



# The Hanging

Darnell Arnoult

# The Hanging

It was a thick hot afternoon in late June. I stared out the kitchen window at an accumulation of vehicles crowding the driveway and side yard of the house across the road—two ambulances, four public safety cruisers, three king-cab pick-ups, and a Honda Civic with a homemade paint job.

“It’s a hanging,” Verna said over the phone.

“What?” I said. “A hanging?” Just then the sun slipped down into the double windows over the sink, and the kitchen broke into fragments of merciless afternoon light and long hateful shadows. I had to shut my eyes.

“That boy that rented the yellow house,” Verna said. “He got drunk and hung himself in the tobacco barn. Left the kids in the house by themselves.”

I turned my back on the sky and leaned against the kitchen counter. “He hung himself,” I said like I had to prove to myself that’s what I’d heard Verna say, and because what else was there to say.

“He did.”

“Where was she?” I asked.

“Working. They’ve gone to tell her now. The State Police have, with her brother.”

We had just gotten home from Charlie’s baseball practice. He had made the tournament team. I waited to turn on the fan so I could hear what Verna had to say. Sweat trickled down my back. In the heat and the light, I remembered seeing the couple move in the summer before, two high school looking boys lugging a second-hand sofa in the front door, the baby bed sitting in the yard beside boxes of what collects so quickly in a marriage.

“He was so young,” I said. “Why would he do a thing like that?”

“He’d been out of work for about three months. They’d missed this month’s rent, and they’d been short by half the month before that. I guess that was it. He had a bad habit for being late for everything is what his cousin told Wilburn not long ago. Couldn’t keep a job for long. She started waiting tables at the Three Penny Grill. There was beer cans all over the kitchen and the barn, Wilburn said. It’s a wonder the boy could tie the rope.”

“Who found him?” I asked.

“Wilburn.” Verna paused, took a puff of her cigarette. Verna was the kind of woman who made smoking look glamorous. Made you want to be a smoker, look that sexy, even if you’d never let a cigarette touch your lips. She exhaled. “He saw the three-year-old, Wilburn did, riding her tricycle out in the driveway. Right up at the edge of the highway. He didn’t see anybody watching, so he stopped to tell them they shouldn’t let her ride out there by the road like that. You know how people fly up and down this road. When nobody answered his knock, he went inside and found the baby in the middle of the kitchen floor playing with empty Blue Ribbon cans. She’d been sitting there long enough for the milk in her bottle to curdle from the heat. They say it’s supposed to get up into the high nineties tomorrow. Can you believe that? Well, when Wilburn went back outside, he asked the older girl where her folks was, and she pointed to the barn. She wouldn’t say a thing. Wilburn don’t know if she saw him hanging there or not. She just wanted to ride her little tricycle. Ain’t that just the saddest thing?”

“Yes it is,” I said. I cradled the phone with my neck, broke open an ice tray, and poured myself a Pepsi.

“Wilburn brought the kids over here and called the police.”

“Are they still there? The little girls, I mean.”

“Her brother came and got them. He was white as a ghost.”

There was only the rhythm then of Verna’s smoking. This would set her on a chain of Salem Lights. Verna couldn’t be nervous and not smoke. I never invited her to the house for coffee. My daughter had a touch of asthma, and Verna was almost always nervous about something.

I'd seen the wife up close one time at White Cross filling station. She was pumping gas into that old boxy black car, an Impala with a grazed rear fender and busted taillight. The two babies slept in the back, strapped in their car seats. She looked like a ghost herself—thin pale hair hung long and flat against her back, a constellation of freckles so light you could hardly see them covered her face and arms.

I broke the quiet. "The kids and I just went after Mother for the weekend. We came back and saw all the trucks and ambulances and police cars. I thought maybe it was a rescue squad picnic or something. Charlie kept saying he bet it was a murder. You know how boys are."

"Her brother's a Public Safety," Verna said. "That's why there was so many there so quick. They all heard it on the squawk box. I hate that damn thing. Sometimes you just know more than you need to with it on all the time. But God knows we can't turn it off. Wilburn might miss a chance to put out a fire or something."

I could hear Verna drawing off her Salem Light. I could picture the smoke swirl out the perfect O of her Watermelon Pink lips and her turned up nose as she talked into the receiver. I pictured Wilburn over and over hearing the pop and click of the scanner and reaching for his coat, going to the truck and putting the light on the dash. Wilburn wasn't one to shy away.

"They had all kinds of family out here in no time," Verna said. "Before she knew. Hell, she may not know even yet. Like Wilburn said, you never know what you'll get when you rent a house to somebody. I guess they'll take him to McAfee's. Wilburn will get Harold McAfee to cut them a deal. If they can't pay rent, she'll have a hard time buying a coffin."

I turned on the fan and pumped up the volume on the telephone. I wouldn't go to offer my condolences. I wouldn't take food the way I had been raised to do for the sick and the dead. I didn't know those people. Back home that wouldn't have been a good enough excuse. But this wasn't home.

