**A Public Hanging**

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Russ and Ginny and Terry and I all went down to the hanging together, along with Ginny’s baby Carol, who was three months old and still pretty ugly, the way young babies are. Not much more than a lump with hands and a face. Couldn’t very well leave the little nuisance at home, though, so Ginny hauled her along.

I wasn’t sure Russ would be up for it, what with his bad leg, which he’d got at the hanging last year; some of the crowd had got rough with him, and it didn’t heal right, so from then on, even once he could walk again, he had to sort of drag his left foot.

So we had a limp and a lump slowing us down, but we were all eager to see it, to work out our aggressions the way we’re supposed to. So we went, but we were a little late.

It was a good crowd this year. By the time we arrived there must’ve been at least a thousand people in the park, laughing and yelling and shoving. I saw folks waving bottles around, and needles, and masks. A man wearing nothing but blue shorts had climbed up a lamppost and was hammering at the white glass globe with his fist, but it wasn’t breaking, so he hit it with his head and it shattered, and the glass showered down on the crowd, and everyone there shrieked. He’d cut his forehead open, so that blood spattered on them, too, but nobody seemed to notice that.

It looked like there was a lot of anger being worked off. Terry shouted something, and I yelled, and we all joined in.

There were people holding shards of white glass now, too.

Little Carol whined and started to cry, so Ginny opened her shirt and pulled out her breast, to shut her up. Carol started sucking and quieted right down.

Someone shoved Russ, and he threw a punch, and whoever it was fell back and went down, and I saw a boot hit him on the neck and then we were past and I didn’t see any more.

A woman screamed nearby, and I laughed. Ginny smiled, but she looked a little uncertain about it.

The man in the blue shorts fell off the pole somewhere ahead of us; I caught a glimpse of him falling into the crowd, but then he was gone and I didn’t see what happened to him.

There was a girl near us with her skirt torn away; I spotted her past someone’s elbow and tried to move toward her, but I couldn’t get through. Then someone got her blouse off, and she went down, yelling, and there were eight or nine men there in a circle around her, and I looked and decided to move on.

Ginny watched a little, but then she turned away. She’d been there last year, of course, and had Carol to show for it.

I wanted to get up close this year, so I pushed on, and Terry and Russ stayed right behind me. The crowd was thick, and seething, and I got shoved and jostled and I shoved and jostled right back, and I managed to work my way forward, toward the gallows.

I was about halfway to the fence when I stepped on something soft, and I looked down and saw wet blood and pale skin, and I moved aside to better footing. Whoever I’d stepped on wasn’t moving, but that was all I could see.

Up ahead someone had started the chant — it seemed early to me, but someone had. I looked back, to see how far we’d come and how far back Ginny was, and someone had pulled Carol away to get at Ginny’s tit. Carol was crying, and Ginny was trying to grab her back, but then whoever held her flung her aside, and someone knocked Ginny down, and I lost sight of them both.

Russ and Terry were right next to me, shoving me forward, so I looked ahead again and pushed on.

The chant was picking up, “Hang him, hang him!”

It seemed like a path opened up all by itself, then, and the three of us slid through it, and a moment later we were all right at the front, right up against the fence, and in fact the top rail was pressing right into my stomach. I looked back, but I couldn’t see Ginny, but I figured she’d be okay. She was fourteen now, old enough to take care of herself.

It was too bad about Carol, and I didn’t expect to ever see her again — and I never did — but maybe Ginny would have another one in another nine months. Besides, Carol was just an ugly baby, not really a kid yet.

Russ was chanting now, with the rest, leaning on the fence beside me. On the other side Terry was looking around, trying to spot the hangman, or maybe the victim.

Then a cheer went up, and I looked, and there was the hangman, stepping out from behind the gallows, his black hood in place. When the cheer died away the chanting was louder than ever — “HANG him! HANG him!”

“Who?” the hangman yelled, though I’m sure most of the crowd couldn’t hear him over the chanting, “Hang who?”

I braced myself, ready to fight back, but nobody shoved me; instead, about thirty feet to my left, someone shrieked, “Hang him!” , and a man in a black T-shirt fell sprawling across the fence, his feet waving in the air as he tried to fight his way back. The crowd heaved his legs up and he tumbled over, onto the grass below the gallows. A dozen fingers pointed at him, and the chant was louder than ever. “HANG HIM! HANG HIM!”

The man got up, and even before Terry said anything I recognized him.

It was Terry’s father.

“Daddy,” she shrieked, and someone laughed.

I looked at Terry, and she was staring at her dad, and there the hangman was, taking him by the arm, and he was getting to his feet, dazed, looking back at all of us, and we were all chanting, and even Terry was chanting, a little off the beat and not very loud, but she was chanting with the rest of us.

“This one?” the hangman called.

“Yes!” we yelled back, “Yes!”

“No!” Terry’s dad shouted, but hardly anyone could hear him over the crowd, and the hangman was pulling at him, pulling him toward the gallows steps.

He pulled away, but he couldn’t go far, with the fence on one side and the gallows on the other, and the crowd reached out across the fence and struck at him, slapping and punching and slashing with those pieces of white streetlight glass, and a bottle whacked him behind the ear and shattered. The hangman stood aside and waited until he went down, and then reached down and grabbed his hand and dragged him upright again.

He got to his feet, and the hangman pulled him along, and as he went along the fence the crowd struck at him, and as he went past I reached out and got him in the mouth, punched him right in the teeth, took the skin off one of my knuckles doing it, but I didn’t notice that until later. And Terry spat at him, and punched, but she didn’t connect, and then the hangman had him on the steps, and they went up together, one, two, thirteen steps, and he was crying, and beside me Terry was crying, and somewhere in the crowd behind me a woman was sobbing, and another woman somewhere much farther away was screaming, but most of us were yelling wordlessly and cheering and chanting.

And then the rope was around his neck, and the hangman tipped him off the edge of the gallows in front of us, and his hands flew up but not in time, the rope snapped tight around his neck.

And then it was over, too quickly, the way it always was, the corpse hanging there, tongue out, eyes rolled back, and the stains spreading on his pants. The smell reached us a moment later.

The crowd quieted, then, for a moment, but then it burst out in a fresh babble. The people at the edges started to turn away, trickle away home, but we stayed for a little longer, Terry crying and laughing and Russ swearing about some bastard who had stepped on his bad leg, or kicked it, or something.

“It was too quick,” someone behind me said.

I tried to turn and see who it was.

“Yeah,” someone else answered, “It’s been a rough year. We need something more if it’s going to calm us down for a whole year. How much frustration can you work off when it’s over so fast?”

“I don’t care about that,” the first voice said, “I just want it to last longer.”

“Yeah, well,” the second voice said. “Me, too. If we’re supposed to work off all our frustrations and aggressions here so we won’t be violent the rest of the time, no five minutes is gonna last me all year.”

“Not enough!” I called in agreement. “Takes more than that to chill me out!” Not that I really thought I was working out any frustrations. I was just there for the fun of it.

Someone laughed.

Maybe, if there’s a lot of violence during the year, I mean more than just the regular beatings and gang stuff, they’ll start scheduling hangings more often, not just once a year. And maybe they’ll find a way to make them last longer.

I’d like that, but it probably won’t happen. I’ve heard some of the smartass sociologists think the hangings aren’t working. I’ve heard they want to stop them.

If they ever tried it, we’d kill them.

Next year I’m gonna get there earlier.

*end*