

Fuck That and Forgive

Guns, Grit, and Grace

Dustin and Margaret O'Connor

Copyright © 2024 by Margaret O'Connor

All rights reserved.

No portion of this book may be reproduced in any form without written permission from the publisher or author, except as permitted by U.S. copyright law.

Contents

1. The Quiet Tree	1
About the author	6
Also By Margaret O'Connor	7

Chapter One

The Quiet Tree

When I was in the third grade, my worst enemy was a tree.

After sitting in school for three hours every morning, it would *finally* be time for recess. We would run into the sun, into the crisp Autumn breeze ready for the most important event of our education: football. My friends and I had the destruction of our opposing teams to discuss. But, we weren't allowed to do so until we passed the *Quiet Tree*. We were to remain silent in line, like soldiers off to war, until we got to that damn tree.

My friends, Justin, Bob, Jake, Sam, and I plotted to cut that tree down; we hated it so much. We brought the idea up daily.

Little did I know, a decade later, on a warm summer's night with the taste of vodka on my breath and a hatchet in my hand, that plot would come to fruition.

It all started with a group chat. I hadn't spoken to several of these guys for years. We were texting about visiting our old elementary school playground to play some football for memories of the good old days of grade school, where our only real concerns in life came from a

tree. I picked up Sam. He told me how he had to let go of his girl that week, because she was getting too comfortable with other guys.

“Block her on everything,” I said, working the hand controls to my RAM 2500. The night was silent except for the roar of my truck; the muffler had broken off three months before and I hadn’t bothered to put it back on. Sam was quiet. He was a quiet kind of guy, the most sophisticated person I knew. I was the most *unsophisticated* person Sam knew. We probably would have never been friends if we hadn’t met in grade school.

“And I know you never drink,” I said, “but tonight is the night. Let’s go, let’s have some brews with the boys, and you can forget about her.”

We showed up, with a case of Coors Banquet and a bottle of Pink Whitney. This was my first time meeting Patrick, a friend who was added to our grade school gang after I had switched schools.

“The only thing I’ve heard about you is that you steal beer from Walmart every time you guys need some,” I said, when I shook his hand.

He chuckled. “Really? I’ve heard you’re kind of a legend yourself.”

Jake handed me the bottle of Pink Whitney, “Damn bro, your arms have gotten huge!”

“Thanks man. I’ve been skipping leg day.”

We gathered around Justin, who was sitting in the trunk of his Sedan playing his guitar, drank beer and chatted about life, God, and the accident.

Justin had just been dumped by his serious girlfriend of two years. Sam was dealing with his breakup. And I, well, I couldn’t relate. I was totally in love and had just talked to my girlfriend’s father about marrying his daughter.

We decided to break into the playground. We would have just hopped the fence if I wasn't in a wheelchair, but, given the circumstances, we decided we needed to break the chain holding the gate. I started first with my hatchet. I was a half bottle of Pink Whitney in and with every swing an ear splitting crack rang through the night. Lights turned on in nearby windows.

"Dustin!" It was Patrick. I paused. I thought he'd probably tell me what a dumb idea it was to break into a playground at this time of night and wake up half the neighborhood by destroying school property. "You're doing it wrong!" he said. "It has to be one big hit to break chains like that."

He grabbed the hatchet and slung it at the chain. After one try, the chain was in pieces on the ground.

A little drunk at this point, I yelled, "Now we know this guy's the real deal. We'll get along just fine, Patrick."

We were doing shots on the concrete basketball court when Justin saw him.

"Hey! That's my Sedan! What the hell are you doing?!"

We had woken up some middle-aged man from the neighborhood who was standing with a flashlight in the middle of all our littered beer cans.

"I'm not gonna call the cops," he said, "just don't break anything else out here."

We didn't believe him. So like the wise, thoughtful men we were, we got in our cars and drove to the other side of the playground. We discovered that our destruction of property wasn't totally necessary, given that there was an open gate on this side of the playground, but we were too drunk to be concerned about it.

After about ten minutes, the cops pulled up. We ran to hide behind the Pre-K building. The fence was at least seven feet tall there.

“I can do a muscle up to get to the top of the fence, but you guys are gonna have to hold my legs! I can’t injure my pecker. I’m gonna be a married man soon.”

The boys were laughing and tossed my chair over the fence. We waited by our cars, ready to drive away if we needed to. But the cop must have assumed he had scared us off. We had free reign once more.

For some reason, in my drunken stupor, I remembered an old promise. To avenge ourselves against an enemy as old as time. The Quiet Tree.

That’s how I ended up hacking away at its trunk with my hatchet. We were too drunk to finish the job, and decided to drive to a bar to get some food. I was impressed when Patrick hopped in my truck. Not very many people wanted to ride with me, given that I had drunk the majority of the Pink Whitney. But, he didn’t seem to care. He acted like his life wasn’t on the line. Maybe he didn’t know it was. I wasn’t sure if I should be impressed or concerned.

The next day, I woke up and thought we might be in big trouble. I called my best friend, Luke, in a panic.

“Hey buddy. I fucked up last night.”

“Oh, boy. We hate to hear that. What’s going on?”

I explained to him the situation and asked him if I should go back to the school, sweep up the tree shavings and put a layer of spray paint on the tree to make the hatchet marks less noticeable.

He laughed, “Never return to a crime scene, Dustin. I think you’ll be fine. It’s not like the cops don’t have better things to do than investigate a tree that only got halfway cut down.”

This put a little peace in my heart. “Thanks, buddy.”

Luke was someone I considered to be a brother. I always called him when I was in trouble.

If you knew our story, that fact would shock you.

Luke was the driver in the accident that put me in my chair.

About the author

Margaret O'Connor is a bestselling author and public speaker. Her works have been published in both literary and academic journals, and she was a finalist for the Annie Dillard Award for Creative Nonfiction with the Bellingham Review in 2022.

Also By Margaret O'Connor

Turtle Soup Is Enough

Did you know that the fluid in your spinal cord is the same color as lemonade?

I sat and watched it drip from my little brother's limp body into a medical bag on his bedside, as one of his surgeons told us the news that nearly shredded my faith to chaff.

"This kid will never walk again."

These essays were written during the worst year of my life. I wrote them for one of my college classes, answering various prompts on the theme of place. I didn't know at the time that I was chronicling a fight for my existence.

My family and faith have never been about fitting in. We don't believe in God because of what they say at church. We see him in the mud that cakes our jeans and the laughter we share around the campfire, drinking beer and listening to the grisly stories our dad brings home

from the ER. Our faith in God has never been about propriety; it's been about relationship.

How can you reconcile that kind of faith when it seems like God stands by as your whole world falls apart?

When my faith went up in flames, I found truth like I never had before. Sometimes God shatters you to shatter the lies you didn't know you believed, and there's nothing left to do but buck up and face what's right.

Faith is tested, hope victorious, and valuable lessons are learned along the way in this raw, wildly funny and inappropriate memoir.

If you're looking for a pat-answer, neat and tidy devotional about God's work when tragedy strikes, move on. O'Connor brilliantly captures the complexity of grief and faith in her gut-wrenching, hilarious, and beautiful telling of stories that have shaped her understanding of God's love.

– Michele Goodrich