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The Healing Tree

A man named Stan was a groundskeeper at Massachusetts Correctional Institution Norfolk. One day, he decided to plant a peach tree. He picked a spot in front of the Community Services Development building, or CSD, and planted a sprouting peach pit. I'm sure he dug up the grass and fertilized the soil, Stan wasn't stupid. But, planting a peach tree in a Massachusetts State Prison? Who would believe that?

The oldest joke in prison is that prisoners have a lot of time on their hands. Stan nurtured that seedling and the peach tree took root. Somehow Stan kept the property manager from rending the little tree out of the ground. I think everyone kind of liked the idea. I mean, the prisoners were tearing Stan a new asshole. Inmates are notorious for milking humor until the udders are dry. Peaches are a juicy subject and I'm sure Stan was badgered by the fellas til' he was blue in the berries. The guy who told me the story mentioned that the kitchen manager found out about Stan's little tree and served peach cobbler for a week straight. But, old Stan took his ribbing with pride and all the while the little peach tree continued to grow.

A couple years past and the little engine that could grew into

- 2 -

a decent sized tree. Nothing huge, this isn't the story of a thousand year old sequoia tree, but tiny peaches were falling.

No prisoner in the history of prisoners was as proud as Stan. For the shellacking this guy took, he held one peach aloft like Excalibur once taken from the lady of the lake and screamed aloud, "Who's laughing now you righteous pricks!" No, I made that part up, but I'm sure he savored the moment when the first peach dropped. You reduce the negativity to nothing once you bite into the sweetest nectar at Norfolk. The crazy peach tree guy became Stan the man and the rest is prison folklore, which inmates are excellent at, "emboldening."

So there I am, walking nonchalantly around the quad one day with my buddy Chris when he says to me, "Hey Nipps, want a peach?"

"Sure, you got a kiwi and a cantaloupe in your pocket too?"

He glanced around like a stick-up kid in a black and white movie about to pull a job and ran onto the grass in front of the chapel. It's kind of a no-no to walk on any section of the grass around the quad. He reached down and grabbed something underneath a gnarly tree I'd never noticed before and ran back to where I was standing. We start walking again and Chris had one hand behind his back. Then he quickly displays two peaches and hands me the larger of the two.

- 3 -

"Tada!" Chris says.

"How d'you do that?" I ask.

The Chris tells me the story of the peach tree, and Stan the man, while we spin laps around the west and east yards. But he also gave me a dire warning, "God forbid you get caught poachin' peaches off the peach tree, Stan'll have your nuts!"

Fast forward a few weeks. My cellmate, Dave, was working in the barber shop trying to earn his barber's license. He had his State Barber Board Examinations coming up. He'd already cut my hair a bunch of times and he asked me to be his model for the test. I said yes, but I didn't know all the details. There are two parts to the physical test. First, the haircut. The second part is a shave with a straight razor. I'd never had a shave with a straight razor. In a prison setting, you're basically putting your life in an inmates hands. This prisoner, locked up for murder, is going shave you with an open razor. Hmm, let me think about that?

I made up a bunch of excuses why I couldn't make it to any of the pre-test shaves. I'd show up for the haircut, but when the blade came out I was M.I.A. Dave didn't seem concerned, there was always another inmate who'd volunteer for the shaves. I don't know why I was so nervous, here's a prisoner trying to better himself by taking the test to earn his barber's license and I'm acting like a big jerk.

The day of the exam came and the models left their housing

- 4 -

units thirty minutes before the test. We tried to enter the OIC building and the c/o out front told us to walk the quad because the barbers weren't ready yet. Whatever. As we're busting laps I notice the peach tree. The quads empty and if there's anytime to make a move, it's when no one's around. I run over to the peach tree and grab a few small peaches off the ground. Then I notice one ripe peach sitting up on a branch just above my head and I snapped it off with lightning reflexes. Before anyone knew what was happening I was back on the quad with three peaches in my pocket and the big, ripe, delicious looking one in my hand. They smelled so good! If you're into peaches, a fresh, juicy, perfectly ripe peach can light up your senses. I started laughing.

"What's so freakin' funny you goddamn peach thief!" one of my buddies said.

I heard somebody walking up fast behind us and the moment I turned around I knew it was Stan. He was an older gentleman, five-six (5'6" tall), large glasses, faded, long-sleeved chambray shirt with jeans and an intense look on his face like a wrong had been committed he was about to set right. I saw justice walking towards me, and justice looked pissed.

"You rotten son of a bitch, did you pick one of my peaches?"

"I cannot tell a lie Stan, I picked one of your peaches."

- 5 -

I thought he was gonna' hit me, he didn't appreciate the George Washington reference.

"Give me back the peach!" Stan yelled.

"Ya' know Stan, I'm having a hell of a day," I said, handing him the peach, "You got a minute?"

Then I spilled my guts. I gave Stan the abbreviated version of my story about the fear of the straight razor. Stan listened intently. I was surprised he cared enough to listen to my story, but he did. After I was done talking he said, "Sometimes you have to have a little faith, after all, we're all in it together."

As Stan walked away with a delicious peach in his hand, it dawned on me, sometimes you do have to have faith. Faith that a peach tree will grow in a correctional institution in the wrong climate. Faith that the guy who's going to shave you won't slip, and knows what he's doing. I'd been leaning all day and suddenly I was standing upright.

Dave aced the test and with his calm demeanor my confidence grew. Prison will test you at every turn, every corner. There's always someone waiting to put you out there, or hate on you. But if you have heart, you can grow and learn from it all. You become a stronger person, capable of handling considerable emotional baggage. But like Stan said, keep the faith, we're all in it together!