

Redemption

by The Blintz

I spend a lot of time in the park, but what else is an old woman supposed to do with her time? Ever since Carl died, I find myself here almost every day watching all the children as they laugh and play. Sometimes I get a little envious of the young mothers as they watch their children playing with such abandon. My Carl and I never had any children and now I'm alone in this world, left to mourn the only man I ever loved. So I come to the park and can almost convince myself that I am a part of the laughter and merriment swirling around me.

Since I come here so often, I see a lot of people on a regular basis. There's the lady with the twin girls who love to swing on the swings, and the teenagers who stop by here after school to do a little sparking on one of the benches near the fountain. And, of course, the joggers. They are a very devoted bunch, here like clockwork every day to keep their bodies lean and fit. For the most part they are a no-nonsense group of people who don't have the time to sit and talk to a lonely old widow so I don't know many of them by name.

Except for one whom I met last fall when I got caught in an unexpected rainstorm. He was so polite and well mannered - even gave me a ride home so I wouldn't get too wet. Now, normally I don't ride with strangers, but this man just gave me a sly grin and a wink and said he was a cop. Showed me his badge and everything! His name is Ken, and he's such a darling boy. I know his mama must be very proud of him, but when I mention her at all he just changes the subject and gets a kind of wistful look in his beautiful blue eyes. I see him here at least a couple of times a week and he always takes the time to say hello and chat for a few minutes.

On this particular day, I had arrived at the park earlier than usual, so I was surprised to see him walking down the path. I was even more surprised to see that he wasn't jogging. Instead, he was walking very purposefully with a large sack in his arms. I couldn't put my finger on it, but there was something definitely different about him, and I just had to find out what it was. So, I followed him.

He walked along the path until he came to the horseshoe toss and then he veered off into the trees. He seemed to know exactly where he was going, and he came to a stop in front of a small sapling. Now to me, a tree is a tree is a tree, but this one seemed to have some special significance to him because he knelt in front of it and began to empty the sack he had been carrying. Various garden tools spilled out on the ground along with some small wooden fencing and a few tulip bulbs. After the bag was empty, he went to work, carefully weeding around the base of the tree and planting the bulbs in a semi-circle in the ground in front of it.

To say the least, I was intrigued. Gathering up as much boldness as I could muster, I walked closer to him making as much noise as possible so as not to startle him. “Ken?” I began hesitantly. “I hope I’m not intruding. I just couldn’t help but see you over here working on this tree. Are you working here now as a groundskeeper?”

“No, Annie,” he said gently, never once looking up to meet my gaze. “I just wanted to spruce up the place a little bit. You know - pay my respects to this tree.”

“Oh, well, I’ve never heard of paying respects to a tree. Is that what the young people are doing these days?”

“No. Just me, I’m afraid.” A certain sadness seemed to creep over him, and I realized again that he had not once looked at me since I had approached him. I have a special place in my heart for this young man, and I felt that something was definitely wrong.

“Ken?” I began again, this time putting my hand on his shoulder. “Are you alright? Is there something I can help you with?”

“You’re very kind, Annie, but I’m afraid no one can help me this time. I’ve got to work this one out by myself.” With that he emitted a deep sigh and began to construct the small wooden fence into an unbroken ring around the tree. That done, he took a small plaque that was mounted on a metal spike and drove it into the ground directly in front of the sapling. I leaned down and read the words that were engraved on the face of the plaque:

For D.M.S.

My partner, my brother, my friend.

“That is so beautiful!” I exclaimed, tears beginning to form in my eyes. “I’m not trying to pry, but this D.M.S., were you close to him?”

“Yeah, Annie, we were close. Closer than any brothers could ever be. He was my best friend...” Ken’s head bowed as he spoke and his whole body seemed to radiate pain and sorrow.

“Oh, Ken! I know how it is to lose someone you love, and I cannot tell you how sorry I am for your loss! How did it happen? Someone as young as you shouldn’t have to mourn the death of a friend.”

There was a long silence as he ran his hand through his hair. When he spoke again, his voice was soft and filled with grief. “No, Annie. He’s not dead. I’m sorry to have misled you like that.”

I reached down and gently tilted his chin so I could look at his face. I was shocked to see the sorrow imbedded in the depths of those crystal blue eyes and the dark shadows that bespoke of many sleepless nights. His skin was very pale and he closed his eyes tightly against my scrutiny. "What's the matter, Ken? You look like you haven't slept in a week and I think you're losing weight. Your friend may not have died, but you still lost him somehow, didn't you?"

He bowed his head again and pressed the heels of his hands against his eyes before he spoke. "I didn't lose him, Annie," he replied, his voice full of bitterness and self-loathing. "I drove him away. I really messed up this time." He took a deep, shuddering breath before he continued. "I did the unthinkable - I betrayed his trust. The one thing we could always count on was each other. Always. Our first rule was "Me and Thee". Period. It was our creed, the one island of sanity we had in this crazy world we live in. And I blew it. I blew it Annie, and there's no way to make it right. What I wouldn't give for the chance to go back and do it all over again..."

