larger branches and smoothed the tattered edges where the tree snapped off. Arnie gave out a few hacksaws, letting us cut off the smaller branches. They sat back and watched us work while they smoked cigarettes, shared a Thermos, and told jokes.

Then, Frank and Arnie pulled out a long, thick chain with hooks. The hooks were hammered into the tree. Then we all pulled, grunted, and rolled the trunk forward. We came to a small hill. The men removed the hooks. In a line, we all pushed it downhill. It crashed into the flowing creek. It took about three hours for two men and nine boys to make use of it.

We positioned it across the creek about twenty feet from the old bridge and the small waterfall. It was perfect for laying atop, spearfishing for trout and just plain daydreaming. Arnie stood proudly looking at our new bridge.

"Arn?"

"Yea, kid?"

"W-what is redemption really?"

"Oh, you got that speech again," he said with a wink.

"I like the road to perdition one better. At least there's some fun first."

He pointed to the log, a thing Fury made, “That is as close as it gets.

That’s redemption. Making good what has been damaged. Ya get it?”

I sighed and threw up my hands.

“Arn, why are nuns so weird, man?”

“You’re asking me? Now let’s all clean up and head to *Del’s*.”

We all went back up the hill to wash. Arnie took us all to *Del’s Dairy Queen* by the Fair Grounds. We all got two large cones. It was a swell day and Sister Anne said the tree-bridge we made was good enough.

Each day after school, I took the axe out and went down to the creek. They thought I was still cutting down trees. I stopped after I cut down the living tree. Something was happening in the forest. I had no words for the nuns or the shrinks.

It started on a Visitation Sunday, I took the axe and went down to the log. I crawled out on it, the axe resting under my arms. I stared into the flowing waters, trying to fix my gaze through the rush and into the bottom, without my eyes being pulled downstream. It took a lot of hours. But over time, I could stare through the rushing depths without distraction.

I studied schools of gray guppies, red crayfish, rainbow and spotted trout, fat bass, and sometimes, a blind catfish. Little eddies formed and fell apart as the water rushed down from the falls, churning and swirling. Laying there, I watched the colorful leaves spiraling down, all reflected in the those sparkling waters. The shadow of a tree hit water and bent in the depths.

For days I sat bankside, poking sticks through the surface, studying and wondering of that odd swerve. But it was the sparkly silt that swept me out. I felt mesmerized by the silt of the creek. At times, my tears fell into the water, mixing, somehow drawn out of me. Time stopped but my eyes were opened.

Then I heard a yell, “John!”

Startled, I dropped Fury. Glancing around confused and disoriented, I fell in the water. Sister Anne stood on the bridge laughing playfully. She was having a good one on me. It took a bit to compose herself, her eyes bright and cheeks red.

“Let’s go, child. Time to eat,” she shouted.

I retrieved the axe from the silt and crawled up the bank and met her on the bridge.

“What were you doing out there? Day-dreamin? It’s a great place for it.”

“I don’t know what happened. I was awake but I wasn’t really here.”

She felt my forehead for fever and we headed up the hill.

“What’s for lunch, Sister?”

She looked down at me, a puzzled look on her face.

“Lunch? John, you’re already late for dinner.”

“Dinner? Nah.”

I looked back at the creek and her face several times, lost and confused.

“H-how can it be dinner? I just had breakfast.”

“You’ve been down here ten hours. You must’ve fallen asleep.”

“I don’t think so. My eyes were open.”

We walked quietly up the staircase. I could feel her thinking about what I’d said. At the closet, I took a cloth and wiped it down all the way and set it away in the back. She closed the door as I stood beside her.

“I don’t need that thing anymore, Sista.”

“You don’t? Tell me why not.”

I looked up into her blue eyes, scratching my head.

“I just don’t. Something’s happening down there. I seen things.”

“At the creek?”

“Yea. Something like a woman.”

She guided me towards the clothes closet.

“A woman?” she asked, looking as if I was pulling her leg.

“Geez, that’s what I’m tellin ya.”

“Well, there are vagrants down there from time to time. Hippies.”

“Nah, not like that at all.”

“Well then, what kind of woman did you see?”

“Well, she ain’t like you’s guys.”

“You mean like nuns?”

“No, Sis. I mean like she’s got no body. She lives high in the trees.”

“She lives in the trees?” she mocked. “And you say you saw her?”

“No. I was too afraid. I looked in the creek. Saw her off the water.”

“Really?” she smirked, shaking her head. “I think you’re telling a fib.”

“I’m not. She took out some of the bad stuff in me.”

“How?”

“I dunno how. I just know.”

She lifted my chin and looked into me, measuring for deception.

“You’ll be off those meds soon. They’re known to have these effects.”

“You really don’t believe me?”

“No. It’s just those meds child. Just the meds.”

“But, but what if it isn’t the meds, Annie?”

“Child, you’re not the kind of kid to draw the saints and angels down.”

Note: the accompanying photo with this story, I cut that tree down at Astor Home in May, 1971.