

WITNESS TO AN EXECUTION

By

Paul Kieniewicz

The night they killed Dominique they did it professionally.

The white-walled room was vacuumed; its cement floor scrubbed free of all stains. The gurney had a freshly laundered cover; each belt and strap was lined up with the pad's top edge. On a clean tray lay three glass vials with the chemicals. Down the hallway a plain coffin of unfinished pine rested on a pair of saw horses, custom made to receive the body of a man who was still alive. Sitting alone in a nearby cell, he listened to his breathing. He didn't feel dead; he wasn't even ill. He knew he was about to be ritually sacrificed and he resented it.

The invited guests arrived. Dressed formally for the occasion they waited in the hospitality house. On the walls hung several oil paintings depicting scenes from Christ's passion. They'd been commissioned to put the guests at ease but no one looked at them. To pass the time the guests chatted with inquisitive reporters.

In a nearby parking lot a handful of people waved picket signs at a yellow police tape. Guards wearing khaki uniforms with broad-brimmed hats paced behind the line to make sure no one crossed it. They chatted in low voices,

occasionally cracked jokes and tried to appear nonchalant but they kept up their guard. Like soldiers in a battlefield they never made eye contact with their adversary, but they stirred uncomfortably whenever someone moved quickly toward the yellow line. The protesters were mostly silent. Most had been there before and knew that the time for words was over. Besides, no one could talk for long before the rattle of a nearby bank of sewer pumps drowned out their voices.

A tall man with a thick beard leaned against a chain link fence. He had the informal look of a professor, and indeed he taught criminology at a nearby college. Two or three times a month, whenever an execution was scheduled, he'd be standing by the pumps holding a candle in a glass jar. If the evening dragged on, and it often did, the candle would go out before he left.

Next to him were three female students in jeans and t-shirts. One fingered a rosary. They came regularly, said their prayers and usually left without speaking to anyone. That evening they were joined by a corpulent man with a bible under one arm and who introduced himself as the pastor of a church in San Antonio. He'd been asking everyone if they wanted him to lead a short prayer. Most protesters were cool to the idea, but the students appeared interested.

Two black youths in low-slung jeans and baggy t-shirts kept apart from the others. If anyone tried to approach them, and several roving reporters with shoulder cameras often did, the brothers moved away. The older one, severely overweight, paced restlessly, his hands in his pockets. His frozen face didn't reveal any emotion; his downcast eyes were turned inward. His brother talked to

him in short sentences, hoping to start a conversation or to at least elicit a response but eventually he gave up trying.

Soon all eyes focused on the driveway beyond the yellow line, and the gabled entrance to the Walls that contained a large clock. Its wrought iron hands were both almost vertical. Usually within minutes of the appointed time a guard would cross the driveway to the hospitality house, and return with a line of witnesses. They would climb a short flight of stairs and enter the doorway beneath the clock. Six o'clock came and went. Five more minutes passed but the driveway remained empty. The brothers shook their heads in dismay but the protesters appeared to take heart. An empty driveway suggested that a Supreme Court judge had delayed the execution to listen to a defense lawyer's last argument.

The sewer pumps kicked into life and rattled noisily. A black man in a dark suit who had been trying to speak on his mobile phone moved away from the pumps to continue his conversation.

'What boxes is he talking about?' he said.

'In Houston? And, what's in them?'

He turned to his neighbor, also wearing a suit. 'The lawyer thinks there's some lost evidence in a bunch of boxes.'

'Like what?'

'Nobody knows.'

'What boxes is she talking about?'

'The ones they found when the inspectors shut down the Houston Police Crime Lab. Three hundred of them.'

'Man, how long will it take to go through those boxes?'

'A long time. Dominique's said all along he never fired the shot. Never handled the gun. Maybe they're looking for the gun.'

