The Weight of Someone Else's Sin

The Story of an Innocent Man on Oklahoma's Death Row

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Spiritual Advisor for Clarance Goode, Jr.

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“I have set before you life and death…choose life.”

DEUTERONOMY 30:19

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PREFACE

I have heard a great many confessions.

That is what a priest does. People tell you things. They tell you in hospital rooms, in kitchens, in the parking lots of churches. They tell you on the phone at two in the morning. They tell you because the thing they are carrying has grown too heavy to carry alone.

On death row, the confessions are different. There is less to protect. A man who has been told the date of his death has lost most of what a lie could save. I have accompanied thirteen people to their executions. I have sat with them in the last hours, after the lawyers have gone home. Nothing is left in the room but the two of us and whatever they have not yet said. That is where the truth comes out. Often enough that I have learned what it sounds like.

Guilt has a sound. So does innocence. After enough years, you can tell them apart.

I have known Clarance Goode, Jr. for years now. I know him the way you come to know someone when the only things you have are time and words: hours on the phone, letters, the visiting room at the Oklahoma State Penitentiary in McAlester. I know his voice when he is tired. I know it when he is hopeful, and I know how rare that is. I know what he sounds like when he is talking about La Kendra, about his children, about his grandchildren. I know him well enough to know when he is holding something back.

He has never hidden from me the things he did when he was young. He names them. He has never once asked me to make any of it smaller than it was.

That is not a man who hides.

He has never confessed to these murders. Not once. Not in a low moment. Not in a letter written at three in the morning. Not when people ask him, as they do, whether he would take a life sentence if the state offered one and the only price was the word guilty. He says no. He has said no to me, in the places where a person says the truest things he knows.

My whole life is built on taking people at their word when they tell me what they have done. A man who will own everything else and refuses to own this is not protecting himself. There is nothing left to protect. He is telling the truth. The same truth he has told his attorneys, his family, the courts and anyone else who would listen for twenty years. I have heard him say it in every register a voice can hold. It has never changed.

I know that a spiritual advisor is expected to say this. I know how it sounds. I say it anyway, because it did not come easy. It came the way everything comes in this work: by showing up, again and again, until the person in front of me stopped being a case, became a man.

La Kendra knows it too. She has stood with him for more than thirty years, through prison, release, then prison again. She is not a woman who would stand with a man who killed a ten-year-old girl. The people who know Clarance best are the people the state has never bothered to ask.

This book is called *The Weight of Someone Else's Sin* because that is what he is carrying. The sins in this story are real. Three people were murdered in the summer of 2005. One of them was a child. Somebody did that. Somebody lied about it. Somebody planted the evidence that made the lie stick. Somebody decided that a man with a record from north Tulsa was close enough to the truth to do. Every one of those people has gone on with

their lives. Clarance has spent nearly two decades in a cell paying for what they did.

John Grisham wrote in *The Confession*: “Death row is a nightmare to serial killers and ax murderers. For an innocent man, it’s a life of mental torture that the human spirit is not equipped to survive.” Clarance has survived it for nearly twenty years. I do not know how. I have watched him do it.

The state of Oklahoma would like him to confess. Not to a priest. To a court. It would like him to sign his name to a lie so the lie can become the official record. He will not do it. He has told me that if he takes that plea, he cannot keep telling the truth. He is right. Confession is only confession when it is true. What the state wants from him is not confession. It is surrender.

So here is what I know, and I am putting my name to it. Clarance Goode, Jr. did not kill Mitch Thompson, Tara Burchett-Thompson or Tara’s ten-year-old daughter Kayla Burchett. I have listened for that confession in the places where a lie cannot hide. It has never come.

What follows is his life. All of it. The reader can decide what kind of man sits in that cell. I decided long ago.

The Rev. Dr. Jeff Hood
September 7, 2026

INTRODUCTION

Clarance Goode, Jr. is an indigenous innocent man. He's been on Oklahoma's death row for nearly nineteen years. The state of Oklahoma is preparing to kill him for three murders he did not commit: murders for which there is no physical evidence linking him to the scene, no DNA, no fingerprints, no forensics of any kind. His conviction rests on the testimony of people who lied, on evidence Clarance has always said was planted, found by a detective who was later convicted of planting evidence in other cases, on a timeline that has been demonstrated to be false, on a legal process so corrupted by negligence and conflict of interest that it would be difficult to believe if you had not watched this system work this way.

This is the story of Clarance Goode, Jr., all of it. His childhood in north Tulsa. His family and his losses. His choices, the ones he is proud of and the ones he is not. The corruption that built the case against him. The people who failed him, the people who betrayed him, the woman who walked free while he went to death row. This is the man who has survived all of it, who has not been broken by any of it, who is still fighting for the truth and for his life.

Read it. Remember it. And then do something with what you know.

But permanence is one of the first things
the system takes from a family.

O n e

Three Years and One Day

One of Clarance's earliest and most vivid memories began on his third birthday: the day his little brother was born.

His mother went into labor in the middle of his birthday party. Everything stopped. They scooped him up and rushed him next door to his godparents' house while the family dealt with the emergency of a new life arriving. Later, when his mother came home with the baby, Clarance stood in the living room and looked at his newborn brother lying on the couch. This small, new, unfamiliar being was occupying a central place in the living room, getting the family's attention, which Clarance was not sure he was prepared to share.

At three years old, Clarance decided he would bite the baby's finger. The infant screamed. His mother came running down the hallway. He took off. She chased him around the house in that combination of fury and exasperation only a mother who has just given birth, then finds herself chasing a toddler, can embody.

He still tells that story with a rueful warmth. The absurdity of it. The innocence of it. The way that small, impulsive act of jealousy became the founding myth of a brotherhood. Three years and one day apart. That was how they began. That gap, three years and one day, would become one of the fixed points of Clarance's life.

They were tight growing up. Real close, in the way brothers close in age can be close: not without competition or occasional resentment, but with a deep loyalty that outlasted both. Their parents often made

the younger brother tag along wherever Clarance went, which he didn't always appreciate. Over time, the bond deepened into something real, chosen rather than imposed.

As his brother got older and began making choices that scared Clarance, choices that pointed toward the streets, toward the same gravity Clarance was fighting in his own life, Clarance felt the full weight of his obligation as an older brother. He tried to steer his brother away from the worst of it.

He tried to be present, to be available, to make himself into a reason for his brother to choose differently. That is what you do when you love someone and can see where their path is heading.

They had each other's backs. For years, that felt like something that would hold forever.

But permanence is one of the first things the system takes from a family. His younger brother got locked up first. Then Clarance did. His brother got out before him and drove through snowstorms to visit during Clarance's incarceration. For a while, in those cold waiting rooms, it felt like the bond was still intact, still the same thing it had always been. But time passed. The phone calls were answered less often. The money on his books stopped appearing. When their mother died, it seemed to take whatever remained of the closeness with her.

The family home they had been raised in, where they had begun raising their own children, started falling apart. It was Clarance, La Kendra, their daughter and his son trying to pay the property taxes to keep the house out of foreclosure. His younger brother was not part of that effort.

La Kendra has known his younger brother since she was fifteen. They all grew up together. Even now, his

brother lives in the same zip code, probably ten minutes on foot, and still doesn't check on her or on his own niece, even with Clarance unable to be present. Only in rare emergencies does he appear. Clarance always tried to be there for everyone, family and friends both. If someone needed a place to live, help with bills, groceries, help with their children, he and La Kendra did what they could. Always. It never seemed to be reciprocated. He kept trying anyway. That has always been true of him.

His younger brother's diabetes, Clarance says, has been eating him alive in recent years. A partial leg amputation. Early signs of kidney failure. The body breaking down in the specific way that poverty, unmanaged illness and the accumulated stress of a hard life break bodies down. Even from death row, Clarance worries about him.

He worries about people he cannot reach, cannot help, cannot hold. That is the specific torture of his situation: the love is intact, and the ability to act on it has been taken away.

He has three brothers in total. The two oldest share only his father; they didn't meet their younger brothers until their teenage years. One of the older brothers disconnected from the family during childhood and has never come back, though he is believed to still live somewhere in the Tulsa area. The other settled in Oklahoma City. He used to come to Tulsa for summers as a boy, and those visits were good. That tradition faded as everyone got older and lives moved in different directions.

In 2018, something shifted with the OKC brother. He began sending money to Clarance's books. He added money to the phone account so Clarance could call him. He submitted a visitation form with plans to visit.

Clarance allowed himself to feel something about that: to imagine that the distance was closing, that there was still time to rebuild something.

Then the money slowed. The calls went unanswered. The visit never came. He was eventually removed from the visitation list by the facility staff. That sequence, the hope followed by the silence, the door opened and then closed without explanation, is one of the lonelier things Clarance has experienced. And he has experienced a great deal of loneliness.

His niece Alexis, his younger brother's daughter, was one of the relationships that held longest and meant most. He had loved her in the particular way that sometimes skips a generation, a closeness that becomes its own thing, independent of the parent in between. He had picked her up from elementary school. He had sat with her over homework. He had looked after her with the same attentiveness he brought to his own children, partly because he saw what he considered her father's negligence and could not just watch.

His brother even wrote in Alexis's obituary that she and Clarance "held a special bond that won't be easily broken." That was true. It is also an obituary, which means the bond was broken anyway, by the cruelest means available, which is death.

Alexis died of an overdose in August 2024. Clarance received that news from a cell on Oklahoma's death row. He could not go to her funeral. He could not hold anyone. He could not do anything except sit with that grief in a place designed to make everything feel final and unreachable. The family was still working through that loss when this story was being written. Clarance carries it with him in a room with no room for ceremony.

In the midst of all of this, his four nieces, the ones who have remained connected, who have not let

distance or circumstance or the weight of having an uncle on death row dissolve the bond, continue to bring him joy. There is love between them that cannot be manufactured or replaced. He speaks of them with something that, in all his years of carrying difficulty, sounds most like unambiguous happiness.

These were the ordinary operations of a system working as it was designed.

Two
North Side Tulsa

Clarance grew up on the north side of Tulsa, near the cross streets of 49th and Cincinnati Avenue, what is now Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard. People who know Tulsa only from headlines or news reports carry assumptions about the north side. They imagine a place defined by danger, by crime, by the kinds of stories that make it onto the evening news. The reality of the neighborhood Clarance grew up in was more complicated, more human, than those assumptions allow.

