NOBODY IS THERE

Nobody Is There

The Life, Death & Witness of William Silvia

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Nobody Is There: The Life, Death & Witness of William Silvia

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Scripture quotations are from the King James Version.

For Will.

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Foreword

William Silvia was executed by the State of Florida on August 18, 2026. I was there. My hand was on his leg when the poison started.

These essays were not written after the fact. They were written in the moment…day by day…as the machinery moved. The first was written seventeen days before the end. The last was written three days after. Nothing has been softened in between.

I did not write these essays to win an argument. I wrote them because William heard voices and almost nobody else was listening.

There is no comfortable distance in these pages. You will sit in the visitation room. You will hear the cartoons. You will keep watch through the last night. You will stand in the chamber. That is the point. Executions survive on distance. Witness closes it.

Will deserved better than the ending he got. The least I can do is make sure the ending is not the only thing that survives him.

Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.

—Matthew 25:40

Nobody Is There: The Moral Horror of the Pending Execution of William Silvia

August 1, 2026

Ron DeSantis signed the death warrant on July 17. Florida intends to kill William Silvia on August 18 at six in the evening at Florida State Prison. That much you can find in any newspaper in the state.

Here is what you will not find.

William hears voices.

I am his spiritual advisor. We talked last week.

William got serious very quickly.

I learned that there are conversations going on all around him...constantly...and there is nobody there. Voices arguing. Voices talking over each other. A cacophony with no bodies attached to it.

He was not making a legal argument. He was not asking me to feel sorry for him. He was telling me what it is like to be him.

Sit with that for a second. Imagine a concrete box about the size of a parking space. Now imagine that box is full of people talking and you cannot see a single one of them. You cannot leave. You cannot turn it down. You cannot tell anybody, because the officers will say you are performing and the State will say you are stalling.

That is the interior architecture of the man Florida is preparing to strap to a gurney.

Patricia Silvia is dead. Her mother Betty Woodard was shot and survived. I am not going to pretend otherwise. There is a family in

Seminole County carrying twenty years of grief. That grief is real. But surely, Florida can do better than executing a man this sick.

The Waiver Held

Now let me tell you what the record holds.

The record holds a shotgun purchase. The record holds a jury that recommended death by a vote of eleven to one. The record holds a sentence handed down in January of 2009.

And then the record holds this.

In June of 2012, William Silvia stood up in a courtroom in Seminole County and asked to fire his own lawyers. He asked to give up his postconviction appeals. All of them. Forever.

The judge held a hearing. The judge ran the colloquy the rules require. The judge found no reasonable grounds to believe William was incompetent. The judge found the waiver knowing, intelligent and voluntary. William was told what he was doing. The specific terminology is making oneself warrant-eligible. He was told the Governor could now sign his death warrant. He was told the decision was permanent. He was told he could never change his mind.

He said yes.

The Florida Supreme Court affirmed all of it the following year. Competency was not raised on that appeal. Nobody stood up in that

courtroom and shared that William was severely mentally ill. Everybody just kept letting him make decisions based on what the voices were telling him to do.

Then the law moved. The *Hurst* decision came down. A jury was going to have to be unanimous before the State could kill a man. William's jury was eleven to one. The circuit court looked at that and granted him a new penalty phase. For one moment there was a door.

The State appealed. In 2018, the Florida Supreme Court closed the door. Not because William deserved to die. Because of what he had signed in 2012. The waiver held. The waiver always holds.

He tried to come back. Florida told him that he had locked the exit behind him.

And this week, with the warrant signed and the clock running, the circuit court denied his claims once more. Same reasoning. He waived. It binds him. It bars him.

So here is the arithmetic. Fourteen years ago a sick man asked the State of Florida to help him die faster. The State said yes and has been holding him to it ever since.

That is not jurisprudence. That is a trapdoor for a very sick man.

Not Sick Enough

What the public record does not hold is the sound inside William's head.