He was breaking my heart. I wanted to put my arms around him and somehow make everything right, but I knew there would be no consoling him. I don't think I've ever seen a person so devastated, so remorseful. I wished I could find this D.M.S. and tell him what I had just witnessed so he would know how sorry Ken was and how this was tearing him apart. Instead I just stood there watching as the man on the ground in front of me seemed to visibly shrink into himself. I could see his jaw muscle tightening as he turned his back to me and became lost in his own private hell.

Suddenly, I felt a presence beside me and I turned to see a young man dressed in worn blue jeans and a brown leather jacket. He looked at me with violet blue eyes that shone with compassion and in a low voice said, "Let me talk to him. Maybe I can help." Somehow, though I had no idea why, I knew that this was the man on the plaque. I stepped back several feet and found a tissue to wipe at the tears that were coursing down my cheeks.

As I looked on, the man in the jeans reached down and laid a gentle hand on Ken's shoulder. Ken stiffened in surprise, but he never turned around. "Starsky." He said it with such conviction, though I have no idea how he knew who it was.

"Yeah, Hutch, it's me. I came to see if maybe we can talk."

"Go away, Starsk" Ken's voice was tinged with bitterness and regret. "I don't think I can face you ever again after what I did. Just know that I am so sorry, Starsk, I am so damned sorry..." his voice broke and even from this distance I could see the effort it took him to retain control of his emotions. He stared defiantly at the clouds for a few moments and rubbed his hand over his face several times. Then, taking another deep breath, he turned his back and continued the work he had started by the tree.

Without saying a word, his friend was beside him in an instant, placing a comforting hand on his shoulder in a way that seemed so natural, even to me. His voice trembled slightly as he began to speak. "It's okay, Hutch. It's gonna be okay. I'm here and you're here and that's all that matters. We've been through a lot worse than this, buddy, and we'll make it through, I promise. As long as we do it together, huh?"

They sat that way for several long moments before Ken spoke again. "How can you say that Starsk?" he asked, shrugging out of his friend's grip. "You know, and I know that I'm a total jerk. I can't even believe it myself. I can't believe that I could be so callous and unfeeling and uncaring...you're the best friend I've ever had...God, I hate myself for this." Ken's voice had risen and pure agony was etched into his features, changing his normally handsome countenance into one of unforgettable pain. "Please, Starsk, just go away. I don't deserve your comfort right now."

"No, Hutch. I'm not goin' anywhere 'til we settle this. I've got somethin' to say and you're gonna hear me out. Understand?" By the tone of his voice, I could see he meant business and there was a look of fierce determination on his face. "Look at me, Hutch."

Ken continued to miserably study the ground in front of him.

"I said, look at me, Hutch."

Still receiving no response from his friend, the dark-haired man reached over and firmly but gently turned Ken's face, forcing him to meet his gaze. Violet blue and crystal blue eyes finally met and locked into place. I could almost see them reading each other's thoughts as Starsky continued to speak.

"Hutch, you're the best friend I've ever had. I never thought there'd be anyone in my life who meant so much to me. I've always counted on you, and you've always been there for me. I mean, I wouldn't even be alive today if it weren't for you."

"Starsk, I..."

"Let me finish, please?" He ran a hand through his curly hair and continued speaking. "Then, Kira happened. And let's face it; we both lost our heads a little bit." He swallowed hard, and I could see him struggling to control his emotions. "You know I've never lied to ya, Hutch, and I'm not gonna start now. You hurt me, buddy, and for a few days there, I thought it was over. Our friendship, our partnership, even 'Me and Thee'. I thought it was gone for good."

My breath caught in my throat as I watched for Ken's reaction. Guilt and shame were written all over his face as his eyes became suspiciously bright. Both men seemed to be fighting for control; desperately trying to stay focused on each other.

“It took me a little while, but I finally realized that I didn’t miss Kira at all. I was an idiot to think that she ever loved me. She played us for a couple of fools; her little boy toys, I guess. But what bothered me, Hutch, was that I missed you. I missed us. And what bothered me even more was that I thought you didn’t care. I thought you’d given up. I had myself convinced that you didn’t give a damn about what happened to me or our friendship.”

He paused for a while, and Ken hesitantly reached out his hand and placed it on the other man’s shoulder in silent support. They sat that way for a few minutes, each man apparently gathering his own thoughts until the man in the blue jeans once again began to speak.

