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I

The Hanging Man

*Wilt thou forgive that sinne by which I have wonne
Others to sinne? and, made my sinne their door?
– DONNE, 'A Hymne to God the Father'*

A child's hand and a piece of chalk had made it: a careful, child's scrawl of white lines on the red bricks of the wall beside Jander's Livery Stable: a crude pair of sticks for the gallows tree, a thick broken line for the rope, and then the scarecrow of the hanging man. Some passing by along that road did not see it at all; others saw it and remembered what it meant and thought solemn thoughts and turned their eyes to the house down the river road. The little children – the poor little children. Theirs were the eyes for which the crude picture was intended and they had seen it and heard along Peacock Alley the mocking child rhyme that went with it. And now, in the kitchen of that stricken house, they ate their breakfast in silence. Then Pearl stopped suddenly and frowned at her brother.

John, finish your mush.

John scowled, pressing his lips together, while their mother stared out the window into the yellow March morning that flowered in the dried honeysuckle along the window. A cold winter sun shot glistening rays among the early mists from the river.

John, eat your mush.

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Be quiet, Pearl! cried Willa, mother of them. Leave John be. Eat your own breakfast and hush!

Yet John frowned still, watching as the little girl resumed eating, and would not let the matter lie.

You're only four and a half, Pearl, he said. And I'm nine. And you got no right telling me.

Hush, John.

Willa filled the blue china cup with sputtering hot coffee and sipped the edge of it, curling her nose against the steam. And then Pearl remembered again the picture on the brick wall beside Jander's Livery Stable down at Cresap's Landing. Pearl made them listen to the song about the hanging man.

Hing Hang Hung! See what the hangman done! chanted the little girl, and Willa, whirling, slammed the sloshing cup to the black stove top and struck the child so the four marks of her fingers were pink in the small flesh.

Don't you ever sing that! Ever! Ever! Ever!

Willa's poor, thin hands were knotted into tight blue fists. The knuckles shone white like the joints of butchered fowl. Pearl would have wept but it seemed to her that now, at last, she might get to the heart of the matter and so withheld the tears.

Why? she whispered. Why can't I sing that song? The kids down at Cresap's Landing sing it. And John said –

Never you mind about what John said. God in heaven, as if my cross wasn't hard enough to bear without my own children – his own children – mocking me with it! Now hush!

Where's Dad?

Hush! Hush!

But why won't you tell? John knows.

Hush! Hush your mouth this minute!

Willa struck the child's plump arm again as if, in so doing, she might in some way obliterate a fact of existence – as if this were not a child's arm at all but the specific implement of her

own torment and despair. Now Pearl wept in soft, faint gasps, and clutching her old doll waddled off, breathless with outrage, into the cold hallway of the winter house. John ate on in pale indifference, yet obscurely pleased with the justice. Willa glared pathetically at him.

And I don't want you telling her, John, she whispered hoarsely. I don't want you breathing a word of it – you hear? I don't want her ever to know.

He made no reply, eating with a child's coarse gusto; smacking his lips over the crackling mush and maple sirup.

You hear me, John? You hear what I said?

Yes'm.

And, despite the sole and monstrous truth which loomed in his small world like a fairy-book ogre, despite the awareness which for so many weeks had crowded out all other sentiments (even the present sweet comfort of breakfast in his mother's steamy kitchen), John could not help finding a kind of cruel and mischievous joy as the lilt and ring of Pearl's chant pranced like a hurdy-gurdy clown in his head: Hing Hang Hung! See what the hangman done. Hung Hang Hing! See the robber swing.

It was the song the children sang: all the children at Cresap's Landing except, of course, John and Pearl. It was the song that was made by the children whose hands had made the chalk drawing on the red brick wall by Jander's Livery Stable. John finished his milk in a single gulp and took the cup and plate to Willa by the sink.

Now, she said, I'm going up to Moundsville to see your dad. Lunch is in the pantry. I'll be home to get you supper but I might not get back till late. John, I want you to mind Pearl today.

John, already heavy with responsibility for his sister, saw no reason to further acknowledge this bidding.

Hear, John? Mind her, now. And you, Pearl. Mind what John tells you. He'll give you your lunch at noon.

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Yes.

And mind what else I told you, John. Don't breathe a word about – you know.

No'm.

Hing Hang Hung, he thought absently. (Why, it was almost a dancing tune.) Hung Hang Hing! See the robber swing. Hing Hang Hung! Now my song is done.

