

4-4-2

I limp along the jagged edges of the crowd. I've walked miles already, but once I reach Retribution Park I may be on my feet all afternoon. It depends on whether they keep the crowd waiting. At previous events they'd taken several hours to gin things up, by which time I'd run out of "An Eye for an Eye" bumper stickers and "A Noose in Time Saves Mine" buttons. My supply of bumper stickers looks okay now, but as always, that bastard of a boss gave me too few buttons.

The real problem is my left thigh. The pain is excruciating, and because I've worked every day for weeks, it's as bad as it was when they released me from the hospital. I'm happy for the work, don't get me wrong. Anna and the kids need extra income. But the pain—pain like a Bowie knife blade twirled inside a deep wound.

I've reached the narrowest part of the route. Usually I stay just ahead of the horse-drawn cart. The crowd's energy makes me forget the leg, at least for a few moments. My mind swims in a shower of dopamine. I call this the Antepenultimate Moment, when people mass along Perp's Progress hoping to catch a glimpse of the convict. They'll be ripe for revenge, prone to throw away money like a middle-aged businessman dotting on his young mistress. They'll be even more willing to spend money than those lucky enough to pack into the Park because this will be their only chance to see someone moments away from Corpseville. So for those good folks it's neither the

antepenultimate nor the penultimate moment. It's the main event, or, as they say here in Chicago, The Killer Thrill.

“Bumper stickers, get your stickers here!” I yell. Then, “wear your justice on your lapel!” This is a little more provocative. It all depends on the mood and makeup of the crowd. I can be more adventurous with teenagers and twenty-somethings. They'll be more numerous the closer I get to Retribution Park. There, the mob is boisterous, even violent. Someone will have too much to drink, or they'll be batshit-crazy on Crystal Meth. A switchblade, a gun, a baseball bat—then who knows? Farther back along the route, I find the older people. They're more cautious, afraid of the mosh pit by the platform. With the older ones, I can't be too garish. I often laugh at the youngest salespeople working these parts of the crowd. They sell “Dead Meat” pennants or graphic photos of beheadings. Those guys have no clue about their customers. They have no feel for the craft.

I follow one rule: simple is best. No blood and guts. A positive message. An appeal to Old Testament justice. Above all, an appeal to property, the “Mine” and everything it includes. I'm proud of that button. I didn't earn a college degree for nothing. I thought up the slogan and the color scheme—black background, white letters. Straightforward. And the “Noose” part appeals to tradition, so it's a bit of Americana.

I'm poised to make good money today. Cirrus clouds drift into wispy kerfs across the sky. Lake Michigan is a shimmering pearl next to the Windy City's corporate fortresses and ziggurats. The temperature is in the seventies, no humidity. The crowd is huge. My guess is many are out just to enjoy the weather. Why not enjoy life when this *danse macabre* unfolds before your eyes?

But my thigh holds me back. I'll have to sit for a while. Every moment I sit is a moment wasted, a sale foregone. The last time this happened, the pain shot from my thigh down to the knee and up into the groin. "Radiated pain," explained the VA doctor. I worry that I could pass out again, like last time, when the pain made my head swirl and I fell against the curb and opened a nasty gash on my chin. More than anything, I remember how shitty it felt coming to and realizing no one had helped me; they'd just let me lay there, bleeding, my head in the gutter.

I make my way through the crowd back to the row of restaurants and office buildings lining Perp's Progress. I hate having to sit right here on the sidewalk. People might mistake me for a homeless person. Or they could step on me—and purposely, in some cases. So I sit clutching my ankles, my knees drawn to my chest. This hurts like hell too, but it's better than having some bloodthirsty tourist stomp on me.

I rest my head against the façade of a tavern. I know the place well. With a strong dash of irony, the owner named it Tyburn Tree, after the site of thousands of executions over many centuries in London till late in the 1700's. In the days when Anna and I first dated, I took her here regularly for dinner and beer. We played darts, enjoyed music, had conversations with the artists, writers, and politicians who frequented the place. It's been years since Anna and I went here. They still play great music. I can hear Pearl Jam and Wilco from inside. How great it would be to dance with Anna. But who can enjoy the music now? I'm losing money by the minute, the horse-drawn cart is coming, a paper shredder's blades striate my lower body. Maybe just a few more minutes of rest will help. Maybe a few more minutes thinking of Anna, dancing, happy, a very long time ago, when some people—when I—still thought something like a society existed.

