

His Own Time

John Thompson

There's something about this waitress that keeps me coming back here. Part of the draw is obvious: it's her hair. I've never seen anything like it. It's braided into a ponytail that hangs like an auburn rope along her back. I'm hoping to get up the nerve to ask her out. She wipes a table, straightens up, and whips the braid of hair over her shoulder. From where I sit, it appears to come dangerously close to the blades of the ceiling fan. It's an illusion. I know that. Even so, an image ambushes me, her hair snarled in the blades and her body yanked off the floor, her pretty legs flopping as she hangs from the makeshift gallows. I turn back to the bar to try to clear my head.

I did a little time once. It wasn't a long bit, but that doesn't matter much. Time is time. One day a new guy on the block, Lenny, decides he can't take it anymore. Some men are playing cards, and some are walking in circles around the perimeter of the cellblock. You'd be surprised how much time you can kill walking in circles. Most guys walk with somebody. I think it's so they don't look crazy. You hear guys say how they walked with so and so for seven years at some joint or another. That's what "walking with" means. And there's a certain stride and pace. It's not for exercise; it's to kill time. I can spot a man on the street with the stride and know he's done time. It's a sort of shuffle that keeps you moving, but there's no hurry because there's no destination.

Me, on this day, I'm reading a book. I'm thinking it was *Zorba the Greek*, but I'm not so sure. Some guys walk away the months; I read away the minutes. I'd read anything I could get my hands on just to lose myself in something. Anyway, I'm reading and the last thing I have on my mind is Lenny and his problems. There's a saying, "Do your own time," and that's exactly what I intend to do.

Only this guy Lenny makes it hard to ignore what he's up to, which is to off himself. I don't know why he wants to exactly, there could be a hundred reasons, or no reason at all other than you're in a place like this, but it ought to be a private thing, at the very least done at nighttime. Lenny's got a sheet all twisted up into a rope and he's dragging his desk from his cell to the end of the block where there's a pipe. When he passes by my cell he's mumbling something to himself about how he'd be better off dead, or maybe I'd have never noticed. Then he gets in place and spends a minute or two checking the layout. He climbs on the desk and drapes the sheet over the pipe. It's funny what I remember next.

The normal roar of the cellblock starts to quiet a little at a time now. It was like a factory I worked in once. At break time you could hear the plant wind down incrementally as each machine shut off, only on the cellblock the roar winds down as each con notices Lenny and shuts up to watch the show.

Lenny is in place. He throws the sheet rope over the pipe, and then pulls a snug knot to the drainpipe. I'm thinking that if he does wrap the noose end around his neck and jumps off the desk, the sewer pipe will break and shit will pour onto the block and stink it up worse than normal, because I can't really believe that Lenny will succeed at this anymore than he's succeeded at anything else in his sorry life.

He isn't even a decent criminal. Lenny is in prison for stealing copper wire. He and a cousin would go into the woods and pull down the wire to hunting camps and cabins. They'd cut down hundreds of feet of wire at a time, roll the mess up through the woods, over rough mountainous terrain that was filled with poison ivy and other shit. Then they'd drag the coils of wire into a truck. They'd drive it home, burn the insulation off in their backyard, and then haul it another fifty miles to a scrap yard to sell it for 39 stinking cents a pound. A real fucking job would have been less work. Even so, they'd managed to get busted because they helped themselves to the liquor in the hunting camp and passed out on the front stoop of the lodge. To top it off, the hunting lodge belonged to a politician so Lenny got the maximum sentence. I can't think of Lenny without thinking of *Cool Hand Luke* and Paul Newman breaking into parking meters to get himself locked up. Only Lenny is no cool hand anything. Lenny is a fuck-up, pure and simple. A likeable fuck-up, sure, but a fuck-up nonetheless.

Lenny's got the noose around his neck and he's poised on the edge of the desk. I put my book down and sit up in my bunk. He hesitates and readjusts the noose so the knot is on the side of his head. I'm not sure what difference it makes, but it seems important to him. He reaches up and checks the knot at the pipe, which seems okay. Then he turns his head back and forth like he's getting comfortable in a dentist chair headrest. Finally, somebody from the other end of the block yells, "What the fuck do you think you're doing?"