None of this is new for Florida. *Ford v. Wainwright* came out of this state. In 1986, the Supreme Court said a state may not execute a man who has lost his mind. Florida has spent the four decades since grinding that holding down to almost nothing. The standard is not whether a man is sick. The standard is whether he is sick in a precise, narrow, legally convenient way.

Nineteen executions in 2025. Fourteen warrants signed already this year. Three men killed in the last month alone. That is not the careful administration of justice. That is a calendar.

The Least Of These

I am an Old Catholic priest. I believe in the Real Presence. When I put the host into a condemned man's hand, I believe I am putting God into a condemned man's hand. And I believe Matthew 25 means what it plainly says, "Whatever you did to the least of these, you did to me." God is literally present in those we throw away.

Not the innocent. Not the sympathetic. Not the ones who poll well.

The least of these. The maligned. The tossed out. The oppressed. The forgotten.

William Silvia is all of these things. He is a sick man in a cage listening to a room that will not go quiet. The State of Florida has looked at him and seen a date.

And on August 18, if the scheduled horror comes on time, I will be standing in that room with my hand on him. I will look him in the eye. I will tell him he is loved.

The voices will be amongst us.

Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven.

—Matthew 18:3

Nobody Dies in Cartoons: On William Silvia's Last Days in Florida

August 8, 2026

Unless something extraordinary intervenes, William Silvia is scheduled to die on Tuesday. Yesterday, our conversation turned to cartoons.

Phone calls from death watch stop whenever they stop. No one says goodbye...the voices simply vanish. You learn to ask what you came to ask early, before the line cuts out.

Cartoons matter a great deal to Will, so I asked which one he liked best.

Bugs Bunny. Or at least it used to be. They played Bugs constantly in the prison. After a while it felt less like entertainment and more like a rabbit assault.

Nothing on the television is ever his choice. The set delivers whatever the schedule dictates, set by someone else.

Lately it's Legion of Super Heroes. That one only airs on Saturdays. He figured he might see it twice more.

Do you know anything about Japanese animation?

I never got the chance to answer. He kept going.

I had a small collection once, before everything. I lost so much. Three bookcases of books about the universe—star maps, planet guides, physics texts. Remember when Cartoon Network first started? I loved Dexter's Laboratory, Samurai Jack, and one other show I can't place... the one with the three cats who race cars.

The title wouldn't come. I had no idea what he meant.

For a few minutes, he wasn't a man on death watch speaking to a priest. He was simply someone trying to recover the name of something he once loved.

I never want those moments to end. I want to stay with the men I visit for as long as the humanity lasts. I've stopped apologizing for that.

Earlier I'd asked what was on his mind.

Nothing much. I watch cartoons to drown them all out.

I knew who "them" were. Will has heard voices most of his life. He talks about them the way a farmer talks about the weather. They used to urge him to hurt himself. That happens less now. A few nights earlier, though, something arrived that wasn't quite a voice.

It was more like a growling darkness—a low sound below the point where language still functions, trying to say something he couldn't catch.

I didn't know what it wanted, so I just turned on the cartoons.

I've been thinking about what he's actually watching. The anvil drops, the coyote is flattened, then he stands up again. The rabbit takes a shotgun blast to the face at close range and reappears in the next scene with a hole through his head. We give children these pictures long before we tell them what actually happens to everyone.

Cartoons offer resurrection without cost. The body never wears out. Death is a punch line.

Then again, I've devoted my life to claims about death that sound a lot like that too.

The rabbit returns unmarked. The coyote unflattens. Smoke drifts away from the people who were blown apart. Life continues, and the laughter never stops.

Who could blame Will for wanting to live inside a cartoon?

Will killed his wife. He has never claimed otherwise. A woman is dead who ought still to be alive. No cartoon undoes that. Neither does anything I write here. But the cartoons give him a little relief.

What's wrong with letting him have them?

I've watched twelve men die. Will will almost certainly be the thirteenth.

