

The Longest Wait

Tick tock. Tick tock.

Two men are in a narrow room. They are seated on a slim bed with a chess board between them. They speak little but their silences are companionable as they plan their moves.

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After Tony, the grizzled older man is check-mated he says, "I think it's time for my special meal." Sure enough, within a couple of minutes the door opens and a loaded tray is set down on a pull-out table.

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The younger man smiles wistfully, noting the simple choices his companion has made. Clam chowder, steak with fries and apple pie and ice cream.

"John you'll have to help me with this...there's far too much here for me."

John shakes his head, "No thanks, eat what you can Tony. I don't have much of an appetite tonight."

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After picking at the food Tony pushes the tray away and closes his eyes. His body shudders and tears dampen his cheeks. John takes the big man's hand and says, "Come on now Tony, don't lose hope. There's still time."

"Pastor John you've been a great friend to me, even though you haven't managed to make me believe in your merciful Saviour. I don't think there's much chance of converting me before the deadline."

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Pastor John smiles ruefully, struggling to find words of comfort for this impressive old man. He knows that any religious offerings of salvation will be met with polite disdain. He feels so powerless. He is no stranger to Death Row but he has never experienced such an egregious miscarriage of justice as this. The incarceration for nineteen years of this patently innocent man is a travesty. But he knows, even when the evidence is flimsy, the odds against the acquittal of a black man in rural Alabama are very poor.

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Pastor John can't help glancing at his watch. He is startled to see that it is just two hours before the cut-off time for a stay of execution. Tony sees where the Pastor's eyes are focused and it is his turn to pat his friend's hand. "Don't you worry about me John. Honestly, I'll welcome those needles going in. After being shut away for twenty-three hours a day, I've been as good as dead for many years."

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John reflects on the barbaric nature of the penal system in one of the most civilised nations on earth. He knows that half of all prisoners currently sentenced to death in the USA have been on Death Row for more than eighteen years. Such statistics shame his nation.

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At eleven p.m. both men spring to their feet as the Warden enters the cell. His smile is incongruous. Shaking hands with Tony he says, "Your execution will not take place tonight. You have been granted a retrial because of important new DNA evidence submitted to the Court of Appeal."