I knew Verna because her girls rode the school bus with my kids. We had talked on several occasions, when her youngest daughter played with my Bridget. But I worked all the time then, and I was too tired to make close friends of the neighbors. Verna and I, we knew each other well enough to ask questions and give answers and sound familiar.

Verna had told me after we met that the neighbors, meaning mostly her mother-in-law who lived right across the highway from me, and who was always peeling back the living room curtain, had been suspicious of me until they saw me switch my children for playing in the front yard near the highway. The neighbors had determined by that one act that I must be a reasonable human being. They liked that I brought my mother to my house every weekend, too, even though they didn't know why. They had observed me, judged me, approved of me, and yet to this day have never said even hello to me. They have occasionally thrown up a hand if they were working in their yards.

"If you ask me," Verna said, "they ought to bring him back so they can hang him again for doing that to those little girls. Leaving a three-year-old and an eighteen-month-old alone, knowing full well she wasn't coming home 'til nine or ten tonight. That's just sorriness. Plain sorriness."

"Yes, it is," I said.

"If I hear any more about it, I'll call you."

I hung up the phone and put the cold glass of Pepsi to my forehead.

Whenever I talked with Verna, I fell into the natural rhythm of speech I grew up with. Then Verna and I pretended we had known each other a long time, that we had something in common, and we gossiped.

My mother, whose name was May, and Charlie and Bridget, my thirteen-year-old son and eleven-year-old daughter, had come into the kitchen to hear the story. They could tell by my half of the conversation the commotion across the road wasn't a rescue squad picnic.

Bridget had her roller skates laced up. She wore them from the minute she got home from school until bedtime. She cruised over beside me and put down a toe stop. "Was it a murder?" she asked. I let her watch too much television. She was worried.

"Suicide," said my mother. "How old?"

"I don't know," I said. "Not old enough. Maybe late twenties."

My mother made coffee. My father used to say to drink something hot on a hot day to cool off and something cold and a cold day to feel warmer. Something about the temperature of the blood. My mother still believed all the things he'd told her.

"Give us the scoop," Charlie said. He popped a baseball into his new fielder's mitt and came to stand on the other side of me. I could smell the oiled leather and the boy-man smell of his sweat from baseball practice.

"There isn't any scoop," I said. "He was sad, and life was too much for him. He made a bad decision. That's all."

Everyone wanted more, including me. It was natural to be curious about death and the neighbors. We all wondered what he must have looked like hanging there in that barn. Thought about the way a barn smells in the heat. How sunlight must have cut through the shrunken boards. Imagined dust motes floating in slices of light. How the light must have changed across the minutes, how soon there would be no light in there at all. But no one said anything for a time. Not even Charlie, who was typically callous for his age.

My mother sat down at the kitchen table with a cup of coffee, and Bridget rolled over to stand behind her. Mother smoothed her hands across the yellow Formica and then looked up at Charlie and me matter-of-factly and over her shoulder at Bridget, then said, "I tried to kill myself once."

"Oh Mother, honestly!"

I was used to strange things coming out of her mouth, but this caught me off guard. Even when your once beautiful mother has been certifiably crazy most of your life, has transformed into a white-haired old woman who looks like Gertrude Stein in profile, and has an imagination as big as the state you're standing in, she's still your mother, still your beautiful mother. I gave her the look all daughters give their mothers when they say something absurd. I was starting to get that look from Bridget every now and then.

"It's true," my mother said. "I did. In the attic of that little house on Spruce Street."

Bridget rolled to an empty chair. Each of us sat down at the table.

I took a drink of my Pepsi. "Where was I?" I asked.

"I don't remember if you were born or not," she said looking into her coffee.

"You don't remember?"

"I guess you were in your crib. I don't know," she lied. "I just remember doing it."

"How'd you do it, Grandma?" Charlie asked, sitting on the edge of his seat, the ball and glove on the table. He took a drink of my Pepsi, then he took my Pepsi.

"I went up to the attic, found some rope and tied a noose," she said. "Then I threw it over one of the rafters and tied off the other end to a stud. I pulled a wooden box over to the noose, climbed on the box, put my head through, and kicked the box away. That was it." She said it as if she were reciting a recipe for three-bean salad.

"Then what?" Charlie said.

"I don't know if we should talk about this," I said.

“It won’t hurt anything,” my mother said. “I’m still here.” She slurped her hot coffee. She never waited for things to cool, just slurped. Her medicine gave her tremors. It was hard to watch her hold a cup of hot coffee. It was like she had to catch it to drink it. It made me hurt all over to watch, but right then, I couldn’t look away. “When I finally got the nerve to kick out the box,” she said, happy now to be the center of attention, “I just hung there.” She used her hands to make it a better story, pushing her jaw up toward the ceiling as if her fingers were the rope. “It didn’t even choke me. I hung there until my neck ached pretty bad from being stretched like that. I must have hung there twenty minutes.”

“Who found you?” I asked.

“Nobody.” She slurped her hot coffee and, with both hands, carefully placed her cup in her saucer. She liked the fanciness of cups and saucers. No mugs for my mother. And no Mom or Grandma. It had to be Mother and Grandmother.