I haven't always been this way. In Iraq I met some shrapnel, but I kept my arms and legs. When I came out of it in the VA hospital, there was the pain and Vicodin and the prospect of living despite my preference for something less amorphous, like death let's say. What was there to look forward to? I had no job. My Comm Arts degree was jackshit. To my two kids I was more a curiosity than a father. Anna had a lousy waitressing job and a boss always hitting on her. We had a foul apartment, hassles from the landlord, credit cards playing demolition derby with their limits. And me, sitting in the worn blue La-Z-Boy in the living room.

"You've got to get a job, Jonathan," said Anna late one night after work.

I barely heard her. I'd fallen asleep in the recliner. Or I passed out.

"I'll look in the want ads tomorrow," I said, feeling as inert as Lake Michigan ice in January.

But, dammit, I followed through, and landed a choice job selling souvenirs at public executions. I knew Worthington, the crook who ran the business, who told me I'd be good at working the crowds.

All this started after 9/11. Every state in the Union passed legislation introducing the death penalty or expanding existing laws. Public opinion favored the death penalty three to one. Not only murder and terrorism but even some property crimes became punishable by death, just as in Merry Olde England, where Authority could lop off your head for stealing two pence. Vengeance became as American as infomercials.

The country didn't stop there. It strove for authenticity. So death was no longer administered by the "humane" method of lethal injection. No, the more authentic way

was the more traditional way. Hanging, the guillotine, even the firing squad in Texas. No longer did executions take place in antiseptic conditions before small audiences. Now the death penalty came out of the closet and into the public light, as in the old days, when convicts were paraded before festive crowds to the site of the slaughter. There, as in the old days, the convicted could utter last words. A speech, a sermon, a rant, anything was possible. The YouTube videos went viral. The newscasters loved it. Conan O'Brien began a regular comedy routine: "Awkward Moments in Perp Speeches."

"You can bank on the retribution trade," Worthington once said to me as he laid down a line of crack. "It's respectable now, something for good Christians in the suburbs. We small entrepreneurs have to exploit it before the corporations get in on the action."

I got in on the action. I was one of Worthington's best salespeople. He got me extra supplies because he knew I'd sell everything. Except the buttons. I think Worthington skimmed on the buttons because I'd designed them. Jealousy? Whatever. I'd do what it took to be a mover and doer in the retribution trade. Even if the pain crushed me. And fuck Worthington anyway. I'd get a little capital and go out on my own.

"Well, at least it's something," shrugged Anna after she heard of my job.

"I'll work on commission," I said.

"And what will you do when your leg gets worse? You're not going to be much of a salesman limping around and popping pills."

"That'll stop. The job will energize me. I'll kick the pills and drinking and drugs. Worthington offered me coke and I refused. You'll see. I'll just deal with the pain."

For several months, I felt I'd made the right decision. Anna and I didn't say a cross word to one another. I played with my sons. Sometimes I forgot about my

throbbing thigh. Same thing when I made love to Anna. I'd not done that for almost a year after Iraq.

"Why don't we move away?" asked Anna one night. We were lying in bed after leaving a trail of clothes from the living room to the kitchen to bed.

"Why? Especially when I'm making a little money. I know it's not enough. But I won't do this forever, and who knows? Maybe it will lead to something else. I'll start my own company."

"What about the tech school classes? The automotive repair program. You said once you'd be happy doing that."

"Oh, I don't know about that any more. We'll need the money for the family. I had enough of school anyway, five years getting a worthless B.A."

"You really want to stay in the retribution trade?" she asked. "You told me your conscience bothered you."

"There are a lot of possibilities there. If someone with half a brain like Worthington can make money doing it, think what I can do."

"But the horror of it all."

"It's the oldest profession in the world. Did you know that? Vengeance, not prostitution."

"Don't joke about it."

"Look, I can't help it if the country wants the death penalty."

"Still," sighed Anna, as I reached for her and she laughed.

