

The Hangman's Tree

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Inspired by John E. Miller

Press the knife against the ridge of wrist where tanned muscle gives way to the soft white flesh around the veins. Clean and sharp. Clean like Tom had looked -- clean and shaved and polished against the blue satin lining. Steady now, steady. Fucking this up will leave a scar. Explain that to Nikki. Nikki'll be pissed enough as it is. At least she's not knocked up. That would be worse -- leave behind a genetic consequence for all the pain and pleasure. What was that billboard by the school? A sad-eyed baby and big teary letters. *Who's your daddy? Paternity tests free of charge for Medicare mothers.* At least Nikki never had to worry about that. There wouldn't have been any doubt. If there's one thing Nikki is, it's faithful. Faithful to the end. Don't think about her now. Concentrate on what you have to do. Draw a straight thin line and don't flinch. Just like in Biology class when you cut open that frog. "You could be a surgeon with those hands," Mrs. Blakely had said. Remember that now and cut straight. There. Just enough pressure to make it bleed. Steady hands, steady heart. If your heart was so steady, why didn't you pick up the phone? One simple call and you were too wrapped up in whether or not Nikki was knocked up to give a damn and pick up the phone. "Tony? You there, Tony?" Tom's voice had called through the answering machine. "Pick up the phone, little brother. I need to talk to you. Pick up the phone, little brother." Over and over the phone rang and those words called out. Again and again while you slept. And those words rang in your ears for the next three days until you saw him, clean and shaved and polished, against the blue satin lining. Rough and jagged was how he'd looked the last time you saw him alive. Rough and jagged like he hadn't slept in week. In a month. "Pick up the phone, little brother." But you couldn't do it. Not even to say hello, sorry not tonight, but we'll get together soon. You couldn't even speak to him long enough to tell him to hang on, to give him something to hang on for.

"*Don't let go, Tom!*" you'd spoken those words once when you were kids. Tom had fallen from a tree, his head opening up on the pavement; yellow, orange, and brown leaves swimming in bright red. "*Hang on, Tom,*" you'd said. "*I'll go get Mom. I'll get help.*" And you ran and ran until you found someone to help. Hang on Tom. You held his hand in the ambulance and even while they stitched him back together. "*Frankenhead,*" you called him and you both laughed. He laughed until his head hurt and he had to lie down. For days you worried that his head would break open and the blood would come pouring out. What were you? Four? Five? And after his head had healed, the two of you would hang upside down from the willow tree and sing *Two hangmen hanging from a tree*. "That's why they call it a weeping willow," Tom had said and you believed him. You never even tried to find out if it was true. Upside down you'd hang, the blood rushing to your heads and making you dizzy. Tom would somersault over the branch and call for you to do the same. But you couldn't do it, could you? You just hung there and waited for Tom to lift you off the branch and put you on your feet. "You know what you are, Tony? A coward," Tom had laughed.

I'm not a coward today, big brother. Today I'm going to make you proud. Today I'm brave. Brave enough to make the sink turn red. Two hangmen hanging from a tree. That's

what we were and what we are. What a gas. I never knew what that meant. But you knew, Tom. You knew even then. Oh god this hurts. Be brave, Tony. Brave and steady. Just let the blood rush out. Two hangmen hanging from a tree. You killed you and I killed me. No one's braver than you and me. No one's deader than you and me.

Tony looked up from the sink and saw a shadow over his shoulder. A man in a dark suit and a dark felt hat stood in the doorway. He didn't speak and didn't move. Tony looked down at the blood pooling against the white porcelain sink. Nikki would have to clean it up -- that's the worst thing about it. Damn my poor planning. Now Nikki would have to clean it up. Tony saw his reflection one last time as his knees collapsed. The bathroom tile felt cold against his cheek - cold and clean and polished.

"You know what we'll be tomorrow, Sid? Two hangmen hanging from a hangman's tree. That's what we'll be."

"Quiet, Bill. I need to make my peace with God."

"You've got to appreciate the irony of it though, Sid. Even you should appreciate the irony."