Willa by the brown mirror over the old chest of drawers tucked her chestnut curls into the wide straw hat with the green band.

Can Pearl and me play the Pianola?

Yes, but mind you don't tear the rolls, John. They was your dad's favorites.

She caught her breath, choking back a sob as she powdered her nose slowly and stared back into the wild, grieving eyes in the mirror. Why, it was almost as if Ben would ever hear them again: those squeaky, wheezy old Pianola rolls, almost as if he had just gone off on a fishing trip and would soon be back to play them and laugh and there would be those good old times again. She bit her lip and whirled away from the face in the mirror.

– And don't let Pearl play with the kitchen matches! she cried and was gone out the door into the bitter morning. When the gray door was closed John stood listening for the chuckle-and-gasp, and then the final cough-and-catch and the rising whine of the old Model T. Pearl appeared in the hall doorway with the ancient doll in her arms, its chipped and corroded face not unlike her own just now that was streaked with tears in faint, gleaming stains down her plump cheeks. John listened to the old car whining off up the river road to Moundsville. Pearl snuffled.

Come on, Pearl, John said cheerfully. I'll let you play the Pianola.

She stumped solemnly along behind him into the darkened

parlor amid the ghostly shapes of the muslin-draped furniture gathered all round like fat old summer women. The ancient Pianola towered against the wall by the shaded window like a cathedral of fumed oak. John opened the window blind an inch to shed a bar of pale winter light on the stack of long boxes where the music was hidden. Pearl squatted and stretched a fat hand to take one.

No, he said gently. Let me, Pearl. Mom said they wasn't to be tore – and besides you can't read what them names say!

Pearl sighed and waited.

Now this here one, he announced presently, lifting a lid from the long box and gently removing the thick roll of slotted paper. This here is a real pretty one.

And he fitted the roll into the slot and snapped the paper into the clip of the wooden roll beneath and solemnly commenced pumping the pedal with his stubby shoes. The ancient instrument seemed to suck in its breath. There was a hiss and a whisper in the silence before it commenced to clamor.

Wait! wailed Pearl, edging onto the stool beside him. Wait, John! Let me! Let me!

But her feet would not reach as always and so she sat and listened and watched in stunned amazement; dumbfounded before the glorious chiming racket it made and the little black and white keys jumping up and down with never a mortal finger to touch them. John thought somberly: That's Carolina in the Morning. That was one of Dad's favorites.

And he could remember the times when they had all listened to it when Ben was there, when they were together, and he knew where the tear was in the roll and the keys would speak out in a short chord of confusion and then go rollicking off again into the mad, happy tune. Pearl hugged the old doll close and sucked her finger in dumb amaze. And when the tune was done she sighed.

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More?

No, sighed John glumly, shuffling away into the kitchen, his heart heavy with thoughts of the good old times that were gone. I don't feel like it, Pearl.

She followed in his footsteps like a lost lamb, hugging the old doll tight as if it might some day be her last comfort, and she stood beside him at the kitchen window, nose squashed flat to the icy pane. The hanging man. Yes, they could see him dimly even now – far away down the frozen road amid the winter mists – the little white man on the red bricks. He had not gone away in the night. When you looked one way at his angular arms and legs he quite resembled an airplane. But, of course, one knew better than that. He was a neat little man with stiff arms and stiff legs and a little pointed hat and there was a white scratch for the rope and two white scratches for the gallows tree.

Hing Hang Hung! whispered Pearl, softly.

For she knew that John would never strike her. It was only Mom who could not abide the song.

Hung Hang Hing! she crooned again; the breath of its music caught in her throat.

John scowled and sketched a hing-ing hang-ing man on the foggy windowpane.

You better never let Mom catch you singing that song.

Why won't she tell, John?

Because you're too little.

I'm not, John! I'm not!

He said nothing, sucking his lip. He would have loved nothing more than to tell her. Since the day when the blue men had taken Ben away the burden of this solitary knowledge was almost more than he could endure. It was not a knowing that he could share with his mother or with anyone. It was a secret that was a little world of its own. A terrible little world like an island

upon whose haunted beach he wandered alone now, like a solitary and stricken Crusoe, while everywhere about him his eyes would find the footprint of the dangling man.