The happy months went by like a lull on the battlefield. Soon the public executions became thick with vendors and food carts and pickpockets. The more I

hustled, the more my leg burned and the more noticeable my limp became. Then Anna's hours were drastically reduced. The recession, her boss said. One of my boys was getting into fights at school. I felt again like the sorry man I was just out of the hospital. The man sprawled on the sidewalk in front of Tyburn Tree, wishing. No, just existing.

The crowd surges. My head snaps forward and feels like it will shear off at the neck. I'd fallen asleep, stretched out a bit, now people were hopping over my legs. A girl, no more than fifteen, trips over my knee, falls, scrapes her palms. "You fucker!" she spits. Her hatred hits me like August humidity after spending all day in air-conditioning.

She runs off as I curse under my breath. I'd missed the passage of the convict. How is that possible? I could see the cart several hundred feet ahead. Two large black horses, a driver dressed in black. Behind him, caged, the convict. I couldn't see his face but there was something familiar about the black-onyx hair, the arrogant set of his shoulders, as if he were the executioner. I half-run, half-walk with the crowd. My goal is to get ahead of the cart and be at the park when the procession arrives. I hold my eyes on the convict as I negotiate my way through the mass of people. My nap has revived me. The pain is tolerable, I feel agile.

The crowd rains junk on the criminal in a ritual of humiliation. It's like a hate session from George Orwell's *1984*, only more American because voluntary and as festive as a suburban pool party. Hatred with a smiley face. There are tomatoes, eggs, paint-filled balloons. Like angry fans at Detroit Red Wings' hockey games, some throw small octopi. Most objects strike the metal bars of the Perp Cage. But some hit home, and the convict's orange prison jumpsuit becomes an Abstract Expressionist canvas.

I'm surprised to make such good progress. I've managed to find all the gaps as I weave a halfback's path through the mob. Now even with the cart, I glance one more time at the criminal, who stands tall in the middle of the small cage with his hands gripping the bars. He smiles. Or he smirks, or does something in between. But the smirk-smile tells me why the face looked familiar.

It belongs to Ilya Mihalofski, my best friend from high school days, the guy I wanted to be. He had the girls, the fun, the fuck-you attitude I never had the stomach for. We'd shared a love of cars, especially hot rods from the '60s and '70s. The Olds 4-4-2 was our favorite and we fantasized about owning one, sexing it up with a custom paint job and super-loud exhaust. The car became our password, our shared identity. We passed each other in the hallways and whispered, "4-4-2." Then there was college and Iraq for me, and Ilya drifted off my radar screen. Now here he is, still defiant and about to twist freely in the wind in front of all these upstanding citizens.

I arrive at the park out of breath and sweating. Immediately I pay for my dash through the crowd with bolts of lightning through my groin and leg. I feel nauseous, and start to panic. No way I can upchuck here in front of Ilya Mihalofski, I think. My little talking-to works, and the dizziness subsides.

I'd made it to the park a block ahead of the procession. I can tell from the crowd's noise that the cart is almost here. I edge my way toward the spot where the execution will take place. I can see the high platform, hear the music blaring. I recognize songs from Salt the Wound and Septic Flesh. I hawk my buttons and stickers, but my heart's not into it. I'm thinking about Ilya.

The crowd is more revved up than usual. People hold banners: *All Evildoers Go to Hell* and *Personal Responsibility, or Die*. The procession reaches the square. It will make one circle around the park before stopping at the main gate where the criminal will be led by foot to the execution. This is the last stage of the Perp Parade, when the crowd will be especially close to the Celebrity Corpse. There'll be a hail of rotten vegetables, plastic cups full of beer or Coke, maybe even a beer bottle. Many onlookers wear motorcycle and army surplus helmets as protection.

I've gotten closer than ever before to the gallows. Now I can see Ilya, flanked by four guards, making his way up the wide concrete walkway to the gallows. He's handcuffed. He laughs as he's pelted with a slurry of garbage. Two paint balls hit him just below his chin, splattering black and red globules. The guards have clear plastic facemasks to keep the point from getting in their eyes. I'm no more than three or four rows away from the walkway. I can see Ilya's bright eyes and long thin nose. I figure he looks ten years younger than me.

