

**No
Harm Done.**

No Harm Done.

I was seventeen when I applied for the job. I lied on the application form. It was a lie that came easily to me. Lies, I find, sit in the mind like crocus bulbs beneath the compost. Nobody knows they are there unless someone starts digging. Told with skill they can flower to be whatever you need them to be. I've invented more lies than anybody knows. And I've forgotten most of those. So, no harm done.

A crime in the mind is not a crime. Is it?

It's quarter past four and my wife will be home with the grandkids soon. You might ask whether I love them. And of course I will answer yes. I am biologically forced to love them. But they're just bags of water and tissue and fragments of the universe spun together into a predetermined anatomical shape propelled by electrical charges and nerve endings. All reason acknowledges they are no more exceptional than next door's cat.

There were five hundred and forty three applications for the apprenticeship. It's a number that I have carried with me all my life. Five hundred and forty three people willingly volunteering to do that most despicable deed. Five hundred and forty

three affirmations of what I've always known: We are forced to love, but that we choose to hate.

I was shocked by the sight of my boss's hands, they were like sides of pork. They were pink and veiny, but worked with the clinical dexterity of a concert pianist. He worked busily looping one strand beneath the other, the rope threading about itself like ivy. He wore a wool cap and brown leather work boots. He looked like the Bolshevik hero of a Soviet propaganda poster. I wished he was my real father.

My real father treated life as a joke.

My real father was a slight man with whispery grey hair and no distinguishing features. When I was a child he tried to kill our ailing cockerel by holding its head underwater in a hessian sack weighted down with stones. The barrel split, the cockerel's head poked free and my father cried at its desperate gasps. I dreamed I finished the job my father couldn't manage.

My boss was a fantasist not a realist. He saw the dark, mysterious side of human nature as a wonder – as though it was a game like those my grandkids play on their laptops. My boss wasn't like me. He never understood the horror of this life. He didn't understand what it was to be good at his job.

I did.

I really did.

Even at that sapling age with my new boots dappled in a dead man's vomit, I knew what it meant to be more than just another man doing his job. I knew to be a great, a truly great hangman, you needed to be every bit as cruel and damaged and aware of the pain as the man swinging in front of you.