

The Usual Punishment

On the witness stand, his mother refused to say Charlie had anything wrong with his mind, even though the lawyer had told her, *If we don't prove he's insane, he's going to die.*

For his last supper, Charlie Starkweather chose cold cuts over steak. Behind bars, in his blue jeans and workshirt, he licked salt and grease from his fingers. When the lawmen arrived to take him to the execution chamber, Charlie asked, "What's your hurry?" First, they had to cut a block of fabric out of the leg of his pants to expose his knee, and then one knelt to shave the hair off Charlie's calf.

Fabric flapping around his shaven leg, wrists cuffed, he walked along the slick linoleum. Years ago, following him home from grade school, the other kids had made fun of his bow-legged walk. "Who shot your horse?" they liked to shout. Now, instead of recalling that old torment, he should have been thinking of what had brought him here: the love of his life, Caril Fugate, that love gone wrong, the way one killing made the ones that followed easier, how during those days of running he'd been conscious of his own competence, the same way he'd felt lifting heavy garbage cans to dump in the back of the truck. A mindless reliance on the body's functionality. You could take comfort in that.

The electric chair looked like an old piece of Mission Oak on

someone's porch, though rigged up with wires and boxes as if an enterprising boy had got ahold of it and tried to make a spaceship.

"Sit," the warden said.

Shouldn't fear make him resist? But the chair seemed like the usual punishment he'd known growing up—tied to one of the captain's chairs in the dining room, his arms and legs bound by rope his father jerked tight, muttering, "*Told* you to stay out of the street." Or, "Take money out of your mother's purse and then *lying* about it. Jesus." One time he'd been working on an art project, surrounded by cut shapes of paper and the smell of pencil lead. He dug his fingers into the pot of grainy paste and paused. Was it really made from the bodies of old horses, like they said?

Charlie sniffed. It didn't smell like meat. He put a blob against his tongue. The taste wasn't bad: sticky, all right, but with a comforting blandness. Faintly salty. Charlie'd eaten half the little container when his father came in, caught him chewing, and went for the rope. The chair's frame pressed hard against Charlie's spine, his arms pinned at elbow and wrist, rope wound around his torso, legs tied at knee and ankle. "What the hell is wrong with you?" his father asked, grunting a little as he tightened the knots.



At first the punishment was punishment: Charlie felt trapped, suffocated by the rope, the way a boy must feel in a boa constrictor's embrace. But after a while, it didn't seem so bad—better, after all, than the strap. Charlie thought about Harry Houdini and considered how he might free himself from these constraints and stride into the living room, throw a punch at his father's startled face and laugh.

Maybe the chair was easier for his father than the beatings, too. Tied down, Charlie sat quietly, after the initial expected fuss, as if he'd thought things over and was deciding how to mend his ways, instead of deciding, as he did, on how he would get revenge, on all the ways he would make them sorry.



And here in the chamber is like the end of a gangster movie he watched from the back row of the Joyo Theater. A hooded man fits the strapped mask over Charlie's face and mouth. He can't see. Hands attach an electrode to his knee. Against Charlie's fingers, the chair's arm is smooth as ice. *Any last words?* He shakes his head. The leather bands around his arms and chest jerk tight. He waits to hear his father's voice— "*Teach you a lesson*"—and tastes again the grit and salt of paste.