Ben lay back in the bunk and smiled. Preacher has stopped talking now. Preacher just sits there across the cell from Ben with those black eyes boring into him. Preacher is trying to guess. Not that Ben hasn't told Preacher everything that he told the others at the trial: Warden Stidger, Mister McGlumphey, Judge Slathers, and the jury. Everything, that is, but the one thing they wanted the most to know. Ben won't tell that to anybody. But it is a kind of game: teasing Preacher. Ben tells him the story over and over again and Preacher sits hunched, heeding each word, waiting for the slip that never comes.

Because I was just plumb tired of being poor. That's the large and small of it, Preacher. Just sick to death of drawing that little pay envelope at the hardware store in Moundsville every Friday and then when I'd go over to Mister Smiley's bank on payday he'd open that little drawer with all the green tens and fifties and hundreds in it and every time I'd look at it there I'd just fairly choke to think of the things it would buy Willa and them kids of mine.

Greed and Lust!

Yes, Preacher, it was that. But I reckon it was more, too. It wasn't just for me that I wanted it.

You killed two men, Ben!

That's right, Preacher. One day I oiled up that little Smith and Wesson that Mr Blankensop keeps in his rolltop desk at the hardware store and I went up to Mister Smiley's bank and I pointed that gun at Mister Smiley and the teller Corey South and I said for Corey to hand me over that big stack of hundred-dollar bills. Lord, you never seen such a wad, Preacher!

Ten thousand dollars' worth, Ben Harper!

Then Mister Smiley said I was crazy and Corey South went for his gun in the drawer and with that I shot him and Mister Smiley both and while I was reaching through to get that green stack of hundreds out of Corey's dead fingers Mister Smiley got the gun and lifted up on the floor and shot me through the shoulder. Well, sir, I run and got scared and didn't know which was up or down before long and so I just got in the car and come home.

With the money?

Yep!

And then?

Ben Harper smiles.

Why, they come down the river after me about four that afternoon – Sheriff Wiley Tomlinson and four policemen.

And where was you, Ben?

Why, I was there, Preacher. You see I was done running. I was just standing out back by the smokehouse with them two youngsters of mine – John and that little sweetheart Pearl.

And the money, Ben? What about that? What about that ten thousand dollars?

Ben smiles again and picks his front teeth with his thumbnail.

Go to hell, Preacher, he says softly, without rancor.

But listen to me, Ben Harper! It'll do you no good where you're going. What good is money in heaven or hell either one? Eh, boy?

Ben is silent. Preacher walks away and stands for a spell staring out the cell window with his long, skinny hands folded behind him. Ben looks at those hands and shivers. What kind of a man would have his fingers tattooed that way? he thinks. The fingers of the right hand, each one with a blue letter beneath the gray, evil skin – L – O – V – E. And the fingers of the left hand done the same way only now the letters spell out H – A – T – E. What kind of a man? What kind of a preacher? Ben muses and

wonders softly and remembers the quick-leaping blade of the spring knife that Preacher keeps hidden in the soiled blanket of his bed. But Preacher would never use that knife on Ben. Preacher wants something from Ben. Preacher wants to know about that money and you can't use a knife to get at something like that especially with a husky fellow like Ben. Now Preacher comes back and stands by Ben's bunk.

Set your soul right, Ben Harper! That money's bloodied with Satan's own curse now. And the only way it can get cleared of it is to let it do His works in the hands of good, honest poor folks.

Like you, Preacher?

I am a man of Salvation!

You, Preacher?

I serve the Lord in my humble way, Ben.

Then, says Ben Harper softly, how come they got you locked up in Moundsville penitentiary, Preacher?

There are those that serves Satan's purposes against the Lord's servants, Ben Harper.

And how come you got that stick knife hid in your bed blankets, Preacher?

I serve God and I come not with peace but with a sword! God blinded mine enemies when they brought me to this evil place and I smuggled it in right under the noses of them damned guards. That sword has served me through many an evil time, Ben Harper.

I'll bet it has, Preacher, grins Ben and presently Preacher goes up into his bunk and lies there a while longer muttering and praying to himself and scheming up new ways to get Ben to tell him where he hid that ten thousand dollars in green hundreds. It's a game between them. And in a way it is Ben Harper's salvation – this little game. In three days they are coming to take Ben up to the death house and a body has to keep busy with little games like this to keep from losing his mind at the last.

A little game – a little war of wills. Ben Harper and Preacher around the clock – day after day. And Ben Harper knows that it is a game that he will win. Because Preacher can talk the breath out of his body and Ben will never tell a mortal, living soul. But Preacher keeps on; stubborn, unremitting. In the quaking silence of the prison night: Listen, Ben! Where you're goin' it won't serve you none. Tell me, boy! Buy your way to Paradise now! You hear, boy? Mebbe the Lord will think twice and let you in the good place if you was to tell me, boy. Tell me! Have a heart!