I've grown wary of anything that requires the dying man to perform. Believe hard enough. Forgive thoroughly enough. Reach peace on the state's timetable. Those are assignments. He already lives under a system of demands.

Grace is a cartoon.

So they sat down with him upon the ground seven days and seven nights, and none spake a word unto him: for they saw that his grief was very great.

—Job 2:13

What William Needs From Me

August 12, 2026

Florida intends to kill William Silvia on August 18.

I have spent years walking men toward execution chambers. I know how to talk about death and God. I have written shelves of books about it. Almost none of that is what William needs from me right now.

My job is to meet him where he is. Right now he is deep inside cartoons I had forgotten existed. Legion of Super Heroes. Bugs Bunny. Samurai Jack. It is not enough to know about them. I have to know them well enough to keep up when he starts talking—who the characters are, what happens to them, why one episode matters more than another. So I have been watching a lot of cartoons.

The Cartoons

What I did not expect was that the cartoons would start working on me.

There is a man in Florida who has been told the exact minute of his death. He is spending some of his last hours telling a priest about a team of young heroes from the future who refuse to leave anyone behind. He is the one preaching. I am the one taking notes. The cartoons are his canon.

You can hear it on the phone. He speeds up. He backs up to explain something he thinks I missed. He does not sound depressed when we are on cartoons. He sounds free.

It makes sense to me now. A cartoon is a world where the moral architecture holds. The wrong is visible the moment it happens.

Somebody falls and somebody else catches them. Nobody in it is disposable. The whole logic of the thing is that everybody is worth going back for.

In the tradition I was trained in, salvation gets complicated fast. In William's canon it never does. Nobody is told he is too far gone to be worth the trip. I have spent my life reading about that. William just says, watch this episode.

I watch them at night. The house is quiet. I keep a legal pad next to me because I am afraid of forgetting a name he might bring up. This is not how I pictured this week going. I have years of experience and education. I have argued about the death penalty in front of people who had the power to stop it. Right now the most useful thing I own is a note about characters in a long-discontinued cartoon.

I keep waiting to feel ridiculous. It has not happened.

There is a version of this where the priest shows up with the language already prepared. He has the book with him. He has the voice he uses for rooms like that one. I have done it that way plenty of times. It is not wrong. It is just not what is being asked of me here.

The cartoons are a door, and William is holding it open. The least I can do is walk through it without letting my Bible get in the way.

When somebody is dying, you do not get to choose the language of the last conversations. He chooses it. You learn it fast.

Next Week I Drive to Florida

Next week I drive to Florida. I will sit with him in person. When I get there I want to be able to say the names. I want to know the episodes well enough that he can start a story in the middle without stopping to catch me up. A man with a death warrant should not have to spend his last week translating for me.

Florida has scheduled the date, the cell, the hallway and the drugs. It cannot schedule what happens between two men talking about cartoons. Nobody has written a protocol for that. Florida can take his body on August 18. It cannot take what is already in his head.

I keep trying to name what is happening to me. A man with a date is teaching me how to pay attention. I came into this to give William something. He is the one giving.

William is beautiful. I want to say that plainly because nobody else in this process will—not the court, not the warrant, not the coverage. He leans into a story like it matters. He believes what he finds in there. Nobody has managed to take that out of him.

God is love; and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God,
and God in him.

—1 John 4:16

I Told Him It Was Love: William Silvia and Apparitions of Light on Death Watch

August 16, 2026

I. What He Told Me

William told me he has seen a dark energy. He told me he has seen apparitions made of light.

He said it without hesitation or hedging.

I asked him about the white ones. He described them. Then I said something I have been turning over ever since.

I said, "That is love."

I want to be honest about what happened in that moment. A man two weeks from execution told me what he sees, and I immediately handed him an interpretation. I offered it quickly because I wanted him to have something solid, and because a priest who cannot manage any comfort begins to wonder what he is even doing there.

I do not know that the white is love. I know that I want it to be. I hope that it is.

