

AT THE ROOT OF FRIENDSHIP

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I was then thirteen, an age notorious for placing friends above anything and everything else in life. Friends were certainly more important than school, or homework and such. The California school system is not a shining beacon of brilliance. As such, my attention waned. I began to think more and more of a project my best friend had proposed we tackle: The Fort. It was a run-down old shack used as a shelter for cows that inhabited an apple orchard. Like the shack, the orchard had long since been abandoned. At length, I decided that we should go for it.

We would come out to the shack every day after school, clearing out debris and formulating our plans for the fort. Over time the fort took shape, redone from the inside out. At first I was not impressed by the progress we were making, but after a year or so of dedicated play I learned to love it. To us it was beautiful in an austere sense—beautiful because it was ours. To Sean and me, it was a palace.

Yes, everything was perfect with our fort. All, that is, except for the tree root. It was a small annoyance, being a harmless tree root that protruded from our dirt floor. It rose maybe two inches above the floor and went about a foot before re-submerging. Like most annoyances, this one became more so over time. It went from being an eyesore to being in the way. At length we decided that it was downright dangerous to have in our fort and must therefore be removed.

Thus it happened one fateful Saturday—Sean and I trotted home to get axes; we were going to remove the root. What would happen that day would mar the perfect beauty of the fort. In retrospect, it was stained red that day and forever in my memory. We almost whistled while walking the familiar path back to the shack. We were oblivious, he and I, and furthermore our senses were dulled by the testosterone which flowed in our veins. We were men at that moment, each of us holding our weapon. No trace of the root would remain when we were done, no sign that the perfect order of our floor had been disrupted.

Sean dug a hole underneath the root, in order to chop it out. We took turns then, chopping away at this pitiable root. Sean drew first blood, as his ax cleaved into the primal, untreated wood. I then sent my ax singing through the air and into the root. This went on for what seemed an interminable length of time, and I had to take several breaks to catch my

breath. Sean was physically strong even then, and I almost envied the ease with which he chopped at the root. For all our concerted efforts, however, the root refused to die. It lingered there, not much alive and not yet pulp and still in our way. It was a mocking tribute to our weakness. Our efforts redoubled, and the war went on.

At great length, we saw that we were making progress, the root was almost gone. In retrospect, the root was already chopped, maimed, and beaten below the surface of the dirt floor. Had we simply been content to cover up the remains with dirt, it would have smoothed out over time. At that precise moment, compromise with the root was not an option. We were going to obliterate the stupid thing, and when we had done that we were going to burn the remains to ashes and stomp on them. At least that was the prevailing attitude at the time. About then, it happened.

He and I volleyed savage blows into the wood. Chips flew as we took turns swinging. Ax up, swing, back away, and then again. On and on. Suddenly as I raised the ax above my head, I could feel something was wrong. I remember it completely, a second of time that my eyes recorded. It is footage that even now my mind can only replay in dreadful slow-motion. My peripheral vision warned me first. Sean's ax, which should be visible to me by now, was not there. In fact, as I turned my head to the left I saw that Sean's body was not at all where it should be. He had crouched down without warning, and was brushing away wood chips with his hands. I could see determination in his eyes. He had put his head lower than my descending blade and directly in the path of my swing.

Too late—the ax was loosed. It fell for an unbelievable length of time. I tried to yell at him, say anything to make him move out of the way. The same cruel time which slowed the deadly fall of my ax did not grant me the right to warn my friend.

When extreme circumstances arise, the human body has an amazing ability to forego the rational, cognitive processes of the brain and simply react. In effect it short circuits the brain, favoring the spinal cord and the rapid response time it can generate when moving muscle in response to a threat. My eyes looked desperately into his; he could almost see it coming. My hands jerked up, I was trying to stop the ax from falling. This particular stroke was a savage swing I had put all of my 165 pounds into—it was a freight train, and no brake, lever, or whistle would prevent it from striking everything in its path. I did not succeed in checking the ax, but I did prevent it from cleaving my best friend's head in twain. The ax struck the root with a muffled thud.

Sean's face registered shock and alarm. I watched on in horror as the ax which did not strike the root hard enough to penetrate bounced unbelievably back into the air. I watched as Sean's visage changed to one of pain and fear as the blunt end of the fifteen pound tool struck him above the temple. I still remember the horrible hollow sound it made. Then the blood came. At first it streamed through the air, describing a nice arc as Sean was knocked backwards onto the floor. Now it gushed out of his head in great crimson spurts. I stopped breathing.

Sean picked himself up within the same heartbeat he had landed on and proceeded to curse and kick a hole into the side of our palace. He realized that he was in trouble and needed help. My friend took off for the nearest house, yelling for me to run. I started breathing, then I started running. Fast. My full mental faculties had not yet been released to me—I was pure adrenaline. I noted how Sean ran with his head cocked to one side, his hand placed over the wound as if to stop the bleeding. We reached a house, and Sean banged on the door.

In a flurry of nervous activity, he was placed on the floor of the porch, some lady applied an ice compress and towel to his head. The blood pooled around his head like a red halo. I phoned his mother and numbly tried to explain to her in one sentence what had happened. She asked me three or four times to slow down, but all I could think of was: "Is my friend going to die? What have I done to him? What must his family think?" It was determined that his bleeding had been temporarily brought under control, and that his mother was coming out to take him to the hospital.

I looked at him then, and he seemed peaceful and not at all feeling the way I was. Right then and there, he understood what I was feeling and forgave me. He told me he did not blame me for what had happened. He was then taken away. I went home sobbing. I sat in a chair, rocking myself back and forth, shaking. I was trying to understand the magnitude of what I had done, and what almost happened.

Even though my friend was able to forgive me, I was never able to fully lay it aside. My guilt rests still on the ground next to an unconquered tree root, exactly where it had fallen from my hands.