It was close-knit. It was the kind of community where accountability ran through informal networks rather than institutions, where you couldn't get away with much because everyone knew you, knew your parents, would not hesitate to report your behavior to the people who had the standing to address it. It was the kind of place where neighbors watched out for each other's children, where the front porch was still a social institution, where the bonds between families extended across years and generations.

It was also Tulsa. And Tulsa carries a history that cannot be separated from the present, no matter how many new murals appear downtown or how many brochures describe the revitalized Greenwood District as a cultural destination. In 1921, a white mob, many of them law enforcement officials, many of them deputized for the purpose, descended on the Greenwood District, known as Black Wall Street, and burned it to the ground. They murdered hundreds of Black residents.

They destroyed a community that had built itself into something remarkable against every obstacle the world placed in its way. They destroyed it in a single night of organized violence that the city spent decades refusing to acknowledge.

That history is not ancient. Its consequences are living, present, visible in the geography of north Tulsa: in the patterns of disinvestment, over-policing and economic exclusion that shaped the neighborhood Clarance grew up in. He grew up inside those consequences, in a community shaped by what the city had done, what it continued to do, where the relationships between young Black men and the institutions of law enforcement were defined by something closer to predation than protection.

His father worked for the same welding company for twenty-seven years. That is a remarkable thing: a kind of sustained commitment to labor, to showing up, that deserves more recognition than it receives. He had dropped out of school in the sixth grade to work on a farm and help support his own family. As a young man, he enlisted in the Army, served as a mechanic, then after his discharge settled in Tulsa and built a life. He was a good man. Clarance says that without elaboration, the way you say things that are true, complete, in need of nothing added.

His parents married in 1972 and stayed married until his father’s death in 2000. Twenty-eight years. Through the good seasons, through the hard ones, through the specific difficulty of raising children in north Tulsa in the 1980s and 1990s, through everything that life brought. They honored their vows. That kind of steadiness shaped what Clarance understood a man, a marriage, to be. It became the standard he carried with

him, imperfectly, like all of us carry the standards of our parents.

His early childhood was good. He was happy in elementary school, had friends in the neighborhood, had friends at school, was a solid student who engaged with learning. He moved through the world with the relative ease of a child who is loved and knows it. That happiness was real.

Then middle school came, and with it the world.

By the time he was thirteen, Clarance was learning lessons that no school curriculum includes. He was being racially profiled: followed through stores by employees who tracked his movements with thin-veiled suspicion, watched in ways that communicated that his presence was considered a threat regardless of his behavior. He was twelve or thirteen years old. He hadn't done anything. He would spend the rest of his life navigating a world that had decided what he was.

By fourteen, he understood what it meant when a police officer pulled up alongside him with his hand resting on his gun: not because there was any reason to draw it, but as a statement of readiness, of willingness, of the implicit threat that was always available. He was a teenager standing on a sidewalk. The hand on the gun was a message.

By fifteen, he had been thrown to the ground face-first in front of his own home. He had been walking his own street. He had been in his own neighborhood. Someone with a badge had decided that his presence on the street he lived on, outside the home he lived in, while looking however he looked, constituted sufficient cause to put him on the ground.

These were not the exceptional moments that get described as systemic failures. These were the ordinary operations of a system working as it was designed.

He watched the older men in his neighborhood get locked up, and then he watched their younger brothers follow them. Then the cousins. Then the sons. A cycle so persistent, so deliberate, constructed over so many years of policy and practice, that it had come to feel, to many of the people inside it, like something inevitable rather than something designed. Clarance saw it for what it was. He tried to resist it. He tried hard.

“Just this once” becomes the new normal.

Three

The Weight of Early Choices

His first job was at Burger King, at sixteen. He was making just enough to help his mother and buy some of his own clothes: a modest contribution to a household that needed every contribution it could get, a source of the small dignities that mean so much when you are sixteen, trying to establish yourself in the world.

But the hours weren't steady. The money wasn't steady. Clarance was a teenager navigating a neighborhood where alternative economies were visible, accessible, presenting themselves as solutions to the problem he was facing. His son was born when he was still very young. Less than a year later, his daughter arrived. The particular pressure of being a teenage parent in circumstances like his, the urgency of needing to provide, the impossibility of doing so through legitimate channels that didn't exist for someone in his position, is easy to describe in abstract terms and very difficult to convey.

When you are trying to support your children and someone offers you three times your weekly wages for one night's work, the word "no" begins to change its shape to the word "on". The first time, you say no. Maybe the second time too. But the need doesn't go away. The children need diapers. The bills need paying. The pressure is constant, specific, material, and the people offering alternatives have answers to all of it.

"Just this once" becomes the new normal. That is not an excuse. Clarance has never offered it as one. It is the truth of how things happen, without the softening that

comes from distance or the hardening that comes from judgment. He made choices he is not proud of. He has owned those choices for his entire life. What he will not do is accept responsibility for choices he did not make: for murders he did not commit.

The hurt was real. The way he managed it was to go quiet and reach for a bottle.

Four

When the Family Cracked

As Clarance's involvement with the streets deepened, the fractures inside his family deepened with it. His mother's response was to pull away from him and redirect her attention toward his younger brother, who was beginning to follow the same path. She blamed Clarance for his brother's choices, as if the older one had recruited the younger, as if the streets were something Clarance had invented and handed to his sibling like a gift. His brother had to tell their mother himself that Clarance wasn't making him do anything. Those were his own choices. He was a grown person making them.

Clarance had been trying to keep him out of it, doing what an older brother does: steering, warning, showing up. His mother's version of events was easier to hold than the truth, which was that the streets had their own gravity, and it worked on everyone.

His father's response was different but no less painful to witness. He began shutting down. He drank more. He was a strong man, a military man, someone who had worked twenty-seven years at the same job on the strength of his word, of his presence. Watching his son become, as he saw it, distracted by society's pitfalls was something he didn't have the framework to absorb. He had believed in Clarance. He had invested his love, his hope, in him. That investment felt, to him, like it had been wasted. The hurt was real. The way he managed it was to go quiet and reach for a bottle.

Neither of his parents meant harm. Both of them, in their different ways, were doing what people do when they love someone who is making choices they don’t understand and cannot stop.

They didn’t see a man. They saw a target.
They saw a record.

Five

HARASSMENT

At the center of this sustained harassment, before federal prison, was a detective named Van Ellis of the Tulsa Police Department. Van Ellis had taken a particular interest in Clarance that went beyond ordinary police attention. He appeared again and again across years of Clarance's life: at traffic stops, at court dates, at moments of vulnerability. He was a recurring presence, a shadow Clarance could not shake no matter how carefully he tried to live.

When Clarance filed complaints about the treatment he was receiving, nothing changed. The complaints were absorbed by a system that had no interest in taking them seriously. If anything, the scrutiny intensified. The message was clear: you are being watched, you are being targeted, and the apparatus of law enforcement in this city will continue to be available for use against you for as long as we decide to use it.

The charges that eventually came, federal charges brought with the weight and resources of the federal government behind them, were, in Clarance's assessment, fabricated. Trumped up. Constructed to put him away. He had proof of this, or what he believed was proof. But proof is only as useful as the willingness of a system to receive it. A man with a record, in a courtroom, in a city where law enforcement had been at war with him for years, does not have the kind of standing that proof requires.

They didn't see a man. They saw a target. They saw a record. They saw a body to warehouse, a name to add to

a conviction count, a problem to be contained. That is what the system did with Clarance Goode, Jr., again and again, before the night of August 25, 2005. Then it did it one final, catastrophic time.

This was not ordinary law enforcement.
This was a campaign.

Six

The Shooting

Everything changed when Clarance was shot in his face.

The physical trauma was real, serious. But the more significant turning point was what happened in the hours after: the way the aftermath revealed, with unusual clarity, the nature of his relationship with law enforcement in Tulsa.

His mother was there when the ambulance came. She stood on the street and watched them load her wounded son. She was crying in the way mothers cry when they are watching something terrible happen to a child and are powerless to stop it. She told him he was going to be all right. She rode in the ambulance with him to the hospital. She stayed while they cut off his clothes, cleaned his wounds, placed him in a hospital bed. She did not leave his side.

After the doctors had stabilized him, after her son was lying in a hospital bed, recovering from being shot, which is not a small thing, the Tulsa Police arrived. They arrested him. The charge was a probation violation tied to a gun he had purchased from a gun store, a firearm he had every reason to believe he was permitted to possess. The detective behind that arrest was Van Ellis. Of course, it was Van Ellis.

After Clarance's arrest, La Kendra and his mother went to bond him out while Van Ellis waited downtown to witness it. He confronted Clarance with something that had the surface quality of a question but the actual quality of a threat. "Oh, so you made bond?" Clarance told him yes; he would make any bond they gave him.

Van Ellis replied: “Don’t worry about it. I’ll just arrest you again on some more charges.”

When Clarance asked what charges, since he hadn’t done anything, Van Ellis said: “Well, we’ll see.”

That exchange is important. Not because it was surprising, Clarance had been living with this level of hostility from this man for years, but because of what followed. Van Ellis was as good as his word. Two counts of attempted murder appeared, from nowhere. Clarance ended up on Tulsa’s Most Wanted list for several months while he continued attending court on the gun charge. When the preliminary hearing arrived, the officers had to show up to testify. Their reaction to his continued presence in the courtroom was telling: they had not expected him to make it this far.

He had made it this far because he was fighting. Because he was innocent of the attempted murder charges. Because he had the presence of mind, the resources, however limited, to keep pushing back. The gang task force became involved, a unit composed mostly of sheriff’s department personnel with some Tulsa Police officers. Van Ellis was there to testify. Members of the sheriff’s department approached Clarance separately and offered him a choice: go in with the TPD side of things, or come with them. He chose to go with the sheriff’s department. They were respectful. They didn’t handcuff him until they were out of public view.

Bond was set at sixty thousand dollars. He was prepared to post it, but La Kendra and his mother convinced him to request a reduction. It came down to forty thousand. They bonded him out. Without witnesses willing to commit perjury against him, the attempted murder charges dissolved.

