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Snapshots of An Execution

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The curtain opens on a room with two mannequins standing next to a prisoner lying on a gurney covered by a sheet. Two IV tubes snake out of the wall into each of the arms protruding from the sheet.

One of the mannequins reaches for the phone to insure there is no last minute reprieve. The signal is given and cold fluids are released. There is a slight spasm as the fluids contact their human target. A few minutes later, the condemned is dead and we have been saved.

That night there are a few one liners on the news with a photo of the condemned and maybe twenty tear stained seconds of the victim's family giving thanks they have finally achieved closure.

We breathe a collective sigh of relief. A cancer has been chemically erased and the streets are again safe for us to travel. And the myth goes on. The myth is that the execution will serve as a deterrent to shield us from danger. The truth is that over the last decade there was one execution for every 377 murders committed in Florida. And the myth goes on.

Built into these snapshots are assumptions the mannequins on stage have no feelings, the witnesses are dispassionate observers, the family of the condemned actually achieves closure and no one is hurt in the process. So the storyline proceeds.

We deceive ourselves with the fiction that the system has infallible safeguards that protect the innocent. Yes, Elizabeth, there IS a Santa Claus.

The two mannequins standing beside the condemned are in fact living human beings. They have to trust, they have to believe, the system is perfect and the condemned on the gurney is truly guilty. It is their ultimate faith.

Their ultimate horror is that they may have executed an innocent human being. This is the stuff of nightmares. This is the foundation of substance abuse. This is the basis for dysfunctional and abusive family relationships. And the contamination is created. The condemned is person with a mother, father, siblings, maybe even a wife and child. What mother wants her child executed? What wife wants her husband executed? What child wants to see such ugliness? And the contamination spreads out.

Then there is the jury. The horror of the discovery that they have convicted and sent an innocent person to be executed. And the contamination spreads out.

Imagine the horror of the victim's family who discovers that they demanded and got the execution of an innocent person. And the contamination spreads out.

The witnesses are often professionals whose business, standing or identity is directly tied to the process. The professionals are there by choice. They often travel great distances to be there under any one of a thousand pretexts.

They will walk away from the execution with one liners for a paper or a merit badge to validate this or that position. Their political purity will be validated.

What we don't see is the people sucked into the process. They often become unwilling hosts for these professional parasites. They are apt to appear in the trial, sentencing and appellate proceedings or in

learned papers attesting to the this or that. These are people whose less than perfect lives are exposed, dissected and exploited by the professionals. Another myth that underlies the entire process is that the condemned is guilty. The truth is in that most cases we cannot be certain.

What we do know is that in the 1990s for every person executed from death there was one exonerated from death row.

What we do know is that Florida accounts for 25% of the people exonerated from death row in these United States over the last 30 years. The point is not that the system works but how did so many end up there in the first place.

What we do know is that Frank Smith died after 10 years on death row of natural causes only to be exonerated after his death.

What we do know is that for every execution there are more lives trashed than are given closure.

What we do not know is how many people have been executed that were innocent. In part because it is in no one's best interest to make it known. Also, there is no mechanism to continue the case after execution.

What we do know is that the professionals build careers and enhance their standing in the process.

And the curtain is closed to hide the emperor without any clothes.