

John Hearn

My Lucky Yellow Axe

I couldn't believe I was in the crawl space under a stranger's front porch. And at my age yet. And with an axe. I wasn't doing anything illegal, so my diving under here doesn't make sense. Except that I panicked. Now, though, some law was certainly being broken, even if I didn't know which one, exactly. Maybe I was trespassing. Could I also be breaking and entering, or does that require infiltrating a person's living quarters, proper? Pure irrational fear triggered my flight response and I made a run for it and dove in here for safety. I felt I was doing something wrong even before I was. It's not against the law to carry around an axe, even if it is concealed, right? And now, because I panicked, I was likely in trouble. Big trouble. What if I were seen crawling through the opening in the lattice under the porch floor? What if I can be seen now through its patterned gaps? What if neighbors or the home owner can see my breath in the cold air, spewing up in puffs through the cracks in the porch's floor?

I was on my back with my shoulders and head against the house's stone foundation as the police cruiser came rolling slowly down the street. How would I explain this to my counselor, Uneek? Why had I given her a hard time by implying that she was the crackpot, not me, and that she was way off base suggesting I might harm myself? Why had I told her that she was my only burden in life? Then again, this current transgression was serious enough to land me in a jail cell, not in a comfortable office on a psychiatric ward, so my concerns about Uneek were likely unfounded. I should be worried instead about a bully cop or a sadistic guard. The cruiser moved on, but I did not. I was paralyzed with fear. What if he returns? What if I'm seen climbing out from under this porch? Within a few minutes the police car was inching down the street again. It stopped directly in front of me. Fuck.

The cop shouted out "Hey, you," and I gasped. "Kid!"

"Yeah?" said a young teenage boy who was walking by.

"Have you seen an older man running by here, carrying a large gym bag?"

"No."

"Where do you live?"

"Over on High Street."

"If you see this guy, call us," the cop said.

"Okay."

The cruiser and the boy headed in opposite directions. I was motionless. I was now the kind of guy my father would have enjoyed hospitalizing, before age and booze and trauma hospitalized him, for good. After an hour or so, I shifted my position slightly and as I did I noticed a mummified cat under my stretched-out legs. I imagined how this would look in the River Falls Gazette: Local resident Jackie McNamara, 62, apprehended under a porch, with an axe. And a dead cat.

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Was startled by a loud thud on the porch's stairs. Then another, and another, as a large man lumbered up the stairs, his outline discernible through the cracks in the floor boards. He knocked on the door. No answer. He swore and dropped a newspaper on the porch floor, directly above my head. He turned, walked down the stairs and away.

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Hours passed and I barely moved. It got dark. I remained stationary on the cold ground, except for my uncontrollable shivering. Finally, gradually, painfully, I squirmed toward the exit and slithered out, dragging my bag behind me.

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It was 2:30 a.m. when I got home, cold and sore and worried sick. And yet excited by the prospect of working out with my new axe. I removed it from the duffle bag and peeled the barcode sticker from its head. I stood in the middle of the small apartment swinging it gently, back and forth, initially like a golf club, then a baseball bat. I imagined myself felling trees in the old forests along the coast, just down the street, on land now covered with abandoned mills and overgrown parking lots. In my mind, I was back in the 18th century and the land was mine, land I'd farm once the trees were down and their long roots were up. I'd chop all day long, watching one tree after another fall exactly where I predicted they would, and at the end of each week I'd pause to visualize my fields emerging from the wilderness.

In just a few minutes I could feel my muscles begin to burn and my lower back ache, but that was all for the good, a sign I was regaining my health. I grabbed a Natural Light from the refrigerator and cracked it open, hoping it would induce the same hazy state in me that fortified the first settlers and then the colonists, allowing them to not only survive but to build a new world, a pristine life, even if it was through a rum-induced haze. I took twenty good cuts, being careful not to get too close to the television or the computer, though I no longer used either, and then gulp half a beer. Twenty additional cuts and chug another half beer.

Could need a family. A wife who would give me the boys who would help with the trees and the crops that followed; a wife who would make hearty meals from...from nothing except whatever we found around us, cranberries, maybe, and corn if the natives would show us how to grow it; a wife who would work as hard as I did and love as deeply as I did, who would share a life with me, and a world, and who would be by my side when I left this one. Her hand - not a slip of paper with a number scribbled on it, like the one the mortician took from my father's clenched fist, below the frail old man's withered fingers - her warm and loving hand would be in mine on that day, at that moment.

Kept swinging and drinking. I could picture the widening wedge I'd cut into a yellow pine, and hear my voice calling for my oldest son - "Caleb," I would name him - and sharing with him my prediction that the tree would fall on my next swing, that it would land a foot from the path we had cleared. Then I'd watch him shake his head in astonishment when it did just that. I would chop my way around the wide trunk of a maple, at one with my ax, anticipating the thundering boom when it crashed to the

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ground and the seismic reverberations that would shake the entire colony. In clearing my land I was clearing my body and my mind, making myself clean and useful, strong and needed. I was opening up the space for a life worth living, a shared existence with those I loved, and who loved me. I swung and drank until I became Big Papi, my keen eye never off the ball, my smooth swing quick and full. I swung and swung and swung until the pine tree became that little fucker Trayden, my pizzeria co-worker who cost me my last job, and I swung some more until the maple resembled my skinny, bearded, long-haired, son-of-a-bitch of an uncle named Doc, the crackpot who ruined my life by teaching me poker.

It was mid-afternoon when I woke up. My head ached and my throat was dry. I counted eighteen empty beer cans in the room around me. I had difficulty getting off the couch and standing straight. I nearly tripped over the axe's yellow fiberglass handle as I walked to the kitchen. Both hands stung as I reached for a glass with one and the kitchen faucet with the other. The skin was torn and red.

I walked out into the cold to the public library to check out my craigslist posting, hoping a good woman responded to my ad, guilty that I claimed I was only forty-one, knowing it's best to be honest. Please let there be someone for me. Please let my new yellow axe bring me luck.