

WILDING

by David F. Duncan

It had been a good night's wilding but the night would soon be over. Dawn was only about an hour away and the park seemed to have emptied of prey. But dawn would bring new prey -- the joggers. Soon the park roadways would be full of them. Too many to be wilded, but the single early joggers were easy prey just like those who jogged too late and alone.

Early that night, Chill and his fellow gangbangers, CJ and Frankie, had terrified a young woman in a blue jogging suit, chasing her with threats of rape till she scrambled into a cab that happened along at just the wrong time and spoiled their fun.

Later they had given one old bum a bath -- thrown him in the park lake. Another they had simply beat up. CJ wanted to set him on fire, but Chill knew that would draw too much heat from the cops.

You had to know how far you could go when you went wilding. Killing wasn't necessarily too far but killing in a way that made headlines was. That could spoil the wilding for months with cops patrolling all the best wilding haunts.

Later, Frankie had found an old bag lady sleeping on a park bench. So they roused her -- threatening to cut her and scattering and stomping the ragtag assortment of prize possessions she kept in her four Macy's shopping bags.

Now the park seemed empty. The three gangbangers stopped for a smoke while waiting for new prey.

Then CJ called out, "fresh meat!" Halfway across the park, he pointed out a hunched figure walking slowly through the park. Silently slipping closer, they saw that it was an old man, gray hair showing under his old fashioned top hat. His old black overcoat flapped around his ankles, nearly dragging the ground as he shuffled slowly down the path.

As they drew closer the old man seemed to sense them somehow and began to walk faster. They started making whooping noises and he broke into a shambling run. As they gave chase, Chill was happy to see that the old man ran toward the trees instead of running to the street.

"He's ours now," shouted Chill to his pals as the old man ran into the stand of trees. But suddenly the old man was gone.

"Where the **** did he go," yelled CJ.

"He's gotta be hiding behind one'a the trees," answered Frankie. But to Chill it had looked as if the old man just took flight, like he had one of those hang gliders.

Anyway he was gone now. He wasn't hiding behind any tree. Nor was he anywhere else that Chill and his bros could find.

Chill lit up another smoke and started to make a joke about how the old man had ran like a scared pigeon, so maybe he could fly. But before Chill could get the words out, there was a noise in the air like a flag flapping in a high wind.

Then suddenly, as the flapping sound seemed to be right on top of them, Frankie was jerked up into the air like a puppet on a string. One minute he was there, the next he was gone.

"Frankie, bro," cried Chill.

"Jesus," exclaimed CJ, "where'd he go."

A moment later he was back. His body fell through the tree branches. Fell back to earth lifeless, his throat ripped open. Chill didn't waste time looking at Frankie's body or wondering why there was so little blood at that ripped out throat. He just turned and ran.

CJ couldn't run. His feet seemed to be rooted to the ground -- his legs wobbling and watery, barely able to support him. As the flapping sound drew near again, he stood gibbering in terror like the old bag lady had earlier when he held his knife to her throat. He was the next to go. Just like Frankie.

Chill ran alright. He ran tripping like the old bum had before they gave him his bath. He ran in screaming terror like the jogger. He ran as so many others had ran from him and his bros. And it did him no good.

The flapping sound grows rapidly closer, til it is right on top of him. Then clawed hands grab him and lift him into the air -- feet kicking -- lungs shrieking. His final screams end almost as soon as they begin -- ending in a wet gurgle as fanged teeth tear into his throat.

A few minutes later a top-hatted figure emerges from the shadows of the park. A taller, straighter figure than before. Walking briskly where once it had shuffled along. Hair no longer gray but now a sleek black.

Reaching the park's edge, he quickens his pace. It has been a good night's hunting but the night would soon be over.