

“Some of us had been threatening our friend Colby”
by Donald Barthelme

Some of us had been threatening our friend Colby for a long time, because of the way he had been behaving. And now he had gone too far. So, we decided to hang him. Colby argued that just because he had gone too far,—he did not deny that he'd gone too far—did not mean that he should be subjected to hanging. Going too far, he said, was something everybody did sometimes. We didn't pay much attention to his argument.

We asked him what sort of music he would like played at the hanging. He said he'd have to think about it, but it would take him a while to decide. I pointed out that we'd have to know soon, because Howard, who is a conductor, would have to hire and rehearse the musicians, and he couldn't begin until he knew what the music was going to be. Colby said he'd always been fond of Ives' fourth symphony. Howard said that this was a delaying tactic, and that everybody knew that Ives was almost impossible to perform and would involve weeks of rehearsal, and that the size of the orchestra would in the course, put us way over the budget. “Be reasonable.” he said to Colby. Colby said he'd try to think of something a little less exacting.

Hugh was worried about the wording of the invitations. What if one of them fell into the hands of the authorities? Hanging Colby was doubtless against the law. And if the authorities learned what, in advance, the plan was, they would very likely try and mess everything up. I said that, although hanging Colby was almost certainly against the law, we had a moral right to do so, because he was our friend—belonged to us in various senses, and he had, after all, gone too far. We agreed that the invitations would be worded in such a way that the person invited could not know for sure what he was being invited to. We decided to refer to the event as “an event” involving Mr. Colby Williams. A handsome script was selected from a catalog, and we picked a creme colored paper. Magnus said he'd see to it to having the Invitations printed, and wondered whether we should serve drinks. Colby said that he thought drinks would be nice, but that he was worried about the expense. We told him kindly that the expense didn't matter; that we were, after all, his dear friends, and if a group of his dear friends couldn't get together and do the thing with a bit of eclat, why then, what was the world coming to? Colby asked if he would be able to have drinks too before the event. We said certainly.

The next item of business was the gibbets, and none of us knew too much about gibbets design. But Thomas, who was an architect, said he'd look it up in old books and draw the plans. The important thing, as far as he recollected, was that the trap door function perfectly. He said that roughly, counting labor and materials, it shouldn't run us more than \$400.00. “Good God”, Howard said. He said, “What was Thomas figuring on? Rosewood?!. “No, no, just a good grade of pine,” Thomas said. Victor asked if one painted pine, wouldn't pine look kind of raw. And Thomas responded that he thought it could be stained a dark walnut without too much trouble. I said that, although I thought the whole thing ought to be done really well and I, that I also thought that four hundred dollars for a gibbets, on top of the expense for the drinks, invitations, musicians, and

everything was a bit steep. And why didn't we just use a tree. I pointed out that since it was going to be a June hanging, trees would be in glorious leaf. And not only would a tree add a kind of manful feeling, but it was also strictly traditional, especially in the West. Thomas, who had been sketching gibbets on the backs of envelopes, reminded us that an outdoor hanging swap had to contend with the threat of rain. Victor said he liked the idea of doing it outdoors, possibly on the bank of a river. But he noted that we would have to hold it some distance from the city, which presented the problem of getting the guests and the musicians to the site and back to town.

At this point, everybody looked at Harry, who runs a car and truck rental business. Harry said he thought he could round up enough limousines, which took care of that end. But that the drivers would have to be paid. The drivers, he pointed out, wouldn't be friends of Colby's, and couldn't be expected to donate their services anymore than the bartender or the musicians. He said that he had about ten limousines which he used mostly for Funerals, and that he could probably obtain another dozen by calling around friends of his in the trade. He said also, that if we did it outside in the open air, we'd better figure on a tent or awning of some kind, to cover at least the principals and the orchestra. And he really thought that the choice ought to be left up to Colby, since it was his hanging. Colby said that everybody went too far sometimes, and weren't we being a little draconian. Howard said rather sharply that it had already been discussed, so which did he want, gibbet or tree? Colby asked if he could have a firing squad. No, Howard said, he could not. Howard said a firing squad would just be an ego trip for Colby: the blindfold, and the last cigarette bit and that. Colby was already in enough hot water, without trying to upstage everyone with unnecessary theatrics. Colby said he was sorry, he hadn't meant it that way, he'd take the tree. Thomas crumpled up the gibbet sketches he had been making in disgust.

Then the question of the hangman came up. Pat said. "did we really need a hangman?" Because if we used a tree, the noose could be adjusted to the appropriate level, and Colby could just jump off something; a chair or a stool' or something. "Besides", Paul said, he doubted very much that there were any freelance hangmen wandering about the country, now that capital punishment had been done away with absolutely, temporarily, and that we would probably have to fly one in from England or Spain, or one of these South American countries. And even if we did that, how could we know in advance if the man was a professional? A real hangman, and not just some money hungry amateur who might bungle the job and shame us all, in front of everybody? We all agreed that Colby should just jump off of something, and that a chair was not what he should jump off of because that would look, we felt, extremely tacky. Some old kitchen chair, sitting out there under our beautiful tree. Thomas, who is quite modern in on-look, and not afraid of innovation, proposed that Colby be standing on a large round rubber ball, ten feet in diameter. "This, he said, would afford a silent drop, and would also roll out of the way if Colby suddenly changed his mind after jumping off. He reminded us that by not using a regular hangman, we were placing an awful lot of the responsibility for the success of the affair on Colby himself, and that although he was sure that Colby would perform credibly, and not disgrace his friends at the last minute, still, men have been known to get

a little irresolute at times like that, and that the ten foot round rubber ball (which could be fabricated rather cheaply) would ensure a bang up production, right down to the wire.

At the mention of wire, Hank, who had been silent all this time, suddenly spoke up and said he wondered if it wouldn't be better if we used wire instead of rope. More efficient, and in the end, kinder to Colby, he suggested. Colby began to look a little green, and I didn't blame him. There is something extremely distasteful in thinking of being hanged with wire. It gives you a sort of revulsion when you think about it. I thought it was really quite unpleasant of Hank to be sitting there talking about the wire, just when we had solved the problem of what Colby was going to jump off of so neatly, what with Thoms' idea with the rubber ball, you see. So, I hastily said that wire was out of the question because it would injure the tree. Yes, cut into the branch it was tied to when Colby's full weight hit it, and that in these days with increased respect for the environment, we didn't want that. Did we? Colby gave me a grateful look, and the meeting broke up.

Everything went off very smoothly the day of the event. The music Colby finally picked was standard stuff, Elgar, and it was played very nicely by Howard and his boys. It didn't rain, the event was well attended, and we didn't run out of scotch or anything. The ten-foot rubber ball had been painted a deep green and blended in well with the bucolic setting. The two things I remember best about the episode are; the grateful look Colby gave me when I said what I said about the wire, and the fact that nobody has ever gone too far again.