Lenny ignores this and tugs on the sheet again, checking the strength of the pipe. He seems satisfied and moves back to the edge of the desk. He's in position and seems ready.

I wait. The whole cellblock waits. I'm getting angry, though I'm not exactly sure why. Lenny just pisses me off. He readjusts the sheet again at the pipe. I don't want this to happen; mostly I don't want to think about it. I get more pissed off the more he stalls, and apparently I'm not the only one. Morgan slams his cards down, "Jesus Christ."

Every cellblock in every prison has a con who runs the show. Morgan runs this one. It's not that he's the toughest dude on the block; I doubt that he is, but the toughest dudes look to him and do what he says. He's a career criminal and proud of it. Morgan's smart, too. He talks to me because I read more than comic books. Morgan has given himself quite an education here; during his times of incarceration he's read most of the classics. It's all part of the life in the can. Morgan claims he'd take a year on the inside if he had to, for every ten on the street living the way he wants. That is, by his own rules.

Morgan's also got a mean streak. He lists the aluminum baseball bat as one of the century's greatest inventions. A man can hear the whistle from the bat before it hits the kneecap, he told me. So even if the man he's punishing closes his eyes, he can still hear it coming, and Morgan likes that.

Morgan gets up from the card game. "Get the fuck down from there asshole. You're not going to do anything." I'm glad Morgan is going to put an end to this charade.

Lenny, his voice a little gargled from the constriction of the bed sheet around his throat, says, "I am, too."

"Well then what's the hold up?" says Morgan. "You're fucking up my game here."

Lenny doesn't seem to have a response, but his eyes grow more doe-like.

"Well?" Morgan starts to amble toward Lenny, reaching into his shirt pocket for his Marlboros.

"Leave me alone," says Lenny.

Morgan holds the cigarette pack out in a friendly gesture. "Relax," he says. "I'm not going to stop you. I'm just offering you a last smoke. That's all."

Lenny is shaking now. Facing Morgan is worse than facing death.

"Here." Morgan offers the pack with a cigarette tapped out and easy to grab.

Lenny takes the cigarette and Morgan lights his own and then holds the match up high enough so Lenny can get a light, which is pretty high, since Lenny's head is tethered to the pipe. Lenny inhales. I figured maybe everything is going to be okay and we can go back to doing our time in peace. That's when Morgan asks Lenny if he really wants to die and Lenny says, "Yeah."

Morgan steps back a little and as calmly as could be says, "Then die you pussy motherfucker," and kicks the desk out from under Lenny. Lenny's body drops the few inches of slack in his makeshift rope. Morgan turns away after the kick and starts back to the card game without looking at Lenny who, as it turns out, didn't really want to die and is flopping and kicking while grabbing onto the rope with both hands, fighting for life. The cellblock is as quiet as I'd ever heard it as Morgan gets to the table and says, "Deal."

Nobody looks at Lenny as he fights the fight of his life, trying not to choke. But we all hear him gurgle and kick, his feet banging at the wall trying to get a toehold. It's as if Lenny had never existed and isn't at the end of his rope in the back of the cellblock.

The next sound I hear is the cards shuffle then slap to the table for somebody to cut. Nobody even looks in Lenny's direction. Me, I'm no better than anybody else. I hate Lenny's guts. I go back to my book. I don't watch and I don't help. What does it matter really?

The waitress's hip brushes against my arm, and I pull away as if her touch had cut like a shiv. I shake it off and come back to the present. When she puts in her drink order, I lean back to look at that tantalizing rope of hair and I know I'm never going to ask her out as I had planned. I mean, who am I kidding? I couldn't look at her without thinking of that place and Lenny. Always pushing away that image. When she turns to take the drinks to a table, I throw a buck on the bar and walk beside her stride for stride. Then she stops to serve a drink, and I keep on walking. After all, a man has to do his own time. ☺