While phones buzzed in justices' offices across the country, the black man in the cell waited. He had refused his last meal. He no longer cared what they did to him as long as they got on with it. However a guard told him that his appointment was delayed. No one knew for how long. Perhaps until someone searched through three hundred boxes. He'd given away everything he owned including his rosary of 101 black and blue beads. The guards assumed that it was gang apparel. They didn't allow him to wear it when he entered the visiting cubicle even though he was separated from his visitor by reinforced glass. As his appointment approached Dominique wrote about the rosary, that he'd added a bead every time he had to say good-bye to a friend or mentor on the Row. He thought of his wife, Jessica, whom he'd never see again. Soon after landing on the Row he sent her away; told her that his life was over and that she needed to take care of her's. He didn't want her to witness his execution because he knew she couldn't take it.

Daylight faded rapidly. Guards posted above the walls in corner boxes, scanned the parking lot with binoculars fearing that a prolonged wait might make the protesters restless; more prone to violence. Lights came on along the red brick wall, and encased the tall building in a ghostly hue. Clouds of mosquitoes

buzzed around the sewer pumps. Behind the yellow tape the guards paced back and forth. Their captain told them they'd have to stay a while longer, at least until midnight when the execution warrant expired.

A reporter with a shoulder camera ducked under the yellow line and ambled up to the protesters. The past hour he'd been up at the hospitality house with the witnesses. He scanned the protesters, a rapid once-over to see if anyone there was worth interviewing. Turning on a small searchlight, he flashed it on an old man with a handwritten sign that read, 'Lord Have Mercy'. The reporter produced a microphone, coughed to get the man's attention but then put it away.

He'd noticed the brothers, now standing by a grassy knoll next to the police line. They had been joined by a diminutive, black woman with long curly hair. The reporter crept up to them, slowly to avoid flustering his prey. When he was within a few feet of the trio he turned on his spotlight. The boys turned their backs to the camera and pulled closer to shield the young woman.

The pastor leaned over to the students. 'We need to get that man away from them.'

'Who are they?' said the one with the rosary.

'The La-Strapes boys. I don't know the woman.'

Twelve years earlier four boys attacked Andrew La-Strapes outside a convenience store in Houston, shot him dead and robbed him of a hundred dollars. When they were caught, two of the four identified Dominique as the

shooter. Despite his protestations he was given the death sentence. The two black boys who co-operated, both African American, were given prison sentences. The one white boy in the gang did not spend any time in prison. La-Strapes's sons, Andrew and Andre, were four and six years old when their father was killed. The following years they clung to their mother, Bernette. They knew something terrible had happened, but years would pass before they understood. They were often left alone in their small apartment while Bernette worked in a restaurant to support them.

One day when the boys were in their teens a small white man called at the door. He was balding, wore a loose shirt and khakis, and introduced himself as a person opposed to the death penalty. He said he wanted to visit with her and with Andrew and Andre. Talk to the family about their father. Bernette offered him coffee. She spoke to him about her husband, the boys and their hard life. After listening to the story, he said he was deeply sorry. He told them that another man would soon die, the man accused of killing her husband. How did she feel about it? At first Bernette couldn't talk, but then she found the words she'd kept to herself over the years, that killing was wrong no matter who did it. She'd seen violent death and didn't want to see any more, not of the man who'd killed her husband. Not anyone. An execution wouldn't bring her peace. It could only re-open her wound.

Some weeks later her visitor returned and said that Dominique's wife, Jessica, wanted to meet Andrew and Andre. She and Dominique had met when they were teenagers and had fallen in love. Andre thought that seeing Jessica

would help him heal his anger. Bernette and Andrew weren't sure but they agreed to the meeting. The moment Jessica appeared, Andre knew he'd like her and that they would stick together during the coming ordeal. All shared the same sorrow, the reality of violent death and the loss that it brought.

Bernette wrote to the Texas governor, saying that she had forgiven Dominique and that no one in the family wanted him to be executed. Andre participated in a press conference. Bewildered reporters asked him why he didn't want justice to be done. He couldn't find the words to tell reporters what he felt. He mumbled that killing was wrong. His dad was gone, and nothing would bring him back.

The governor didn't reply to Bernette's letter, but remarked to an aide that the family's wishes would not factor into his decision whether to pardon Dominique.

The pastor asked the professor. 'Who's the woman?'

'That's Dominique's wife.'

'With the boys?'

'I understand that they're very close.'