Just then Ilya turns and looks directly at me. It's no more than a couple seconds, but I'm shocked. It's as if he knew exactly where I was. He grins like one of Ken Kesey's Merry Pranksters. He approaches the metal stairs of the gallows. The crowd cheers. Some yell obscenities. The music is louder than ever. I turn to the grim-faced man next to me to ask what the criminal had done. When the man turns, I'm awash in whisky-and-onion breath.

The man cups his ear, shakes his head. I'll have to yell to be heard.

"What did the man do?"

"He's a car thief," shouts the other. His speech slurs. "And a recid...erist."

“A recidivist?” I shout. The man looks blankly.

Ilya climbs the stairs. A water balloon hits him in the back and he slips momentarily. The guard pulls him up roughly, jerking Ilya’s neck. In a moment he’s standing atop the gallows. After the sentence is read and the crowd cheers lustily at the phrase “death by public hanging,” it’s time for the convicted man to utter his last words.

Ilya looks at the crowd, which now fills the square and flows in rivulets down side streets. He smiles as he raises his hands in a pastoral gesture. He looks in my direction but it’s unclear if he can find me again in the crowd. Then he speaks:

“My friends, it’s gratifying so many of you came out today to share with me this solemn hour of my demise. I am moved. Thank all of you from the bottom of my troubled, dark heart.”

The crowd stirs. I have the impression most of the people around me don’t understand the irony. I know his tone, his cadence. I can hear the sarcasm. Some people actually seem touched. A woman in front of me pulls a Kleenex out of her jeans pocket. She probably treats these events like a good soap opera, a chance to have a good cry.

“I’m a man of few words, an admirer of concision, so I shall make my little speech brief. I wanted you all to know, to understand clearly, that I am unashamed of my actions.”

Jeering and hooting from the crowd below the gallows.

“Please, please,” says Ilya, gesturing for calm. “You’ll have time for your revenge very soon. But before you do, I wanted to say that in the thirty odd years granted to me I wish I’d stolen even more Avalons, Escalades, Lincolns, BMWs, Mercedes, Infinitis, and

Lexuses. Above all, I regret not having lifted a Hummer. A Hummer would've been glorious!"

The crowd is screaming. The man next to me shouts, "Kill him! Kill him!" The mob's collective voice reverberates like a giant Fender Stratocaster played by an unseen hand.

As the din grows louder, some wild impulse makes me raise my right hand in the air and yell, "and a 4-4-2! An Olds 4-4-2, black with orange flames! Tell them, Ilya! You'd steal a 4-4-2!"

The noise is so deafening I'm certain no one understands me. The man next to me continues with his "Kill him!" Then Ilya looks down, points at me. He shouts something impossible to hear. I thrust my fist in the air and scream as loudly as I can, "4-4-2! 4-4-2! 4-4-2!" The man next to me takes up the cheer, as do several other people. Soon everyone near the gallows chants. Do they know what they're cheering? Ilya raises his arms in a triumphant pose. He's Muhammed Ali celebrating a knockout.

My throat is raw. I stop cheering and look a last time at Ilya, who's being led to the noose. His body language is unmistakable: he's a giant smirk floating over the boisterous crowd.

Soon it will be over. I turn and begin a tortuous walk back through the mass of screaming onlookers. The entire square chants "4-4-2!" When I reach the outer edge of the mob, I hear a loud, undulating cheer. I envision an orange-clad body hanging, turning. Music once again bellows from the loudspeakers. "We will, we will, ROCK YOU!"

Dazed, I walk several blocks before I drop my stickers, pennants, and buttons. I rip three "A Noose in Time Saves Mine" buttons from my shirt and baseball hat and

throw them into the street. I find my bike and I pedal away, feeling light and painless once again. On the way home, I stop at the supermarket, buy four small steaks, fresh carrots, potatoes, a cheap bottle of red wine. It all barely fits in my soiled backpack but I manage. We'll splurge tonight. I'll cook for Anna and the boys. I'll tell her of my plans to enroll in tech school classes for auto repair. I'll find a way to pay for it.

And then what? Then I take up Ilya's trade and go searching for that 4-4-2.