“Then along came crazy Joey in the dance hall last night. You may not think I noticed Hutch, but I saw you look back over your shoulder to check on me. Not Kira, but me. And I saw that gesture you made trying to get me to leave the building. And that’s when it hit me. You hadn’t given up and you hadn’t stopped caring. Fact is, you were still tryin’ to take care of me in your own little way.” I could see the beginning of a lop-sided grin tugging at the corners of his mouth. “So now we’re at a crossroads. The way I see it we have one of two options. Either we make a conscious choice to put this behind us and get our act together, or we walk away from here and go our separate ways. So, what’s it gonna be?”

Ken went back to studying the ground once again, and I watched his eyes blinking rapidly in the afternoon sun. I wanted so desperately to run over to him and tell him that redemption was staring him in the face and he better not miss the opportunity. I wanted him to know that the kind of friend he had in this D.M.S. only came around once in a lifetime, and only then if you were very, very lucky. I wanted to tell him to seize the moment and take what this man was offering him; after all, we don’t know how much time we have on this earth and one day it would be too late. I wanted to save him from the pain I have lived with for too many years; the pain of a love lost way too soon. But I stood there silently and watched him, knowing in my heart that he would make the right choice.

Finally he looked up to meet the sapphire blue eyes of the other man. “Starsk,” he began, his crystal blue eyes staring pleadingly into his friend’s face. “I know I don’t deserve you. Somehow, somewhere along the way I lost sight of what was really important in my life. What IS really important in my life. And I’m begging you Starsk, by everything that we’ve been through, by everything that we once meant to each other, by the very pledge of ‘Me and Thee’, I’m begging you to forgive me. I know I don’t deserve it, buddy, but I can’t live without it either. If you can forgive me, I’m willing to try to put all this behind us and get my act together.”

The tension in the air was thicker than the afternoon smog as the two men looked at each other. I held my breath waiting for some response from the dark haired man. My patience was rewarded almost instantaneously as his face broke into a smile that would

chase away the darkest night. He reached over and pulled Ken into a tight embrace, then held him at arm's length. "Consider it done, Blintz," he said, his voice thick with emotion. "But you know you have to forgive yourself too, pal."

"I can't do it on my own, Starsk," Ken replied a trace of a smile lifting his upper lip. "But if you can help me, I just might make it."

They embraced tightly once more, each man wiping discreetly at the tears that were threatening to spill down their cheeks. I had given up on my own tears long before this moment, but now they had changed to tears of happiness for my friend. I knew that he would be all right.

"Ok, ya big lug. Let's cut the soapy scene and get outta here, huh? I don't know about you but I'm starving!"

"Right, Starsk. Let me just gather up this stuff and I'm right behind you." Ken pushed himself up off the ground, and I was alarmed to see all the color drain out of his face. As I watched helplessly, he swayed on his feet and it looked like he was going to fall. But his friend was beside him in an instant, steadying him with a strong grip on his elbow, and he seemed to know exactly what was wrong.

"Ok, Blondie," he said with genuine affection in his voice as he quickly helped Ken regain his balance. "How long's it been since you've eaten anything?"

"Well, I ... uhm ... let me think ... you mean like today or yesterday or ..."

"Just what I thought. How many times do I hafta tell you that you gotta eat! Boy, it's a good thing I came lookin' for you today. No tellin' what woulda happened to ya if I wasn't around to look after you." He reached into his jacket pocket. "Here. Eat this candy bar, and no arguing, either. This can hold you over until we can get some real food in you. Hey! How about Italian? I know this great little place. Reminds me of..."

"...this little restaurant your grandmother used to live over when you were a kid." Ken finished for him as his friend helped him gather up the rest of the gardening tools. "C'mon Starsk. You know it always gives me the willies when you say that! Are you sure you want to go Italian?"

"You comin' with me?"

At this Ken's face broke into a broad grin. "Wouldn't have it any other way, Gordo. Someone's gotta keep an eye on you; might as well be me!"

"Then everything will be just fine, Hutch. Just fine!" The dark haired man smiled and ruffled Ken's hair. "There is one thing that puzzles me a little, though."

“What’s that?”

“What exactly are you doin’ to my tree? I mean, I always thought it would grow up to be big and strong and manly lookin’, kinda like me. Now it looks kinda...well...sissy, if ya’ know what I mean.”

“Sissy?” Ken said incredulously. “Hey man, I was just tryin’ to improve your image some; maybe add a little class. Your image could sure use some, buddy.”

“Hutch, I know exactly what you were doin’’. And I appreciate it. Next time, though, forget the tree and come straight to the source, okay?”

Ken smiled and slung his arm around the other man’s shoulders. “You got it, buddy. You got it!” Their eyes met once again for a brief moment as an unspoken understanding seemed to pass between them.

They made their way to the jogging path and I watched them as they moved out of sight, chatting with the easy familiarity of old friends. I couldn’t help but think they were the two luckiest people I had ever seen.

And as I left the park, I decided it would be a nice day to buy some flowers to put on Carl’s grave.

The End