Two more reporters discovered the trio. Flashes went off, spotlights shone in their faces. A reporter stepped forward, microphone in hand, and asked for an interview, but the boys turned sharply away, linked arms and drew a cordon around Jessica. She was trembling and had to hold onto them for support.

The full moon, now high above the trees cast its silver light on the walls. The guard boxes and the men with the rifles were silhouetted against the pale sky. Several bright stars gleamed above. The cosmos of stars and planets knew only a higher order and appeared uninvolved in the affairs of the prison. Nevertheless Jessica looked for a long time at the moon, as if deriving some comfort from its steady light. She disengaged from the boys and walked a few paces away from them.

The sewer pumps kicked in. They rattled louder than ever, determined to break up the silence. Conversations halted. The moonlight that had brought Jessica solace appeared to withdraw into an unattainable world far from human chaos.

The suited man with the mobile phone received another call. His face stiffened, and he shook his head. He spoke to his friend, but his voice didn't carry above the pumps' rattle. In any case his strained expression said it all. The Supreme Court had denied the appeal concerning the unmarked boxes.

All eyes turned to the entrance below the clock, now lit up by yellow lights. Before long a guard came through the door and crossed the street. A minute later he returned leading a line of people across the street. First were two black women who held onto each other, followed by the man who had introduced Jessica to the brothers. Bringing up the rear, were two women in business suits. With clipboards in hand they walked briskly as if heading for a routine meeting. Reporters' camera flashes caught the witnesses as they climbed the prison steps.

Still shielding Jessica, the La-Strapes brothers moved across the street to an empty spot in the parking lot. The reporters decided not to follow them, but continued to film. The pumps cut out. Silence fell, broken only by the Jessica's sobbing and the boys' attempts to comfort her.

'Holy Mary, mother of God, pray for us... ' The students and the man with the bible repeated the prayer and flipped rosary beads.

Ten minutes passed since the witnesses entered the prison. Jessica had fallen to her knees on the bare asphalt, her body convulsed with cries. The boys leaned over her, each holding a shoulder. Scarcely moving the three clung to each other. They all knew what had to be happening behind the ghostly wall. The man Jessica loved would be strapped to the gurney while technicians injected a cocktail of chemicals into his veins. A doctor waited nearby. He was there only to pronounce the victim dead because he'd sworn an oath to do no harm.

A spotlight shone on the trio. A TV reporter's camera buzzed, gathering material for a human interest story. The man with the handwritten sign walked over. 'Would you mind leaving them alone?' The journalist grunted 'Okay,' but continued to film the trio. The pastor planted himself between the brothers and the camera. The old man joined him along with the professor and several others to form a barrier that shielded the brothers and Jessica from the camera. For several minutes the spotlight played on the protesters' faces, but then turned off. The reporter decided that no one in the studio would want footage of protesters in a parking lot. He decamped and moved across the police line to ambush the witnesses as they exited the building.

The guards paced the line as if cold and talked in subdued voices. One removed his hat to swat mosquitoes. They were relieved that there had been no trouble that night. The crying from the parking lot had thankfully stopped.

One by one the witnesses appeared in the main doorway and climbed down the stairs to the driveway. The women in black held onto each other. The reporters with clipboards who had walked in confidently now stumbled as if drunk. Cars started in the distance, turned on their lights and rolled down the driveway. The guards pushed the tape aside to let them through. The friend who witnessed the execution walked alone down the driveway, his head bowed. He found the brothers and Jessica in the parking lot. After he hugged each of them, he told them about Dominique's last moments: that Dominique died peacefully. He thanked everyone there for their support and wanted them to keep up the fight. He was sorry he wasn't strong enough and wanted Jessica to know that he loved her. That he regretted her ordeal.

Jessica listened to the account but said nothing. Perhaps she wanted to feel gratitude for the sunny days she and Dominique had shared or remorse for not having spent more time with him after his incarceration, but she found herself staring at a void that no one could fill. Not her friend; not Andrew or Andre.

The guards wound up the tape. Talking in loud voices they bid each other goodnight. Their captain thanked them for their work and for staying late. It had been a clean operation without any incidents.