II. The Room Is Not Dark

Everything people say about light and darkness collapses the first time you step onto a death watch.

We treat darkness as the enemy and light as the rescue. We have written a thousand hymns on that contrast and never once checked the actual wattage.

Death watch is not dark. Death watch is lit. The fluorescents stay on day and night. The man in the cell has no switch that belongs to him. He cannot choose dusk. He is observed on a schedule, entered in a log, checked at set intervals, and the light itself is the main tool of that observation.

The execution chamber is the brightest room in the state of Florida. It is white. It is clean.

So when I read that the light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it, I have to ask which light we mean. Florida has no shortage of light—floodlights, floor lights, hall lights, cell lights, gurney lights. None of those lights have ever saved anyone.

There is a light that reveals and a light that exposes. They are not the same. One lets you be seen. The other makes certain you cannot hide.

The state has perfected the second. It has no concept of the first.

III. What Darkness Actually Is In There

If you want to locate the darkness on death row, turning off a lamp will not help.

The darkness is the paperwork. The darkness is the calm. The darkness is a governor's signature on a warrant, signed in a well-appointed office in the middle of the afternoon. Nothing about that moment is shadowed. It is the most administratively transparent killing in the world—announced, scheduled, defended.

That is what evil looks like once it has finished maturing. It stops skulking. It acquires letterhead.

So when William says he has seen a dark energy in that place, I will not tell you he is wrong. I have felt something in those hallways for which I have no better words. Anyone who has spent time in a killing house and claims the air is ordinary is either lying or has stopped paying attention.

The question is not whether darkness exists at Florida State Prison. The question is why we keep searching for it in the corners when it sits so neatly in a well-lit room designed for killing.

IV. The Thing I Am Not Going To Do

Here is where I have to proceed carefully, and where most religious people would not.

William's mind works the way it works. That fact is central to his case. It is central to what should have been examined at trial and never was. We have said publicly, and correctly, that Florida is about to kill a man whose mental health has never been fully reckoned with.

I will not now reverse course and claim his apparitions are visitations from the Lord simply because it would make a cleaner essay. That would be using him. It would also quietly undermine the most accurate thing we have been saying about him.

But I will not do the opposite either. I will not declare it is only a symptom and therefore nothing. That is the state's method. The state

keeps one file on William, and it is a file of deficits. Everything he is gets converted into evidence of something broken, something evil.

I refuse both approaches. I do not have to decide what William sees in order to know how to respond to it.

That is the entire pastoral art, and almost no one practices it. You are allowed to sit with a man inside his experience without ruling on it. You are allowed to say I hear you. You are allowed to say I do not know. You are allowed to remain present to something you cannot classify.

The state must classify. Love does not.

V. Three Nights

I am writing this in a bed that is not mine, in a state that plans to kill a man on Tuesday morning, and sleep has not come.

This will be my thirteenth. People hear that number and assume it grows easier, or that some professional shell forms over you. It does not. What forms is a kind of precision. I know the long walk. I know what my hands will do. I even know the hour when food will become impossible.

But that is not what keeps me awake.

What keeps me awake is one sentence I spoke on a telephone.

“That is love.”

I said it quickly. I said it because he had just told me something enormous, the silence afterward felt unbearable, and because I am a priest and priests fill silence, and because I could not bear for him to sit alone in that cell with a thing that had no name. So I named it. I named it before I understood it.

Lying here, I keep asking whether I did that for him or for myself.

That is the question underneath all of this work, and almost no one in it will say the question out loud. We are proud of showing up. We take pictures outside the gate. We ring bells. We write the essays—and I am writing one right now, so I am not standing outside this. What we rarely admit is that a man on death watch will accept whatever you hand him because he has nothing else, and that makes you dangerous in a way an ordinary friend is not.

He cannot check my work. He has three days. I simply wanted him to believe he is seeing love. I want him to have some light that is separate from the light of a system that is going to kill him.

Should I have offered that assurance? I do not know. I only know that this is what is haunting me tonight.