"Bill, let me pray. You should too. The hangman's hereafter is not as black and white as most other folks'."

"Whatever they say, I never hanged a man without due process. Never, not once."

"Bill, let me pray."

"Yessir, we'll hang from a hangman's tree without a hangman around to hang us."

The next morning at dawn, we walked up the hill. The hangman's tree was a black silhouette against the reddening sky. I thought the sky looked angry, but didn't say anything to Sid. He seemed distressed enough and couldn't see the irony in anything. He'd spent all night muttering to his god and he looked like hell. I'd spent all night trying to tune him out by listening to the chorus of frogs and crickets outside my window. From the sounds of things, fall was near. I listened to the frogs argue back and forth and considered the situation from all angles. Ironic. That's the only way to describe it. Ironic and just dead wrong.

The first-time hangman walked behind us and slapped a rope against our legs, "Hurry it up," he said.

One thing I knew was that if it was up to me to decide the fate of the man who pulled the rope today; I would make sure he burned in hell. I sure hope he knew what he was doing. Hanging is an art. Being hanged wrong would be the worst injustice yet. Not to mention, it would be painful. I grimaced as he missed my head the first time he tried to slip on the noose. Would I have to give instructions for my own death? I felt the rope tighten around my neck. Now one swift jerk, I thought to myself. One swift jerk and I'll be swinging from the tree. He pulled the rope slowly and I felt my feet rise off the ground. The rope cut into my neck. This would be worse than I thought. "Jerk hard," I cried. "Jerk hard and fast. You have to break my neck for it to work."

"Shut up," he said. "I'll do it my own way."

I felt the pressure around my neck ease up. My feet nearly touched the ground. “I’m not dead yet, foo...” then crack, black, and nothing. No rope, no pain, nothing. The spine was snapped. Okay, not bad for a rookie. I could have done without the opening rope burn, but at least he cracked the spine. I wondered if Sid was as lucky.

“Heaven or hell?” a voice behind me asked. “Won’t be so easy to decide with you. I guess I’ll have to flip a coin. You wouldn’t have one, would you?” The voice stepped into the circle of light in front of me. It belonged to a woman with long red braids, coiled into a net at the nape of her neck. She wore a velvet and satin dress, like those you think of queens wearing back before the west was won. It was black with purple sleeves.

“I thought angels wore white,” I said.

“I’m not an angel,” she replied. “That’s an angel.” I looked just in time to see Sid engulfed in brilliant white flames, then disappear. The flames left behind a momentary void like the darkness in the room when you’ve looked too long at the sun.

“Then what are you?”

“I’m your destiny.”

I felt my lips curl to match her smile. It was a familiar position for them. The hangman’s smile, I’d called it often enough. This woman with the long red braids was a professional hangman.

“Executioner,” she said. “I prefer being called an executioner. But in the afterlife, my job is more that of judge. And in you, I’ve met my match. So I can either flip a coin, or...”

“Or?” my eyebrow rose to match the expression on her face.

“Or you can take my place,” she twirled a piece of hair that had escaped a braid. “I’m ready to rest now. I’ve sent kings and queens, peasants and thieves to their just reward. And never, in all that time, have I found someone as truly neutral as you. You’ll make a fine replacement.”

“Do I have a choice?”

“Not really. You see, if I toss a coin, I admit there’s a greater power than mine. It’s not in my character to admit that. Besides, as I said, I’m tired. I’m ready for my reward.” Her hands were cool as they touched my head, cool enough to penetrate my scalp, my mind, my blood. Cool as mine are now, and as yours will be after you decide. Feel.

Tony felt a coolness on his forehead and opened his eyes. He saw flesh drawn back against bone. Stern and grey, made greyer by the black collar and thin yellow rope time.

“Yes, you’re coming around,” Bill said. “But you’ve lost a lot of blood. Lay still and listen to my story. You’ll want to hear this part, I’m sure.”

“Who are you?”

“My name is Bill. Just leave it at that for now. By the time my story’s finished, you’ll know more than you want to.”