Go to sleep, Preacher.

Salvation! Why, it's always a last-minute business, boy. There's a day of judgment for us all, Ben Harper, and no man knows the hour. Now's your chance. Mister Smiley and Corey South is both dead, boy! Can't nothin' change that! But if you was to let that money serve the Lord's purposes He might feel kindly turned toward you. Ben, are you listenin' to me, boy?

Shut up, Preacher! Ben whispers, choking back a giggle at the game, the furious little game that keeps him from thinking about the rope upstairs and his own shoes swinging six feet above the floor of the drop room.

Listen, Ben! See this hand I'm holdin' up? See them letters tattooed on it? Love, Ben, love! That's what they spell! This hand – this right hand of mine – this hand is Love. But wait, Ben! Look! There's enough moonlight from the window to see. Look, boy! This left hand! Hate, Ben, hate! Now here's the moral, boy. These two hands are the soul of mortal man! Hate and Love, Ben – warring one against the other from the womb to the grave –

Ben listens to the familiar sermon; shudders with a kind of curious delight as Preacher writhes the fingers of his two tattooed hands together and twists them horribly, cracking the knuckles as the fingers grapple one hand with the other.

Warring, boy! Warring together! Left hand and right hand! Hate and Love! Good and Evil! But wait. Hot dog! Old Devil's a-losin', Ben! He's a-slippin', boy!

And now Preacher brings both hands down with a climactic crash on the wooden bench by the bunks. Then he is silent, crouched in the darkness, smiling at the glory of God in his evil fingers and waiting to see if his little drama has done anything to the boy in the lower bunk.

I could build a tabernacle, Ben, he whimpers. To beat that Wheeling Island tabernacle to hell and gone! Think of it, Ben. A tabernacle built with that ten thousand dollars of cursed, bloodied gold. But wait, Ben! Now it's God's gold. Thousands of sinners and whores and drunkards flocking to hear His word and all because you give that money to build a temple in His name. Listen to me, boy! You reckon the Lord wouldn't change His mind about you after that? Why, shoot, Ben! He wouldn't let them little old killings stand between you and the gates of Glory. Hell, no!

Ben rises on his elbow, tired of the game now.

Shut up, Preacher! Shut up and go to sleep before I climb over there and stuff your bed tick down your throat!

Silence again. Preacher up there in the darkness, in the thick, creosote silence of the vast prison. Preacher lying up there on his back with those tattooed fingers criss-crossed behind his sandy, shaggy head thinking how he can worm it out of Ben Harper with only three days to the death house. Ben stuffs his knuckles into his teeth till he tastes blood. The ropes beneath his straw tick squeak to the rhythm of his ague-like trembling. Ben Harper is quaking with agony beneath the little dream that the night's blue fingers reach out to him. Once more it is that winter afternoon on the river shore by the old house up the road from Cresap's Landing. He is looking into the moon faces of the children: Pearl stony and silent as a graveyard cherub and

John's big eyes wide with everything Ben was telling him, while Pearl clutched the old doll against her body.

Where you goin' to, Dad?

Away, John! Away!

You're bleedin', Dad.

It's nothin', boy. Just a scratched shoulder.

But there's blood, Dad.

Hush, John! Mind what I told you to do.

Yes, Dad.

And you, Pearl! You, too. Mind now! You swore!

Now, from the corner of his eye, Ben sees the blue men with the guns in the big touring car coming down the road beyond the corner of the orchard. John's mouth is a white little line as his dark eyes follow the blue men. They circle and walk slowly in through the dead grass that rims the yard.

Now I'm goin' away, boy.

John's mouth breaks and trembles but then it tightens back into the thinness again. He makes no sound.

Just mind everything I told you, John.

Yes, Dad.

And take good care of Pearl. Guard her with your life, boy.

Yes, Dad.

Who's them men? whispers Pearl at last.

Never mind them. They come and I'm goin' off with them, children. Don't even waste time thinkin' about that now. Just mind what I told you – mind what you swore to do, boy!

Yes!

Swear to it again, John. Swear, boy!

I swear! I swear!

Ben Harper lies in his bunk now with the sweat beaded like morning dew on his forehead. He does not move lest Preacher may sense that he is awake, frightened beyond all reason or caution, and think that now is the time to break the seal at last