Then the federal government arrested him on the gun charge. From that moment, the nature of what was happening to him was undeniable. This was not ordinary law enforcement. This was a campaign.

One staff member told him outright:
someone was trying to get him killed.

Seven

Federal Prison

Clarance entered federal custody in March 1996 and was released in July 1998. What happened in between shaped him in ways that cannot be put into words.

The first thing that happened was the assignment. He was sent to the United States Penitentiary Leavenworth in Leavenworth, Kansas: a maximum-security federal facility that housed inmates who had caused problems elsewhere, who had committed serious violence, who required the most intensive containment the federal system offered. This was not where people like Clarance, with thirty-six-month sentences and six months already served, were sent. The math alone should have prevented this placement.

At his initial unit team meeting, staff members went through his file trying to understand how he had ended up there. They found a detainer on his record for the attempted murder charges, the same charges that had been dismissed, the same charges that should not have been on his record at all. One staff member told him outright: someone was trying to get him killed. There was no legitimate penological reason for placing him in that facility. It was a decision made with a specific outcome in mind.

Leavenworth at that time was a world unto itself: violent, unpredictable, governed by hierarchies that had nothing to do with the official structure of the institution. Clarance was twenty years old. He had never been to prison. He walked into a world where serious violence was a regular occurrence, where the

administrative response to that violence was measured, procedural, rather than urgent.

He saw stabbings. He witnessed assaults. He endured lockdowns. One morning, on his way to work, passing through metal detectors as everyone did in the facility, he and another inmate found a man on the ground with his head split open, bleeding hard. They stepped over him and kept walking. That was what you did. That was what the environment demanded.

He navigated that environment for months without losing himself. He did not become someone he didn't want to be. He did not allow the violence around him to define who he was inside it. That required something, a kind of moral stubbornness, a refusal to be remade by circumstances. Clarance describes it as survival.

Eventually, his mother hired a lawyer who produced documentation proving that the detainer on his record was invalid. There were no pending charges. The detainer should never have been there. After that, the institution had no justification for keeping him at Leavenworth. He was transferred to El Reno, a federal facility with a different atmosphere entirely. He completed his sentence there and was released to a halfway house in Tulsa.

Working in federal prison had taught him something he carried back out into the world with him: if he could work for pennies inside those walls, do any task assigned to him in any circumstance, he could work a legitimate job on the outside. That knowledge was not nothing. It was a foundation.

After his release from federal prison, Clarance rebuilt. He worked multiple jobs. He and La Kendra built a family, moved into their own home. He held employment, stayed clean of hard drugs, paid taxes, raised children. He did everything that the language of

second chances and redemption asks people in his situation to do.

But law enforcement in Tulsa had not let him go. He was stopped constantly: while driving, while walking, while existing in public. Officers appeared at his house without warrants. They pulled him over without cause and cited reasons that evaporated upon examination. They accused him of things he hadn't done and made clear that the accusation was the point, not the resolution.

After everything, they still believed.

Eight

REBUILDING

When Clarance got out, everything had changed. The money he had accumulated before his incarceration, the money of a young man who had been working, building, trying to get somewhere, was gone. All of it had gone to bonds and legal fees. The house he and La Kendra had shared together, their first attempt at building a life with physical permanence, was no longer theirs in the same way.

La Kendra had made the practical, painful decision, during his incarceration, to move out of their house and focus on raising their children while completing her education. It was the right decision. It was also a reminder of everything his absence had cost: the life they had been building together had been interrupted in ways that couldn't be resumed where they left off.

The halfway house was new territory. He had to find employment on a timeline set by someone else. He had to use the bus system to get there. He had to present himself to employers who ran background checks, who saw his record before they saw him. He had to find a way to be hired anyway, or to find people who would give him a chance.

He worked two, sometimes three jobs during those three months. Whatever was available: cutting grass, working at a plant, taking any work that came. He showed up. He was reliable. He was building trust one shift at a time in circumstances that required him to prove himself over and over to people who had every institutional reason not to trust him.

His parents bought him a car so he could get around. That act, practical, generous, a reminder that there were people in his corner, meant more than the car itself. It was a statement of belief in him. After everything, they still believed.

After three months in the halfway house, he spent six months living with his parents. Then he and La Kendra made a decision: they would rent a house, raise their children together, begin building toward something permanent again. La Kendra was working and a full-time student. They were young, stretched thin, committed to each other and to their children with a seriousness that had been earned rather than assumed.

He also had to navigate the family court system during this period. There were child support complications involving his son's mother that led to him taking legal action and gaining custody of his son. La Kendra's support through that process, her willingness to take on the care of a child who was not biologically hers, is something Clarance names as one of the central acts of love in his life.

Two years after his release, in 2000, they bought their first home together. La Kendra would remain in that house for the next twenty-five years. They were building something real.

Prison has a way of erasing who you were before.

Nine

The Cost of Disconnection

Clarance Goode, Jr. wasn't just locked away from his freedom. He was locked away from everything: his family, his future, his dreams, his name.

Prison has a way of erasing who you were before. It strips every layer down to the number on your jumpsuit. And once you get out, that number follows you. On job applications. On housing forms. In people's eyes. The person you were before the sentence doesn't survive intact. What comes back out is someone who has to rebuild an identity from scratch in a world that has filed you away.

There were people who didn't call anymore after his release. People who didn't understand why he didn't "just move on." But you don't just move on from watching your children grow up in pictures. From having your body deteriorate in a facility with no adequate medical care. From hearing someone say, a guard, a counselor, another inmate, "you don't deserve to be here," while still leaving you there anyway. Those words, said without the power to act on them, are their own type of cruelty.

He tried to reconnect. With the world. With himself. But sometimes the gap felt too wide to cross: not because he lacked the will, but because the distance that incarceration creates is not only spatial. It changes people on both sides. The world keeps moving, but the person in prison remains stationary. When you come home, you are returning to a place that has become, in ways small and large, a stranger.

He held onto his faith through it all. He also held onto his sense of what kind of man he wanted to be. For seven straight years after his release from federal prison, he worked, including one job where he stayed nearly five years. He raised his children, stayed clean of drugs, kept building the life he and La Kendra had committed to. He was doing what the language of second chances asks for: not because the system required proof, but because he had people he loved and a future he was trying to reach.

The grief of losing his father did not arrive all at once.

Ten
Devastating Losses

The real devastation, the kind that breaks something structural, permanent, began in 1999, when his father was diagnosed with cancer.

Clarance's first response was denial, the particular denial of someone who loves the person they are about to lose and cannot yet absorb what that means. He told himself that treatment would fix it. That chemotherapy would work. That his father, who had been strong, physical, present his entire life, would weather this the way he had weathered everything else.

He drove his father to treatments. He bought him a cell phone: a practical gesture and also an act of love, a way of staying connected, of remaining accessible. He made himself useful in every way he could. He even joked with his father once, in the dark-edged humor that sometimes surfaces between men who are not sure how to talk about what is happening, telling him that if he didn't go to the doctor to see why he was in pain, he would wrap him up and drive him there himself. His father laughed. They both did. That was one of the last times it was easy to laugh.

The cancer spread in ways that treatment couldn't contain. It moved to his father's throat. He could no longer eat. They placed a feeding tube in his stomach, and Clarance watched his father try to feed himself through a tube, his father who had worked with his hands his entire life, who had served in the Army, who had spent twenty-seven years at the same job. The reduction of that man to that level of dependence was

unbearable to witness. He was placed on oxygen. He was confined to a wheelchair. He declined with a speed that left no time to adjust to what was coming.

A hospital bed was set up in the living room of his parents' home. Clarance still thought there might be a recovery. He held onto that belief with a stubbornness that was, in retrospect, a form of love rather than a failure of realism. He was out getting a tattoo when his younger brother called and told him to come home.

When he arrived, his father was gone: still in the hospital bed, in the middle of the living room, as if he had stopped in the most ordinary place imaginable.

Clarance Goode Sr. died on March 22, 2000. That date is also Clarance's mother's birthday, a collision of occasions that would shadow every year that followed.

The grief of losing his father did not arrive all at once. It came in the spaces between things: in the moments when he reached for the phone and remembered, in the places they had been together that were now only his, in the birthday that would never again be only a birthday. He kept functioning because he had to. He had children. He had La Kendra. He had obligations that did not pause for grief.

But something had shifted underneath the surface of his life, something that would only be visible later, in the choices he made, in the things he turned to when the weight became too much.

You don’t forget that kind of companionship. You don’t replace it.

Eleven

More Losses

Less than a year after his father died, in February of 2001, two of Clarance's closest friends were killed within days of each other. Two of the people he was closest to in the world. Within days. While he was still carrying the fresh grief of his father's death.

Terry Jackson was the first. Clarance was at work when his brother called to tell him. He saw the story break on the news while his brother was still on the phone. Terry had been standing behind Clarance's younger brother's Suburban when a shooter opened fire. The shooter recognized Clarance's brother and chose not to kill him. He did not make the same choice about Terry.

Terry had been in legal trouble. He had been lying low, but he had come back to Tulsa to see a friend who had just gotten out of prison. Clarance had warned him against coming back. He had told him to stay away from the clubs, to stay away from situations where he would be visible. Terry had his own reasons for coming back, and he came.

Clarance drove to where his brother's Suburban was parked the next morning, which meant driving past the spot where Terry had been shot the night before. He was still processing that when his phone rang. The caller was the younger brother of his best friend, Free "Presto" Smith. His message was three words: "Presto is missing".

What had happened to Presto was this: he had been released from prison not long before, then encountered

someone at a store he had a history with and confronted him. The man pulled a gun. Presto turned to run and was shot in the back before he could take more than a few steps. He didn't make it far.

Clarance drove to the hospital. Before he arrived, his brother called from inside and said only: "You need to get here." Those four words.

Everything after that is what Clarance has described as a blur: the kind of blur the mind produces when reality has exceeded what it is able to process. He remembered Presto's mother crying. He remembered what appeared to be Presto's body. He remembered standing next to Presto's mother and hearing himself say: "You lost one son, but you just gained another." She clung to him. She screamed into his chest. He held her.