And he cometh unto the disciples, and findeth them asleep, and saith unto Peter, What, could ye not watch with me one hour?

—Matthew 26:40

Stay Awake With Me.

August 17, 2026

Tonight is the night before Florida kills William Silvia.

On the last night of his life, Jesus asked his friends for one thing. He did not ask to be rescued. He did not ask for a lawyer. He did not ask for a riot in the street or a legion of angels over the trees. He asked three tired men to stay awake with him. They could not do it. Tonight I am asking you for the same hour they could not give, on behalf of a man the State of Florida intends to kill tomorrow.

We have turned Gethsemane into a prayer meeting. It was not a prayer meeting. It was a death watch. Jesus knew the charge against him. He knew the men coming for him were already on the road with torches. He knew exactly how the empire disposed of people like him, because he had seen the crosses standing along the roads his whole life. He had hours left. He spent them face down in the dirt. Mark says he began to be distressed. Luke says the sweat came off him like blood falling to the ground. Two thousand years of stained glass have worked very hard to make that scene serene, and it was not serene. It was a man coming apart in the dark because the state had scheduled his death.

He took Peter and James and John deeper into the garden. He told them his soul was crushed to the point of death. Then he gave them the only instruction he would give them that night. Stay awake. He did not say fight. He did not say organize. He did not say preach. He did not say fix it. He walked a stone's throw away, he prayed, and when he came back they were sleeping. That is when he asked the question that should wreck every Christian who ever hears it. Could you not stay awake with me one hour? He went back and prayed again. He returned and found

them sleeping again. A third time, the same thing. Then the torches came through the trees and there was no more time for anything.

What I cannot get past is that those men were not villains. Judas gets the malice in this story. Peter eventually gets the denial. The sleepers get something far more familiar and far more damning—they get the ordinary. They were exhausted. It had been a long week. It was the middle of the night. They did not know what to say to a man in that condition. And underneath all of it sat the excuse that still does most of the killing in this world, the quiet certainty that they would not have been any use anyway. That excuse is a lie, and it was a lie in the garden too. Staying awake was never about being useful. Peter could not have stopped the arrest. John could not have argued Rome out of a cross. Not one of them could have altered a single detail of what was coming. Presence was the entire assignment. Presence was the only thing they had left to give, and they could not manage it for sixty minutes. The Gospels leave that accusation sitting in the church's lap and it has never been answered. The charge against us is not that we betray. The charge is that we doze.

Florida Has a Garden Too

Right now there is a man in a cell at Florida State Prison named William Silvia. He is on Death Watch. That is the actual term the state uses. Someone in an office decided long ago that a man waiting to be killed should be watched, and they were more right than they knew. He is watched constantly. He is not accompanied. There is an enormous

distance between those two things, and Florida has never once understood it. He knows the date. He knows the hour. He knows the cell where he will wait, because men have already gone ahead of him out of it. He told me he thinks about the execution for a few minutes at a time, then he makes himself stop.

I have spent these last weeks on the phone with him and these last days beside him. He loves cartoons. He has spent a good part of his life inside a world where nobody dies, where the anvil falls, and the character stands back up in the next frame. He told me he spent most of his life trying to keep people from hurting people. He has wondered out loud whether heaven might be a really good long cartoon that never has to end. He has already decided what happens to his ashes. Tomorrow, the State of Florida intends to strap that man to a table and stop his heart. I will be in the room. It will be the thirteenth time I have stood in one of those rooms, and I can tell you plainly that it does not get easier. But William does not need one priest at his shoulder. He needs a church that will not fall asleep on him.

The Killing Only Requires Our Sleep

Understand that the machinery is built for a drowsy country. Executions are scheduled at the hours when decent people are eating dinner or putting their children to bed. They happen behind a wall, down a hallway, in a room with a curtain that opens on somebody else's schedule. The paperwork is dull on purpose. The language is medical on purpose. The witness list is short on purpose. Every single feature of the

system is designed so that almost nobody ever has to look directly at what is being done in their name. The killing does not require your approval. It only requires your sleep.