“How’d you get down then?” Bridget whispered. She put her hand on Mother’s shoulder.

“I hung there until my neck hurt so bad I couldn’t stand it. I tried to get my foot back on that box, but it was just beyond my toes. So I made myself swing back and forth, back and forth, back and forth,” her trembling hands waved back and forth in front of our faces, “until I caught the corner of the box with my big toe. I couldn’t look down, so I closed my eyes and imagined my big red toe nail catching the top of that box over and over. I worked the box back to me a little bit at the time.” She slurped at her shaky coffee again to draw out the tension. “I kept at it till I had the box under me again. Then I climbed down and just sat there on the box for a long time.”

“Did you cry?” Bridget asked.

“Honey, I don’t even remember.”



“Well, that was just stupid,” I said. “When a person hangs them self, they either die from the fall snapping their neck like on a gallows, or they strangle to death because the noose gets tighter from the gravity of the person’s weight. You didn’t tie a noose, you tied a loop. You can’t hang yourself with a loop, for Christ’s sake. Anybody knows that.”

“Way to go, Mom,” Charlie said, picking up his glove and popping that ball into the pocket. “Now she can do it right.” He looked at me like I was the one who was crazy.

“No, I don’t think so,” Mother said to Charlie and Bridget more than to me. “One thing I learned hanging there like that was I didn’t want to die nearly as bad as I thought I did.”

She was laughing. We all laughed. It was a family gift. We could laugh at anything. We stood up and milled around the kitchen. Charlie popped his ball into his mitt. Bridget rolled over to the dish drainer and hung the clean coffee cups on the little hooks underneath the cabinet. I cleared the clean breakfast dishes from the dish drainer. Mother looked at Bridget who hadn’t said anything else. “Help me fold some clothes,” Mother said. “You always have clothes that need folding.” Bridget skated into my bedroom and Mother followed.

“Charlie put his glove back on the table. He palmed a bag of Oreos and popped three in his mouth at once. He was an eating machine when he was thirteen. I worked night and day to feed him. He chewed the cookies with his mouth half open just to aggravate me. He chewed them until it looked like he had dark rich dirt in his mouth. Then he took what was left of a gallon of milk from the fridge and poured it down his throat.

“I told you it’s not good manners to do that,” I said and took the empty jug from his hand. I realized for the first time he was taller than me.

“It’s just family,” he said. “We’ve pretty much got the same germs.” He took the jug back to get the last little sip from the bottom. “It’s not like I do this at somebody else’s house.”

“It’s not nice,” I said.

“What difference does it make when I drink it all? If I’m the last one to drink it?”

“I’ll never hang myself,” I said to him. “I just want you to know that.”

He kissed me. Patted my shoulder. “I know,” he said and gave me a brief I-know-you smirk. We had that small moment where he was almost grown, and I knew he was paying attention. “Oh yeah, I’m going to Jesse’s,” he said. “He and his dad are picking me up in ten minutes. Wait till they hear about the hanging.”

“Whose?”

“Whose do you think? The guy across the street.”

“I thought you might tell about Grandmother.”

“Nah. That guy’s story’s better. Police and rescue squads and all that. Besides, Grandmother technically didn’t hang herself.” *Technically* was Charlie’s new word. He used it in every fifth sentence. *Technically, I struck out. Technically, a B is above average. Technically, she isn’t my girlfriend. Technically, she didn’t really hang herself.*

Alone in the kitchen, I poured more Pepsi in my glass wishing I had a little bourbon to go with it, then I called Verna. Her line was busy. I tried her several times that evening, but no answer. Then later, after Mother and the kids went to bed, I tried one last time and Verna answered. I didn’t even say hello.

“What did he stand on?” I asked her.

“I don’t know.”

“Verna, by now you have picked Wilburn for every detail he ever had in his head. Just tell me, what did he stand on?”

I thought I heard her strike a match.

“You can’t tell anyone I told you. She don’t want people to know about it.” Verna drew on her cigarette as she lit it. I pictured Verna on the other end of the phone with the nugget of the story I had to have, was urgent to have. I could see the way her wrist flipped the match out in one motion, the way she tossed it into the ceramic cowboy-hat ashtray on her end table in the den, the way she held the Salem Light with that now faded pink ring around the filter, the cigarette between her first two fingers, and her thumb and ring finger making that circle, her little finger wiggling nervously. Her smoking arm was probably bent at the elbow, which rested on the sofa arm. I could see the way she pursed her by now faded Watermelon lips like she had to decide to tell me or not, knowing she had something the college girl really wanted. In her mind, that was the thing that separated us. That I had come to town to go to college. But she ached to tell me. I counted on it. I waited, wishing I had a cigarette.

“She asked Wilburn not to say nothing about it to nobody.”

“Fine,” I said. “Please just tell me what he stood on. Who would I know to tell anyway?”

She took a drag and blew it out. “It was the tricycle. He stood on the tricycle and pushed it out from underneath him. They could tell from the dirt floor under where he was hanging. The dirt had little tire tracks mashed into it. Ain’t that just the saddest thing?”