Presto had driven Clarance's cars. In Clarance's world, you didn't let many people drive your car. Your car was your independence, your livelihood, your freedom in a literal sense. Presto driving his cars was a statement about the level of trust between them. It was total. They were inseparable in the way best friends in their twenties can be inseparable, lives woven together in the ordinary fabric of shared time and shared history.

Terry had been with Clarance every day for months during one of the hardest periods of his life. You don't forget that kind of companionship. You don't replace it.

Losing both of them within days, while still in the first year of grief for his father, left Clarance in a state that he has struggled to describe. Hollow is one word. Numb is another. Neither is quite right. What it was, was the experience of having too much taken too fast, of the structure of his life losing its load-bearing elements one by one until it was very difficult to know what was still holding.

But the architecture underneath was cracking.

Twelve

The Downward Spiral

Clarance did not collapse visibly. He has an extraordinary capacity for maintaining the surface of things even when the interior is in crisis. He kept working. He kept parenting. He managed the household, handled the responsibilities that were his to handle, stayed present for his children in the ways that counted. But the architecture underneath was cracking.

The weight of what he had lost, his father, his two closest friends, in the span of less than a year, was more than the ordinary structures of a person's coping mechanisms were designed to hold. He stopped attending college. He had been enrolled, was making progress toward something, and then he stopped.

Clarance turned to Xanax (which he was prescribed by a licensed physician) and alcohol: not hard drugs, not the substances he had worked hard to stay away from, but prescription pills with drinking, the particular combination people reach for when they need to turn the volume down on pain they don't know how else to manage. Over time, he began using more than the prescribed dose, which was more than what was safe. And it was working, in the terrible specific way that self-medication works. It was quieting something that needed to be quiet, at the cost of things he would only understand later.

He maintained the surface. He kept things together with his partner La Kendra, or at least tried to. He did not let her or his children see what was happening underneath.

But the grief was doing its work regardless. It was changing him in ways that made the man who had rebuilt himself after federal prison harder to find.

He began to experience what he could only describe as spiritual attacks. He had been raised in the church, and the framework of his faith was the one he reached for when he tried to make sense of what was happening to him at night. Some nights he woke up drenched in sweat, unable to move, paralyzed by a fear he couldn't name or locate. During one of these episodes, he recalled seeing a dark figure standing in the doorway of his bedroom, a looming presence that felt malevolent, specific. He was unable to speak, unable to make any sound, until La Kendra shook him awake.

He had been taught, growing up in church, that speaking the name of Jesus was enough to drive away evil. He had relied on that in difficult moments before and found it to be true. But in this episode, he could not find his voice. He lay there, silent, until La Kendra reached out to him.

After that night, he began to open up to her about what he was carrying. For him, that was not easy. He had not wanted to add his brokenness to what she was already managing. He did not want her to have one more heavy thing to hold. But he told her the truth: that he felt lost most days, that the grief had become a weight too heavy to carry without anyone knowing it was there, that holding it alone had begun to be unsustainable.

La Kendra listened. Afterward, she made the decision to stay, to continue to support him through this critical time. That is her particular form of steadiness: not the absence during difficulty, but the refusal to leave in the presence of it. Clarance often speaks of her with a gratitude that has not diminished over thirty-plus

years in a relationship, twenty years of her standing by him, visiting him, while refusing to let him disappear into the system's narrative of who he is.

Once her mask dropped, the woman underneath was chaotic in ways that should have been a clear signal.

Thirteen

Meeting Michelle

In late 2003, Clarance met Michelle through a coworker who had been buying marijuana from him. The coworker and Michelle had gone to school together. Michelle and her family had come to Tulsa looking for a connection: someone who could supply them marijuana when they needed it. The coworker made the introduction.

When the coworker moved back to Sacramento, Michelle began calling Clarance herself. He was not looking for anything beyond business, especially since he was in a long-term relationship with La Kendra. His attention was there, where it belonged. But Michelle was persistent in the specific way of someone who is used to getting what she pursues. Something began between them: transactional at its core, without the weight of real emotional investment, but present.

Michelle presented well, at first. She seemed composed. Organized. Someone who had it together. That presentation was effective for a time. What it concealed, as Clarance came to see it, was more complicated: a dependency on meth, an entitlement shaped by her family's indulgence, a vindictive streak that she kept beneath the surface until the circumstances that revealed it arrived. She was someone who kept accounts, who catalogued grievances, nursed them, waited. In his telling, once her mask dropped, the woman underneath was chaotic in ways that should have been a clear signal.

Clarance recalls that she gossiped about her family in ways that were more revealing than she seemed to realize. She described her sister as jealous. She described her brother as worthless. She aired secrets that were not hers to air, undermined people she claimed to care about in conversations with someone who was, in the final analysis, an acquaintance. That pattern of behavior, the willingness to wound the people closest to her when she felt wounded, was visible if you were paying attention. Clarance was paying enough attention to keep his distance. Not enough to understand what it might cost him to remain in her orbit at all.

He set a boundary with her early and held it: he would not get involved in her family's business. Whatever was happening between Michelle and the people in her life was not his concern, not his responsibility. He had his own family. He had enough. That boundary was clear, and it was real. It also was not enough to protect him from the consequences of being in her world when her world exploded.

Each call was a brick removed from the wall of the life she had constructed.

Fourteen

The Path to Tragedy

The tension between Michelle and her brother Mitch Thompson had been building for months before August 2005, drawing energy from the specific kind of sibling grievance that is about power: about who has the standing to expose whom, whose version of events will be believed, who has the capacity to destroy the other.

Mitch had been using that capacity with system. He called Michelle's employer and reported her, which worked: she was fired. He contacted Cherokee Nation housing and filed a complaint. He reached out to Section 8 housing authorities. He reported her to the welfare office for receiving food stamps illegally. He accused her of harboring a fugitive, a reference to Ronald Thompson, their cousin, who went by "Bunny" and who had legal troubles of his own. Each call was a brick removed from the wall of the life she had constructed. Mitch was taking it apart with patience and thoroughness.

By the summer of 2005, Michelle had lost her job. She was in danger of losing her housing and her benefits. She was furious in the way people are furious when they believe they are being persecuted, when they have done things they feel entitled to do and someone has chosen to hold them accountable anyway. She wanted her brother to feel what she was feeling. She made threats. She said them out loud, to people who were paying attention, people who would later say so under oath.

There was also an episode, roughly a month before the murders, that gave shape to the violence that was coming. What follows is Clarance's account of what he witnessed. Ronald Thompson had a dispute with a man named J.R. Hoffman, one of Michelle's associates. One day, Mitch and J.R. arrived at Michelle's house with a baseball bat. Clarance was there at the time, picking something up from Michelle's house. Then, all of a sudden, there was a loud bang at the front door. Mitch and J.R. began beating Ronald.

When he heard the commotion, Clarance's first instinct was that it was a police raid. He began hiding the product he had stopped by to pick up. Then he understood what was happening: Ronald was getting beat. He intervened to stop it: "Hold up. Get off of him." Mitch assured everyone present that this had nothing to do with Clarance; this was between him and Ronald. That should have ended Clarance's involvement. J.R. didn't see things coming to an end that soon.

J.R. turned to Clarance with his bat and said: "I got a problem with you." Michelle grabbed the bat. The confrontation between Clarance and J.R. moved outside and continued until the Thompson family members broke it up.

As far as Clarance was concerned, it was over. Michelle, along with Ronald, tried to press charges against Mitch and J.R., but the police were not interested. Mitch had framed Ronald as a drug addict, and law enforcement found Ronald's word insufficient. Angered by that decision, Ronald said something the police would later include in reports: he would handle it himself.

That statement was the first thread of what would become the prosecution's narrative. It established Ronald as someone willing to take matters into his own

hands. What it could not establish, what the prosecution could never establish, was that Clarance was part of that calculation.

Not through malice. Not through planning. Through the ordinary human instinct of answering the phone when someone you know calls and needs help.

Fifteen

The Weight of Truth

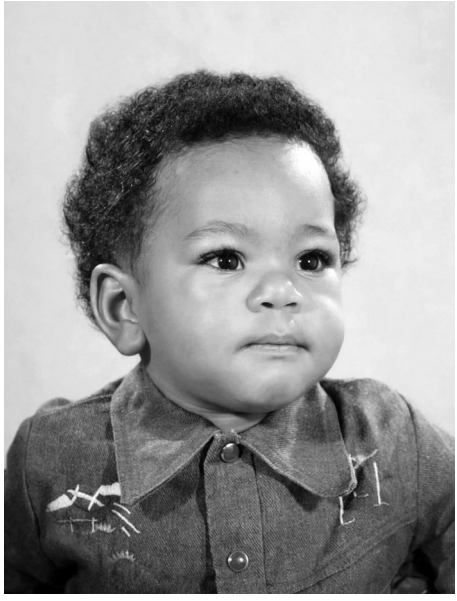
The day before Clarance Goode's life was turned upside down, he was just trying to keep his head down and avoid trouble. Michelle had her own problems: her brother had been exposing her, and DHS was scheduled to inspect her house. None of that had anything to do with Clarance. He had his own family to support. His immediate focus was on his plans to visit his younger brother in prison the next morning, while staying as far as possible from the chaos that always seemed to surround Michelle and her family.

By that time, he had been clean of any drugs, prescription or otherwise, for years. He still sold a little marijuana, nothing that would even be considered illegal today. No meth. No crack. No cocaine. Just weed to a few familiar faces. It was not some massive operation.

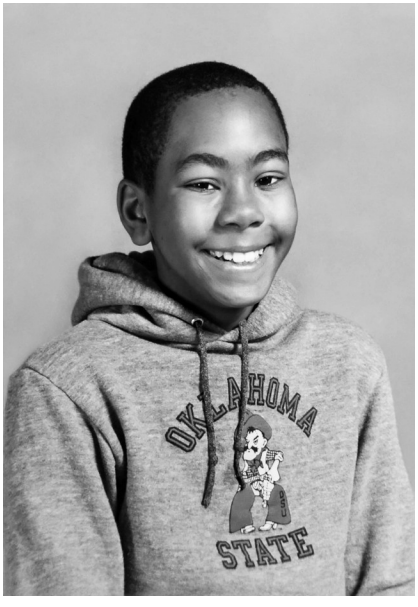
Ronald Thompson, Michelle's cousin, known as "Bunny," was another story. The night of the murders, Clarance was with Ronald and Kenneth at first, picking Ronald up from work at Walmart. Kenneth then took Clarance to his parents' home and dropped him off. His phone records proved that they could not have been together at the time the crime took place. According to those records, Kenneth called Clarance after the murders had already occurred, seeking help with a passed-out Ronald who could not give directions back to Michelle's house.