That is why a vigil is not a sentimental gesture. A vigil is a direct act of resistance against a system that depends on public unconsciousness. Every person who stays up tonight, every person who says his name out loud, every person who refuses to let this be a routine Tuesday in Florida, takes something away from the machine that it needed. The state controls the date. It controls the cell, the hallway, the straps, the drugs. It does not determine whether William Silvia dies alone in the world's imagination. That one thing we can still take back, and tonight is the only night left to take it.

So the Execution Intervention Project and St. Oscar Romero Old Catholic Church are hosting a joint online vigil for William Silvia tonight, the night before they kill him. It will be livestreamed. You can join from anywhere on earth. We will pray. We will read. We will sit in some silence together. We will say his name until it stops being a case number and becomes a man again. I am not going to promise you that this stops the execution. Peter staying awake would not have stopped the cross. That was never the point of the request. The point is that when the torches finally come through the trees, a man should not have to look around and discover that everyone who claimed to love him is asleep.

Matthew 25 is not a suggestion. I was in prison, and you came to me. Jesus attached no conditions to that sentence. He did not ask what the

man had done. He did not ask whether the man was innocent. He said that when you go to the one the state has thrown away, you are going to him. The garden and the death house are the same address. So come tonight. Come tired. Come furious. Come from whatever faith holds you—or from none at all. This vigil is for Christians, Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, Hindus, pagans, humanists, atheists, the lapsed, the exhausted, the unsure. Every tradition on earth knows something about sitting with the dying. Bring what yours knows. There is no test at the door, and there is no creed to sign. He asked for one hour. Let us not be found sleeping again.

My soul waiteth for the Lord more than they that watch for the morning: I say, more than they that watch for the morning.

—Psalm 130:6

The Sun Is Going to Come Up: The Horror of Waiting for the Execution of William Silvia

August 18, 2026

Sleep seems so distant.

I can feel his fear. I mean that exactly. There is a pressure in my chest at this hour that does not belong to me. It arrived sometime after midnight and has not eased. I have felt it before—the night before every one of the twelve. It is not sympathy. Sympathy is a choice the mind makes. This arrives uninvited and settles into the body.

Fear travels. That is the part no one prepares you for. You sit with a man long enough, listen long enough, and eventually the wall between you thins. One night it gives way completely, and his dread walks straight into your chest and takes up residence.

The sun is going to rise. That is the fact I cannot get past. I am lying here begging God to keep it below the horizon. It will rise anyway—indifferent, on schedule. And when it begins its descent this evening, they will kill my friend. Not in the dark. At six o'clock. At the supper hour, while the rest of Florida sits down to eat.

So there is one more day to get through. It will be the longest day Will and I have ever shared.

I have read the gospel all my life. I thought I understood the garden. I did not. You do not understand Gethsemane until you are inside it, at this hour, with someone you cannot reach. The gospel says Jesus sweated blood. For years I treated that line as poetry. I no longer do. There are nights when fear presses so hard against the body that sorrow finds its way out through the skin. Miles apart. Two men in the same dark. One prayer between us. Let this cup pass.

Will told me that something comes for him at night. Not a voice exactly. Something low, beneath language. It feels close to me tonight.

I am supposed to be the steady one—the one who has done this enough times that his hands no longer shake. My hands are shaking. I am sweating his sweat. I am watching the same clock and hating it exactly as he hates it. Dread does not stop at the prison gate. It does not check your collar at the door. It comes for the priest the same way it comes for the prisoner.

By tomorrow night only one of us will be dead. The other will not walk out whole. I will leave a piece of myself in that room.