And that, Clarance would later say, was how he got pulled into the nightmare of his life. Not through malice.

Not through planning. Through the ordinary human instinct of answering the phone when someone you know calls and needs help.



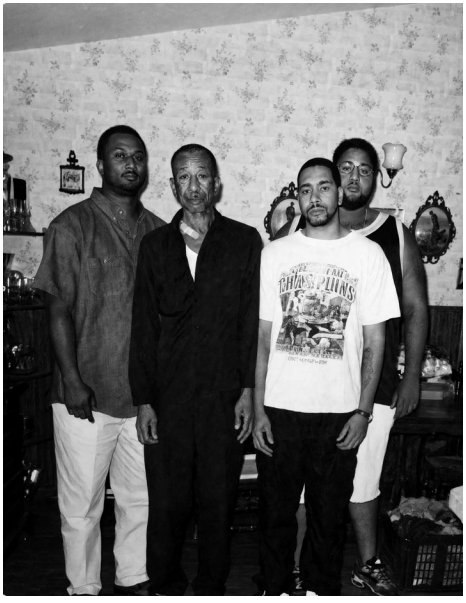
Clarance as a baby.



Clarance as a boy.



Clarance, back, with his parents and his younger brother.



Clarance, second from right, with his father and his brothers.



Clarance before his arrest.



Clarance and La Kendra.



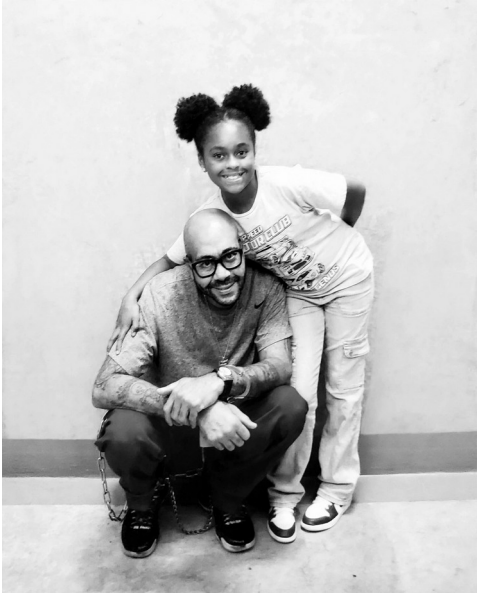
Clarance and La Kendra, visiting room, Oklahoma State Penitentiary.



Clarance with his daughter, visiting room, Oklahoma State Penitentiary.



Clarance with his grandson, visiting room, Oklahoma State Penitentiary.



Clarance with his granddaughter, visiting room, Oklahoma State Penitentiary.



Clarance with his granddaughter, visiting room, Oklahoma State Penitentiary.



Clarance with his daughter, visiting room, Oklahoma State Penitentiary.

That was the extent of his involvement.

Sixteen

The Night Everything Changed

August 25, 2005, was a night Clarance did not expect to be significant. He was at his parents' house. He and his mother were preparing for an early morning drive to Cushing, Oklahoma, to visit his younger brother, who was in prison there at the time. It would be his first visit with his brother in that facility. They had things to say to each other that had been waiting for the right moment, and this was going to be that moment.

Earlier that day, Clarance stopped by Michelle's place to package some marijuana. He found her in a state of acute distress. Her brother Mitch had followed through on another threat: he called her job, and it worked. He had gotten her fired. The housing inspection was coming. The welfare reports were pending. Her life was being dismantled piece by piece, and she wanted Clarance to do something about it.

He told her what he had told her before, without ambiguity: he was not getting involved. This was her family. This was her problem. He was not going to take a side in a dispute between siblings, no matter how badly she wanted him to. He had his own life. He had his own family. He had an early morning road trip, a brother he was going to visit.

At one point during the visit, he walked into the kitchen while talking on his phone. Michelle and Ronald were sitting at the table together, deep in conversation, a conversation that stopped the moment he entered the room. The silence was specific. It was the silence of

people who were discussing something they did not want overheard. Penny Avans, Michelle's close friend, later testified that Michelle and Ronald were in the middle of planning something when Clarance walked in. She described it as something dark. Something serious.

Clarance did not know this at the time. He walked into the kitchen, registered the silence, finished his call, left. He went back to his parents' house.

As the evening progressed, people called to buy marijuana. Because he was in the area, near his parents' house on the north side of Tulsa, the transactions were simple. While he was at his parents' house, Kenneth arrived: the childhood friend whose grandparents lived across the street, who were, in the way of certain Tulsa families, bound up in the fabric of Clarance's family history. Kenneth was having a hard time. He had no place to stay. He was trying to figure out his next move.

They were talking when Ronald called. His speech was badly slurred. He was nearly incoherent. He had been sent home from his job at Walmart because he was visibly impaired, impaired in a way that, it would later emerge, went well beyond anything a single substance could explain. Meth, likely. Ecstasy. Cocaine. Xanax. Whatever combination had produced the stumbling, mumbling man on the other end of the phone, it was serious. He needed a ride. He had no one else to call.

Clarance looked at Kenneth and said: "You want to take me to go pick him up?" Kenneth said yes. They drove to Ronald's job and found him inside, barely functional: stumbling, zoned out, unable to string a sentence together. This man was not in any condition to navigate himself. Clarance told Kenneth that Ronald needed to go to his wife's place in Mannford, not to

Michelle's. Not with the inspection coming. Not in this state. Kenneth agreed.

Kenneth took Clarance back to his parents' house first. He dropped him off. Then Kenneth and Ronald drove away.

Clarance went inside his parents' home to prepare for rest before his and his mom's early morning road trip the next day.

Later that evening, he drove to his cousin Michael Scott's house. Michael was someone he could open up to, someone who knew the texture of his life, the weight he was carrying. Clarance had been struggling with depression, with the grief that had never resolved, with the accumulated difficulty of the years since his father's death. He had run out of his Xanax prescription. With the anxiety surrounding going to see his younger brother behind bars, he needed a coping tool to help him relax and rest for the long day ahead. Michael had some and gave him a few pills to help him settle before the early drive. They talked. Clarance began to feel calmer, more relaxed, ready for the morning to come.

His phone rang. An unfamiliar number, but he answered it anyway.

It was Kenneth. His voice had a different quality now: tight, stressed, not quite right. He said: "Bro, this dude we picked up passed out. Where's that girl's house again?" Ronald had passed out cold, was unresponsive, and Kenneth was somewhere near Michelle's place without a clear address. He needed directions.

Clarance said he would come meet him. He drove to a QuikTrip near Michelle's that Kenneth had mentioned. No familiar cars in sight. Clarance drove to Michelle's house and found Kenneth parked outside.

"This dude's an idiot," Kenneth said when Clarance reached the window of his car.

“What are you talking about?” Clarance asked.

“This dude’s just a freaking idiot,” Kenneth said.

Clarance opened the passenger door to help get Ronald out. Ronald was limp: not sleeping, not resting, but absent from his own body. The two of them had to carry him into the house. Michelle’s door was unlocked, as it always was. They went inside and laid Ronald on the couch. Clarance went to the back bedroom and woke Michelle up.

“Your cousin is here,” he told her.

She was awake at once, panicked at once. He couldn’t be there. The inspection. The housing. He needed to go.

Clarance told her, for what felt like the hundredth time: this was her family. This was her problem. He was not the person responsible for managing the chaos of her life, and he had somewhere to be in the morning.

He told Kenneth to call him when he got somewhere. He said goodnight. He left.

That was the extent of his involvement. That was the whole of his presence at Michelle’s house that night. He drove back to his parents’ house and went to sleep.

It was not an accusation. It was a confirmation.

Seventeen

The Morning After

The next morning, Clarance and his mother woke early. They loaded themselves into the car for the drive to Cushing. It was a morning with a specific texture: the quality of early light, of cool air, of the heightened alertness that comes from having somewhere meaningful to be. Clarance was looking forward to seeing his brother. He was thinking about what they would say to each other.

When you go inside a prison for a visit, you leave your phone in the car. That is not a guideline or a suggestion. It is the rule, enforced at every facility, non-negotiable. Clarance left his phone on the seat and walked in.

The visit was good. It was the first time he had seen his younger brother in this facility, and there was the particular warmth of a reunion between people who have been separated by circumstances neither of them controlled. They talked. They caught up. They took photos with each other, with their mom. The hours passed the way hours pass when you are present with someone you love.

When he walked back out, reached his car, picked up his phone, he found dozens of missed calls. Michelle's number. Penny's number. Numbers he didn't recognize. The calls had been coming in all morning, escalating in frequency as the hours passed and he remained unreachable.

He called Penny.

"Oh my God," she said at once. "What did Michelle do?"

He asked what she was talking about. She asked where he was. He told her: just coming back from Cushing. He had gone to visit his brother. Penny went quiet for a moment, and then she told him.

Michelle's brother was dead. So was his family, including a ten-year-old girl.

The information arrived in pieces, each piece requiring Clarance to reconfigure his understanding of what the night before had been. He had left Michelle's house with a passed-out man on her couch, an irritated woman in the bedroom, a sense that he was finally, finally out of her orbit. He had driven home, gone to sleep, gotten up in the morning, gone to visit his brother. And while he was doing all of that, something had happened.

He had said as much before he left: that he was done, that he was going home, that the rest of it was her problem. He had witnesses. He had phone records. He had his mother, who could account for where he was. He had nothing to do with what had happened.

Penny said: "You never came back last night." It was not an accusation. It was a confirmation. She already knew he hadn't been there.

“I’m not confessing to something I didn’t do.”

Eighteen

The Arrest

What happened next feels, even now, twenty years later, like something that belongs to someone else's story. Except that it is his, and it has been his every day since.

When Clarance first understood what had happened, it did not occur to him that he would be a suspect. He had not been there. He had witnesses who could place him elsewhere. He had phone records. He had a mother who had been with him that morning. The idea that anyone looking at the evidence in good faith would conclude he could be responsible for three murders, including the murder of a ten-year-old child, was incomprehensible to him.

His first instinct was to help. Michelle's sister was in town, scared, unfamiliar with Tulsa or its legal landscape. The Owasso Police were questioning Michelle. Her family was worried she might be implicated somehow and wanted legal representation during questioning. The family wanted Clarance to help them find an attorney in the Tulsa area.

He called Larry Edwards, the attorney who had recently represented his brother, and left him a message asking him to come to the Owasso Police Department. Edwards either never received the message or chose not to respond to it. Clarance made the decision to drive to the station alone.

He knocked on the glass door. He identified himself to the officer who came. He was trying to help someone

navigate a legal situation that had nothing to do with him. He was arrested the moment he identified himself.

He asked what the charge was. They said material witness. He still thought he would be released and at work the next day.

The next morning, when he asked to call his employer, a detective came in for an interrogation instead. The questioning went in circles: the same questions, the same insistence that he was hiding something, the same construction of a narrative that required his involvement regardless of what he said. He answered every question. He explained his timeline. He pointed out, again and again, that he had not been there. None of it moved the needle.

“I’m not confessing to something I didn’t do,” he told them. “I don’t even know what you’re talking about.”

That was when they charged him with three counts of murder.

These are not variations on a consistent account.

Nineteen

The Story That Kept Changing

The state's case against Clarance Goode, Jr. did not arrive fully formed. It evolved. It shifted. It tried on different shapes, discarded the ones that didn't fit, until it found a version that could be presented to a jury: not because any version was true, but because one was constructed that was serviceable enough to survive.

First, he was a material witness. Then an accessory. Then they placed him at the scene. Then they said he had been inside the house. Then they said he was one of three shooters: Ronald fired one shot, Kenneth another, Clarance the third. Then, by the time the case reached trial, the story had become something else: Clarance was now the mastermind who had fired all three kill shots himself. Kenneth and Ronald had fired at random, without effect, afterward, as minor participants.

These are not variations on a consistent account. These are different stories, each one constructed to accommodate whatever obstacles the previous version had encountered. They are the narratives of people who have decided on a conclusion and are working backward to find something that will support it, rather than the narratives of people who are following evidence toward the truth.

And the evidence, the physical evidence, the kind that cannot change its story because it was never given a story to tell, said nothing about Clarance. No DNA. No fingerprints. No forensic trace of any kind placing him in that house at the time of the murders. No physical

contact between him and any of the victims. None of the weapons were ever recovered.

What the prosecution had was testimony. The testimony of Michelle, never charged as a co-defendant, whose threats against her brother were heard by people who later swore to them. The testimony of Ronald, who had been so impaired the night of the murders that he had admitted to police he was blacking out. And physical evidence, found alone by a detective who would later be convicted of planting evidence in other cases, that Clarance has always said was planted here.

That was the foundation of a death penalty conviction.

The system wanted a conviction.

Twenty

The Planted Evidence

During the investigation, Ronald told police that he and others had been at a location where they discarded shell casings in the yard. Multiple officers were dispatched to search. Canine units were deployed. Metal detectors were used. The property was gone over with care, with method, for hours.

They found nothing.

Then Jeff Henderson arrived. He had been assigned to a separate search warrant at a different address but left that scene to assist with this investigation. He went inside. He did a quick walkthrough. He came back out. And he announced that he had found bullets.

Hours of searching by multiple trained officers, dogs, professional equipment, had produced nothing. Jeff Henderson went in alone for a few minutes and found what everyone else had missed.

The credibility of that discovery should have been zero. In a system functioning as it should, with the oversight mechanisms in place that are supposed to prevent this kind of abuse, that discovery would have been examined, questioned, rejected. But the system was not functioning as it should. The system wanted a conviction.

Jeff Henderson was convicted years later of planting evidence, falsifying reports, framing defendants. Forty-two people had their federal prison sentences overturned as a result of what he had done. Forty-two. These were not people with ambiguous cases. Some had been recorded on wiretaps. Some had been caught

holding contraband. The convictions looked solid. But they had been built, at least in part, on Henderson's lies. They collapsed.

Forty-two people were freed. And Clarance Goode, Jr. has never been granted a single hearing on Henderson's role in his case. Post-conviction lawyers filed an appeal on the issue, but he was denied by the Oklahoma Court of Criminal Appeals, which seems to be normal for this court. The federal public defender's office lawyers representing him on his next appeal told him he was procedurally barred from raising that issue again. Every other door stayed closed. The machinery moved on.

The door closed.

Twenty-One

The Corruption Runs Deep

Jeff Henderson was not the only instrument of corruption in Clarance's case. He was one node in a network of compromised actors whose connections to each other, to the prosecution, made the possibility of a fair trial something close to a fiction.

As Clarance tells it, Detective Mike Denton of the Owasso Police Department was the one who persuaded Michelle to give false statements against him. The word "persuaded" does a lot of work there. Michelle's early interviews, the ones conducted before Denton became involved, tell a different story. In those interviews, she told investigators again and again that Clarance had nothing to do with what happened. She asked, in so many words, why they kept bringing up his name when he wasn't involved.

Denton's background should have disqualified him from participating in a capital murder investigation. According to news accounts and department records, he had been fired from his position multiple times. He managed, through whatever processes govern the reinstatement of officers who should not be reinstated, to get his job back each time. Those same accounts describe footage of him elbowing a handcuffed defendant in the face. They describe footage of him, following a car chase, beating a man with the butt of his gun while the man lay on the ground, incapacitated. Most recently, by those accounts, he killed a neighbor's dog. That act generated more public attention than the

human beings whose lives he had damaged over the course of his career.

Eric Cullen was the investigator on Clarance's case at trial. He was also a childhood friend of Jeff Henderson. When Henderson was prosecuted for his misconduct, for the same pattern of behavior that, as Clarance has always said, included planting evidence in his case, Cullen served as Henderson's investigator. He sat on that side of the table too. He was connected, through the most personal kind of loyalty, to the man whose actions had contaminated the evidence in a capital case.

Cullen went on, after the trial, to build a career with the Innocence Project: fighting conviction injustices, helping free innocent people from the very system that operates the way it operated in Clarance's case. He is out there, right now, doing that work. The man in whose case he failed is still on death row. Eric Cullen has recently signed an affidavit stating that, in light of new evidence Clarance's legal team has obtained, he would have done things differently. The investigation at the time was based on the assumption that the officers involved had conducted their investigations in good faith.

When Clarance was removed from death row for a time under the McGirt ruling, his family found a federal attorney who worked in the same building as Cullen. They thought it was providence: that someone so close to the case, who knew everything about it, who had spent the years since building expertise in these issues, might be the instrument of finally getting Clarance's case heard. His family went to the attorney meeting with hope. They were quoted three hundred thousand dollars.

The door closed.

The evidence that could have changed everything kept disappearing.

Twenty-Two

The Missing Evidence

The evidence that could have changed everything kept disappearing. It was misplaced, withheld, degraded, or not presented in a way that gave the jury the tools to use it.

Michelle's early police interviews were recorded. In those recordings, she told investigators again and again that Clarance was not involved. She asked, by name, why they kept bringing him up when he had nothing to do with it. Those statements exist. They were made under conditions where she had no particular reason to protect Clarance. They were made before anyone had applied the kind of pressure that changes what people say. Then a detective got involved. Then, as Clarance tells it, she was told her children might be taken from her if she didn't cooperate. Then her story changed.

One of the videotaped interviews was produced without audio. The footage is there. The conversation it depicts is there. The sound is not. Clarance has long believed that the missing audio captured detectives feeding her information about the crime, filling in details she didn't have, coaching her on what to say so that her testimony would be consistent with the evidence rather than invented. His current attorneys are still attempting to obtain a usable copy.

The timeline was another piece of evidence that should have protected him and didn't. The prosecution's theory required the murders to have taken place at a time consistent with the Walmart surveillance footage. But the physical evidence did not support that timeline.

Witnesses in the Thompson neighborhood who had been outside that evening told investigators they had not seen any suspicious vehicles. The neighborhood was the kind of place where people knew what was happening on their street. They would have noticed.

Legal documentation placed the murders hours later, around one or two in the morning, when Clarance was at Michael Scott's house. Michael signed an affidavit. Phone records showed Kenneth calling Clarance from a payphone near Michelle's house later that night, confirming that the two men were not together at the time the murders occurred. These records were introduced at trial. But they were introduced by Eric Cullen, who was new, inexperienced, and they were never explained in a way that gave the jury the tools to understand what they meant. The prosecution's timeline was never challenged head-on. The impossibility of the state's version of events was never made visible to the people who were deciding Clarance's fate.

“Clarance, I’m just ready to get it over with.”

Twenty-Three

The Trial

The jury was assembled in Tulsa, Oklahoma, in the middle of one of the worst ice storms Tulsa had experienced in memory. The city was frozen. Courts were shutting down. Outside, the world had become a place where movement was difficult, dangerous. Many homes were without power. Many families were relocating to hotels and motels for warmth.

Clarance asked Larry Edwards whether they were going to proceed. Whether it was possible to request a continuance: to wait for conditions under which the jury could be assembled from a wider pool, under which witnesses who hadn't been subpoenaed might be reached, under which the timeline that hadn't been completed might be finished. Edwards said: "Clarance, I'm just ready to get it over with." That was the last thing he heard from his attorney before the trial began.

The jury was nearly all white. The one Black juror worked overnight shifts for the City and was visibly exhausted throughout the proceedings, falling asleep, unable to maintain the sustained attention a capital murder trial demands. Mayor Kathy Taylor reportedly called to have him excused. He was not excused. He continued to sit on that jury. Eventually, the single Black juror on this case was excused, believed to have been replaced by a woman of Hispanic descent.

Larry Edwards had been a prosecutor for fifteen years before coming to the defense side. He had experience. He had skill. When he at last visited Penny Avans, the witness Clarance had been urging him to see

from the beginning, he came back transformed. He sat down across from Clarance on a weekday instead of his usual Sunday visit, took out his notepad, crossed his legs, said: "You were telling me the fucking truth." After that, he worked with a different energy. He began building timelines. He began engaging with the case as though it were real, as though the life on the table were worth the full expenditure of his abilities.