There is a name for the piece that stays behind. It is the wound you take when you stand in the presence of something your soul recognizes as evil and you cannot stop it. It is not fear. Fear belongs to the body. This belongs to the conscience. It is the monster that moves in once the witnessing is finished. It does not roar. It waits. It feeds on the soul. I am carrying twelve of them into this night. Before this day ends there will be thirteen. The monster is already awake in here with me. It knows what is coming. It is waiting to learn his name. It is waiting to feed.

I cannot finish the prayer the way Jesus finished it. He said, "Not my will but yours be done." I cannot pray that. This cup is not from God. God did not measure Will for the gurney. God did not sign the warrant. God did not set the clock. Florida did. So tonight I am praying the first half of Gethsemane with everything I have. Let this cup pass. And I am refusing

the second half with everything I have left. There is no "thy will be done" owed to an executioner.

In this spiritual battle, sleep would be desertion. So we will do this together. He will hold the line in the corner of his cell. I will hold mine here in the dark. His fear is in my chest. I will carry it into the morning. I will carry it into that room. I will carry it right up to the moment they take him—and then I will carry it for the rest of my life.

Then came there a voice from heaven... The people therefore that stood by, and heard it, said that it thundered.

—John 12:28–29

The Thunderous Message: Lessons from the Execution of William Silvia

August 21, 2026

I walked past the executioner and sat down on a stool next to the gurney. My hand is on his leg. His skin is warm through the thin cotton of the prison pants. I knew the warmth would soon be gone.

Will is my focus.

Everything else is noise.

Torrential rain hammers the roof of Florida State Prison like it wants in. The chamber smells of ozone and industrial cleaner. Fluorescent lights buzz. Generators cough. Thunder rolls through the walls. The power flickers. Half a second of stuttered darkness. Then the emergency lights kick on and off.

The giant mirror above Will makes sure that nobody can say they didn't know what was happening. I can see everyone. The witnesses. The officials. The family. The media. All of us reflected in the same small space.

Will is on the gurney.

I have known him long enough to know he is not simple. He is beautiful. He is also broken in ways that have names in textbooks and no names in the dark. He talks to people who are not there. He has done it his whole life. Prison did not create the voices. It only turned the volume up until the concrete itself seemed to answer him.

In the last weeks, the voices changed. He told me about a light. A light that spoke.

I know what educated people would say about such things. I used to say it too. I don't anymore. The more he spoke, the more real the light became. Not metaphor. Not a coping mechanism. Real.

Will had asked me earlier to do the last rites in Latin. I read them through over and over before this night. Now, I speak them with scattered fluency.

In nomine Patris, et Filii, et Spiritus Sancti.

The words sound ancient and absurd. It's like bringing a chalice into an ER. But that is why they work. They have survived every room like this. Every gallows. Every plague ward. Every place where humans convinced themselves that death is the final authority. The Latin does not belong to this century. It belongs to every century.

Do you repent of all of your sins?

I could have said it in English or Latin...he knew how he was going to respond.

Yes.

I make the sign of the cross in the air.

Through the limitless grace of Christ, all of your sins have been forgiven.

I put my hand out. It is shaking.

I continue to read scripture over him.

I'm having great difficulty holding on.

Will listens. When something lands, he says it.

"Ooh."

Soft. Childlike. Completely without shame. In the killing room, with the witnesses watching and the chemicals waiting, he hears Scripture and responds like a boy who has just seen fireflies for the first time.

I read Psalm 23. I read John 14. *Let not your hearts be troubled. In my Father's house are many mansions.* I read about the woman caught in adultery. Jesus kneeling in the dirt. *You who are without sin, cast the first stone.* The accusers leaving one by one. No one left to condemn her.

Will, you ain't never had much in this life. But you're about to get a mansion.

Then we talk about the stars. The galaxies. He always wanted to see them. Wanted to go to space.

"*You're about to."*

Outside, the storm is a physical assault. Rain against glass and concrete. Thunder that seems to start inside the earth. The power strains again. The generators scream. Emergency lights stutter.

You can prepare the soul for years. Read the mystics. Debate the Incarnation. Travel to the greatest spiritual centers. But at some point the words run out. You are left with a body.