But he did not finish. He ran out of something, commitment, energy, patience, or perhaps all three, before the work was done. By the time the trial arrived, key witnesses had not been subpoenaed. The alibi timeline was incomplete. The tools the jury needed to understand the impossibility of the prosecution's account had not been assembled. And Edwards had said, with the weariness of someone who has already moved on, that he was ready to get it over with.

What Clarance did not know at the time, what emerged only later, was the network of personal, professional relationships that surrounded the trial. Edwards had once been a prosecutor and maintained close friendships with former colleagues who have moved into the judiciary. One of those friendships was with William "Bill" Musseman, who now sits on the Oklahoma Court of Criminal Appeals (OCCA), the very court that would eventually review Clarance's conviction. While representing Clarance in a capital case, Edwards, knowing Clarance's love for sports, told Clarance that he and Musseman often attended Dallas Cowboys football games together.

At the time, Musseman was an assistant district attorney. He eventually became a Tulsa District Judge, later a judge on the OCCA. After finding out about Edwards' personal association with Musseman, it may have been wiser for Clarance to obtain different

counsel. But La Kendra had already paid Edwards between fifteen and twenty thousand dollars in upfront legal fees. The state covered additional costs. At one point, there was even a conversation about his grandmother signing over the deed to her home to pay more. Edwards was collecting fees from every direction. Still, at the moment that counted most, he said he was ready to be done.

On the stand, both Michelle and Ronald were impeached. They were caught lying: caught contradicting themselves, contradicting each other, contradicting the physical evidence.

The judge gave the jury a special instruction: they could believe all, some, or none of what these witnesses said. In any fair reading of what that instruction means, it means the testimony was so compromised as to be unreliable. The judge left the testimony standing anyway. He put the question to the jury.

Michelle's testimony fell apart in real time under cross-examination. The transcript shows her offering details that did not correspond to the crime scene: wounds that didn't exist, multiple shots the evidence didn't support. She was not lying with skill. What the transcript shows is desperation: a witness improvising because she couldn't admit that she didn't know what had happened that night, because she had not been there to witness it the way the prosecution needed her to have been. She kept going because she couldn't stop. Because stopping would have been worse. From the witness stand, she claimed that Clarance had told her he shot her brother with a shotgun: a weapon that does not appear in the crime scene evidence, a conversation Clarance says never happened, a claim the physical evidence did not support at all. The judge saw it. The

jury instruction said so. And somehow the verdict went the other way anyway.

There was also video of prosecutors coaching Ronald before his testimony. In the footage, an investigator with the DA's office can be heard responding to Ronald's inconsistent account with: "Hold up, that don't even make sense." He knew the story didn't hold together. He used it anyway.

Kenneth, whose childhood connection to Clarance was part of what Van Ellis exploited when he pressured him for statements, received a life sentence. He never testified at trial, but he made statements that were false: statements he has since admitted were coerced, that he was manipulated into making through the pressure applied by a man who had known his father. He has said, since, that those statements were not true. That acknowledgment, too, has not been enough to bring Clarance a hearing.

The footage exists. It can be watched.

Twenty-Four
The Unraveling

What happened at the Thompson house that night has never made sense to Clarance: not through twenty years of sitting with it, of turning it over in his mind, of trying to reconstruct from the outside a sequence of events he had no part in. The prosecution avoided, at every turn, the most important fact about the man they were using as their star witness: Ronald had admitted to police that he was so high that night he was blacking out.

Ronald had been sent home from Walmart earlier that day because he was visibly unable to function. He told investigators himself what was in his system: ecstasy, cocaine, meth, Xanax, likely marijuana on top of everything else. Xanax alone is a blackout drug. In sufficient quantities, it erases hours. And yet this same man, who told police outright he could not remember what had happened, became the foundation of a death penalty case.

Ronald's account changed every time he told it. First, he said he wasn't there at all. Then he said he was present but unarmed. Then, trying to minimize his exposure, he admitted to having the .22 pistol, believing it was the least culpable of the weapons. He was wrong. When investigators told him that the .22 was the weapon that had killed ten-year-old Kayla Burchett, the interrogation video captures what happened next: Ronald's head dropped. He sat there with that knowledge for a long moment. He knew what he had just said. The footage exists. It can be watched.

The prosecution made a deal with him anyway. In exchange for his testimony against Clarance, he would avoid the death penalty. He received three life sentences: two with the possibility of parole, one without, for Kayla’s murder. When he realized the full weight of what he was facing, he tried to appeal. The court denied him.

He couldn’t be both a coerced bystander
and a cold-blooded murderer.

Twenty-Five

The System's Contradictions

Nothing about the story the prosecution presented ever added up. The internal contradictions were visible to anyone paying attention.

If Ronald had been forced at gunpoint to participate in the killings, coerced, a reluctant instrument of someone else's violence, then why would his supposed coercer have allowed him to fire random, harmless shots? What is the logic of threatening someone into killing, then allowing them to waste bullets on nothing? The scenario requires both that Ronald was under Clarance's total control and that Clarance was, at the same time, indifferent to whether that control produced anything useful. It makes no sense.

And if Ronald was a reluctant, manipulated participant who deserved mercy, the prosecution's implicit argument when they made the deal with him, then why did he receive three life sentences, including one without the possibility of parole for the murder of a child? The prosecution wanted it both ways. They used Ronald's testimony to convict Clarance while sentencing Ronald as though he were the killer.

He couldn't be both a coerced bystander and a cold-blooded murderer. The prosecution never had to reconcile that contradiction. They just moved on.

Then there was the physical evidence, or the complete absence of it. No DNA linked Clarance to the crime scene. Not a trace. When Ronald told investigators that the people involved had worn gloves and thrown them out of the car window afterward,

police searched the highway. They found over a hundred pairs of gloves scattered along the roadside, as if a box had exploded somewhere and distributed its contents across miles of pavement. The only pair they claimed was connected to the case happened to be sitting in plain sight. Even those had no DNA on them. No weapons were ever recovered. No .22. No other firearms. Nothing.

This was not random violence. This was personal.

Twenty-Six

The Web of Lies

The real story, as Clarance has always understood it, revolves around Michelle Thompson Chastain and her cousin Ronald. The victims were not chosen at random. There was specific, personal history. Tara Burchett-Thompson, Mitch's wife and Kayla's mother, one of the people killed that night, had filed a sexual assault complaint against Ronald at his workplace. This was not random violence. This was personal. This was settled scores.

Michelle's own best friend Penny had testified that Michelle was the one who had been planning it. That testimony came from inside Michelle's own circle, from someone with no obvious reason to lie about it. Even after the murders, when Ronald and Clarance were placed for a short time in the same jail pod while awaiting trial, Ronald wrote Clarance notes. In those notes, he tried to explain that he "didn't have a choice," that he knew Clarance had nothing to do with what had happened. Those notes went to Clarance's attorney. They were not enough.

Douglas Miller was a former Owasso resident who ended up jailed next to Ronald. He later signed an affidavit stating that Ronald had admitted to him that Clarance was not involved: that he had only started mentioning Clarance's name because the police kept bringing it up during interrogation, threatening him until he gave them what they wanted. Clarance's lawyers were supposed to subpoena Douglas Miller. They were supposed to bring him to trial. They never

subpoenaed him. He never appeared in court. That was the quality of legal representation Clarance received.

Edwards had told him, early on, that there was one rule he had maintained across fifteen-plus years of practice: you never let a shooter testify, especially not someone who had shot a little girl. But that rule was broken for Ronald Thompson. Because without Ronald, there was no case. Without a case, there was no conviction. And the system needed a conviction.

Michelle lives free.

Twenty-Seven

Why Michelle Did It

The question of why Michelle would have participated in the murder of her own brother is one that gets asked. For Clarance, who has spent twenty years thinking about that night from a cell on death row, the answer is not a mystery.

Her brother had taken everything from her. With method, with deliberation, with the specific cruelty of someone who knows which supports to remove. He had gotten her fired. He had triggered the loss of her housing benefits. He had reported her for welfare fraud in a way that exposed her to legal consequences. He had, in her understanding, gone to war with her life and was winning.

She had said, out loud, that she wanted him dead. People heard her say it. Those people later testified. But when three people ended up dead in the Thompson house, including a ten-year-old girl, it was not the woman with the motive, the woman with the opportunity, the woman who had made explicit threats, who faced a capital murder charge. It was Clarance, who had nothing to gain, who had been trying to stay out of her family's business the entire time he knew her.

The legal mechanics of why this worked the way it did are specific, important. Oklahoma law, at the time, prohibited a conviction based solely on the uncorroborated testimony of co-defendants. If Michelle had been charged as a co-defendant, if prosecutors had treated her the way the evidence suggested she should have been treated, then Ronald's testimony would have

been inadmissible without independent corroboration. There was no independent corroboration. There was no physical evidence. There was nothing.

The decision not to charge Michelle as a co-defendant was not an oversight. It was not the product of insufficient evidence against her. That, as Clarance reads it, was the architecture of the prosecution.

By keeping Michelle as a witness rather than a defendant, they preserved the ability to use her testimony, and through her testimony, Ronald's, to construct a narrative that would survive the trial. It worked. Clarance went to death row. Michelle received probation on welfare fraud charges, the exact accusations her brother had made against her. Michelle lives free.

That is how innocent people end up on death row.

Twenty-Eight

The Real Timeline

Here is what the evidence shows.

Clarance was dropped off at his parents' house by Kenneth before the murders occurred. His mother and his brother's girlfriend, who was living in the home at the time, both testified that he spent the night there. Phone records showed Kenneth calling Clarance from a payphone later that night, which establishes that the two men were not together, which dismantles the prosecution's scenario.

The murders happened hours later, in the early morning hours. Legal documentation supports this. At the time the murders took place, Clarance was at Michael Scott's house. Michael signed an affidavit confirming this. The timeline is not speculative. It is documented.

By the time Kenneth called Clarance for help with a passed-out Ronald, the crime had already been committed. Kenneth was not calling for backup. He was calling because he had a problem, a passed-out man in his car, and Clarance was the person he thought could help. Kenneth was as surprised as Clarance when they later learned what had happened that night.

The prosecution needed someone to blame. Clarance fit what the system needed: a record, involvement in drugs, the wrong race in the wrong city in the wrong courtroom. He had also made the mistake, the kind of mistake that only looks like a mistake in retrospect, of being a decent person who showed up when someone called him for help. That is what put him in Michelle's

house that night. That is what put him in the vicinity of a crime he had nothing to do with.

That is how innocent people end up on death row.

The way every door that should have
opened instead closed.

Twenty-Nine

The System Fails

What has stayed with Clarance the longest, through everything, is not the individual acts of misconduct or betrayal. It is the comprehensiveness of the failure. The way every mechanism that should have caught the error instead confirmed it. The way every door that should have opened instead closed.

Owasso had not seen a murder in ten years when this happened. The local investigators were inexperienced with capital cases. They brought in help from Tulsa, but Tulsa help brought Tulsa corruption. The federal defenders assigned to Clarance's post-conviction case found procedural bars everywhere they turned, while forty-two other people were walking out of prison because of the same detective whose role in this case has never been examined.

The 10th Circuit Court of Appeals described the remaining evidence, after Henderson, with the bullets he alone found, was removed from the picture, as "overwhelming." No one asked them to name it. No one required them to explain how two impeached witnesses whose stories changed every time they told them constituted overwhelming evidence against a man whose connection to the crime was circumstantial.

Since 2012, multiple investigators have looked at this case. They have all reached the same conclusion: Ronald Thompson should never have been permitted to testify against Clarance. He was mentally unstable. He was, by his own admission, blacking out on multiple substances the night of the murders. His account

changed so many times that no consistent version of events could be extracted from the aggregate. And yet that testimony was the foundation, the load-bearing wall, of a death penalty conviction.

No one did.

Thirty

The People He Tried to Help

Before everything changed, Clarance was the person you called when you needed something. He had grown up knowing what it was like to be without resources, to be young in an economically deprived environment while trying to provide for people who depended on you. That knowledge made him generous in ways that were specific, practical rather than abstract.

He used the early internet to find services that offered free diapers to young parents who couldn't afford them. He gave people clothes: whatever he had, whatever he could spare. If someone needed a place to stay, he and La Kendra opened their home. If someone needed help with bills, with groceries, with childcare, he did what he could. He believed in showing up for people the way he had often needed someone to show up for him.

What he learned, at the cost of everything, was that not everyone carries that ethic of reciprocity. Some people accept help and feel no obligation in return. Some people, when the pressure comes, will throw the person who helped them under whatever bus is available to save themselves.

When law enforcement began applying pressure to people in his circle, offering deals, making threats, making it clear that cooperation was the path through, those people turned on him. Every one of them. He sat in that courtroom and watched them take the stand to lie. He had believed, even as the trial began, that someone would find the truth too heavy to carry on the

stand. That someone would crack, not under cross-examination, but under conscience.

No one did.

He still said he was ready.

Thirty-One

His Lawyer's Betrayal

Larry Edwards had arrived, eventually, at the truth. After his visit to Penny Avans, he knew who Clarance was. He had said so, in words that carried the weight of revelation: "You were telling me the fucking truth." He had worked harder after that. He had become, for a time, the kind of advocate someone facing death deserves.

But at the moment that counted most, he was ready to be done. He sat across from his client, the man whose life was at stake, in the middle of an ice storm that could have provided justification for a continuance, and said he was ready to get it over with. The witnesses hadn't been subpoenaed. The timeline hadn't been finished. The case hadn't been built to the standard a capital defense requires.

He still said he was ready.

After the conviction, he visited Clarance one last time and promised to make things right. Clarance was transferred to death row. That was the last conversation they had. In subsequent years, Clarance was told, Edwards said to those who contacted him about the case that he had done a great job.

The prosecution had not even offered a clear motive until trial was nearly underway. When they at last produced one, it was this: Clarance had orchestrated three murders in order to obtain Xanax pills. Three murders, including the murder of a ten-year-old girl, for Xanax. That was the story. That was what they asked the jury to believe.

No physical evidence. No DNA. No fingerprints. No weapons. The word of a woman who was never charged, though witnesses testified she had threatened her brother's life. The word of a man who had been blacking out on a drug cocktail, who changed his story so many times that even his own prosecutors found it incoherent.

That is what sent Clarance Goode, Jr. to death row.

“If I take that plea, I can’t keep fighting. I can’t keep telling the truth.”

Thirty-Two

The Choice He Won't Make

Clarance has held onto his faith through all of it: not the easy faith of someone whose life has been uncomplicated, but the hard-won faith of someone who has been given every reason to abandon it and has refused.

People ask him, from time to time, whether he would accept a life sentence if one were offered. His answer is immediate and has not changed: No.

He will not plead guilty to something he did not do. Not for a life sentence. Not for anything.

He understands what that refusal costs him in legal terms. A guilty plea closes doors. It ends appeals. It eliminates the ability to introduce new evidence. It terminates the legal fight. He is not naive about any of this. He has spent twenty years in the company of lawyers, legal documents, the specific language of capital post-conviction proceedings. He knows what his options are and what each of them means.

He refuses anyway. "If I take that plea," he has said, "I can't keep fighting. I can't keep telling the truth." That is correct. A guilty plea does that. It trades the life of the fight for the life of the cell.

Clemency is not, at present, a realistic avenue. Under the present governor, the Oklahoma Pardon and Parole Board has recommended clemency for individuals on death row. Those recommendations have been ignored. Clarance refuses to pursue any path that requires him to admit guilt for murders he did not commit. He will not do that for a governor who ignores

clemency recommendations. He will not do that for anyone.

And he is still here. Still telling the truth. Still refusing to let the machinery have the last word.

Clarance Goode, Jr. is Tulsa too.

Thirty-Three

What Remains

Over eighteen years on death row. Twenty-one years of watching his children grow up in the photographs they send him. Twenty years of carrying the grief of a niece he couldn't bury, a father he couldn't hold, two friends whose deaths he has processed in a cell rather than in the world. Twenty years of watching the city of Tulsa transform, gentrify, rename its streets in the news while he sits behind glass, being erased from the story of a place he is as much a part of as anyone who has ever lived there.

Tulsa talks about its history now: about the 1921 Race Massacre, about Greenwood, about what was built, what was burned, what that means for the city that exists today. There are murals, museums, conversations about reckoning and reconciliation. In the middle of it all, an innocent man sits on death row, waiting for the state to kill him for something he did not do, with a case built on evidence Clarance has always said was planted, coached testimony and a lawyer who was ready to get it over with.

Clarance Goode, Jr. is Tulsa too. His life: his childhood on the north side, his father's twenty-seven years at the same job, his mother chasing a three-year-old around the house after he bit his baby brother's finger, his grief, his rebuilding, his love for La Kendra, his love for his children, his grandchildren, his nieces. All of that is Tulsa. All of that is Clarance. The side that doesn't appear in brochures. The side the machinery of the state has been consuming for generations.

He is a man with a history, a family, a faith, a specific, stubborn refusal to let the system make a lie of his life by making him say that lie is true. He should not be on death row. The evidence has always said so. The bullets found by a detective later convicted of planting evidence elsewhere. The impeached witnesses whose testimony was left standing. The attorney who was ready to get it over with. The judge's instruction telling the jury they could believe none of what the state's witnesses said, and the conviction that followed anyway. The forty-two exonerations that freed everyone else and changed nothing for Clarance. The appeals court calling the remaining evidence "overwhelming" without ever being required to name it.

All of it points in the same direction. All of it says the same thing. The state of Oklahoma is preparing to make that wrong permanent, and the window for stopping it is not infinite.

The people he once tried to befriend, to help, were the same people that ruined his life to save themselves. The lawyer he trusted, as Clarance came to see it, prioritized his friendships with prosecutors over the truth. The system that is supposed to protect the innocent failed him at every level, in every direction, without exception.

But he is still here. Still fighting. Still telling the truth, even when no one seems to want to hear it.

Because that is all Clarance Goode, Jr. has left: the truth. And he will not ever stop fighting for it.

A Prayer for Clarance

Clarance Goode, Jr. has asked for one thing from the people who read his story: that they not forget him. Prayer is where that begins. Pray for him by name. Pray for him out loud, in your congregations, at your tables, in the places where the people of Oklahoma gather. Pray for the truth to be seen by the people with the power to act on it. Pray for La Kendra, for his children, for his grandchildren, for his wider family and his supporters. Pray for the people who lied, because they are carrying something too. Then pray with your hands: write the governor, write the Pardon and Parole Board, tell someone else what you know. Here is a prayer to start with.

God of the innocent,
you know what happened at the Thompson house.
You were there.
You know who fired the shots, who told the lies, who planted the bullets.
You know Clarance was not there.

Be with him tonight in McAlester.
Be with him in the cell where the state keeps him.
Be with him when the phone does not ring.
Be with him when the photographs of his children arrive and he cannot hold the people in them.

Give him what you gave the prophets in prison: a voice that does not go quiet.
Keep his faith stubborn.
Keep his hope alive.

Keep his truth whole.

Be with La Kendra, who has stood for thirty years.
Be with his children, his grandchildren, his wider family.
Be with the supporters who carry his name into the world.

Open the eyes of the courts.
Open the ears of the governor.
Open the mouths of the people who know the truth but have not said it.
Soften the hearts of the ones who lied.

Stop the machinery.
Give Oklahoma the courage to admit what it has done.
Give us the courage to say his name until it does.

Clarance Goode, Jr. is innocent.
You know it.
Let the world know it too.

Amen.

About the Author

The Rev. Dr. Jeff Hood is a priest, author, activist and death row advocate. He is the founder of the Execution Intervention Project, a nonprofit devoted to the abolition of the death penalty. His ministry is one of direct witness. He serves as spiritual advisor to condemned people throughout the nation, accompanies them through their final hours, and has stood in the execution chamber thirteen times. For that witness, including his battle against nitrogen executions, he was nominated for the 2025 Nobel Peace Prize. He has been widely profiled, including in USA Today, Newsweek, GQ and Rolling Stone, which made him the subject of a documentary, *The Spiritual Advisor*. He is the spiritual advisor to Clarance Goode, Jr.