Will shivered. The chamber is cold. Always cold. His body trembles against the leather restraints. I watch the color leave his face. Not gradually. Not politely. It drains. His lips change first. Then his cheeks. Then his forehead. Blue. The blue of drowning. The blue of a body being emptied while it is still alive.

My hand is still on his leg.

I feel the muscle beneath the cloth. I feel the tremor. I feel the life still there, fighting, shivering, existing, while the chemicals do their work.

God did not become an idea. God became flesh. And now the flesh is strapped to a gurney...underneath a sheet

Of course, I cannot write about Will as though he were innocent. He was not. He bought a shotgun. He drove to a family cookout. He killed Patricia Silvia, his estranged wife. He destroyed Betty Woodard's face.

Will's repentance does not erase any of it. His mental illness does not erase any of it. My love for him does not erase any of it. But neither does his crime erase him.

Grace is not a magic trick. Forgiveness is not a delete key. The victims remain. The grief remains. The crime remains.

And still. Will told me he had repented of all his sins. I looked in his eyes, and declared him spotless. As life left his body, I could see Christ flickering around in the harsh light.

The words come then. Not from my mind. From the room. From the air itself.

Through him. With him. In him.

Words I have spoken a thousand times over bread and wine. But what happens when the body in front of you is not on an altar? What happens when it is on a gurney?

The state has a word for him: condemned.

I have another: beloved.

Not harmless. Not innocent. But something much more.

The blue has deepened. His body shakes harder. The restraints hold. The witnesses watch. The state performs its final sacrament.

They scream out to make sure he is unconscious.

The sound cuts through the room and startles me. I make the sign of the cross...once when it is clear he has gone unconscious, and again when the blue deepens, and it is obvious he is not coming back.

In the mirror above the gurney, I watch a family member on the front row turn to another and say, almost under the breath:

"That's it?"

My hand stays on his leg. I do not remove it. I will not remove it.

Will's breathing changes. The shivering slows. Not because he is warm. Because all warmth is gone.

The doctor checks his vitals, and at 6:11 p.m. he speaks,

"Time of death, six-eleven."

The sky splits open.

Lightning strikes so close that the crack and the flash are one. The thunder does not roll. It detonates. The chamber shakes. I look at the officials, and I see it in their eyes. For one moment, every one of us is listening to something beyond these walls. Every one of us knows we have been caught in a place of tremendous evil.

I look up.

God is not silent.

Through him. With him. In him.

I lean down. I told him I would. I kiss his forehead. His skin is already cooling. I am close enough to smell his breath.

It is devastating. It is always devastating. No spiritual language makes a body stop being a body. No theology makes death less final. No beautiful sentence gives Patricia her life back, or gives Will another night beneath the stars.

But there is presence.

I walk out into the rain.

It isn't a cleansing.

It's just rain.

Afterword

The rain did not stop when Will died. Neither did the machinery.

People ask me why I keep doing this. Thirteen executions. Thirteen names. The answer is in these pages. Presence is not a strategy. Presence is a sacrament. When the State strips a man down to a gurney and a needle, presence is the one thing they cannot confiscate.

I keep returning to the waiver. In 2012, a man who could not silence the voices in his own head signed away every appeal he had. The courts called it knowing, intelligent and voluntary. Then they spent fourteen years hiding behind it. The waiver held because nobody stood up. Remember that. The next time a court tells you its hands are tied, ask who tied them.

Patricia Silvia deserved to live. Betty Woodard deserved to grow old unafraid. That grief is real and it is not mine to spend. But Will deserved treatment instead of a trapdoor. Grief does not require a side. Abolition simply asks that we stop adding bodies to it.

Do not close this book and call yourself informed. Information did not save Will. Find the condemned in your own state. Learn their names. Write to them. Show up. He asked for one hour. Let us not be found sleeping again.

The sun came up on August 19. It will come up tomorrow.

The question is what we will do in the light.