

You've probably read that Eric King was executed two weeks ago Tuesday. His picture stands on the sideboard. He's a good-looking black guy in an orange jumpsuit with a huge smile and there's an inscription on the back that reads in part "This picture was taken 5/16/06." "Taken" is interesting. Uneducated, Eric was an enthusiastic letter-writer with a good vocabulary, a lot of interest in the world and thoughtful questions, but his vocabulary is a constant reminder of another reality.

We've visited maybe thirty times and exchanged dozens of letters, and now we're unspeakably sad, and it was never supposed to end like this.

I hope you don't mind my revisiting the execution day. It seems useful to me, though the words are coming out very slowly.

None of the experience Tuesday made any sense. It was one strange irony after another. We arrived at a familiar parking lot just outside the gates of the ASPC at 7:30 as lawyers had directed. The lot was empty except for a black Chevy. After a minute a large man got out of the driver's side, pulled on a black suit coat, walked over, smiled, and extended his hand. He wondered why we were there, and then he explained that we were expected and we should drive down the road to the stand of palm trees where we would be met. At the palm trees was a man in uniform with a check list. He matched our id's to his list, looked at us to see we matched the id's, and gave us instructions on how to drive through a couple of gates, make a couple of turns, and come to the appropriate parking lot. That was the rest of the morning, moving from one man with a checklist to the next, some with cellphones, all orchestrating where and when we would move, deeper into the complex, finally to ground zero, and then reversing course, back and out into the world.

Six of us were there to witness on Eric's behalf. Two, a young man and woman, were on his legal team. Four of us were friends: a professor from Oregon who had met him while she was getting her doctorate at the U.ofA., a ninety-year old woman friend of Eric's mother, and Nancy and I. After being moved through a warren of rooms and passageways, we were collected together in a windowless conference room where we sat for over an hour. On the table were two plastic party platters full of carrot sticks, celery and apple slices. Comfort food. The lawyers had heard that we were being moved around the complex following a certain route and schedule to avoid our meeting the relatives of the victims, but that we would all eventually come together in the execution chamber.

From time to time as we traveled, one of our minders was a grim-faced woman in a grey pin-striped suit, wearing an ornate cross. A chaplain? She never spoke.

It was getting on toward nine-thirty. The execution was at 10:00. The movement of the hands on my watch never had had such significance. The prison director came in and asked if we had any questions. No one did. After he left, a minder got on his cell and said we had five minutes to use the toilet. Nancy posed them a problem. As we left our carrot sticks, she and I had to follow a different route to an elevator. The others took the stairs. Eventually the six of us

joined up again. Coming into the main yard of the prison complex, her wheelchair wouldn't fit through the metal detector. A great portcullis - is that the word? - had to be opened. That wasn't all. A young guard removed a padlock that was securing a massive metal bar that he swung aside. It looked like it would have stopped an armored truck from breaking into or out of the complex. Nancy wheeled on through.

Another room and it was 9:40. This was a sad and ugly and run-down office. It didn't look like anyone had actually worked in it in recent memory. We were parked and told we'd be there for ten minutes. We had all gotten quiet. You can't imagine how oppressive it was. There was a sense of people around us talking, planning our last movement. The chaplain sat outside in the hall watching us through the open doorway.

We were out in the main yard again. Beautifully manicured. Lots of free labor. Guards in khaki standing around, watching us pass by. Then our young leader, still on his phone, made a sudden turn and we were in a small, dark room. The glass windows at the back, somebody explained, look in on the gas chamber. The windows at the front had curtains drawn across them like a little theater. There were risers but no seats, except that a plastic chair had been found for our ninety-year old friend. The six of us were first into the room and tucked behind a flimsy partition at the far end so that those who came in after us couldn't see us. A couple of minutes later a dozen State officials walked in and arranged themselves, and finally three or four family members of the victims. The little theater was pretty well full. At ten o'clock the curtains parted .

The scene was so sanitized. I didn't know what to expect. Eric was strapped on a guernsey and covered except for his head by a sheet. Whatever tubes were connected to him were invisible. He could turn his head and did. He scanned the room and his eyes seemed to settle on us, his friends. He smiled. We smiled back. I'll always wonder if he could actually see us ... and whether it mattered. He was at that point on antidepressants and adevan. An assistant superintendent came in and asked him if he had a statement and he responded very clearly, "No." Then the superintendent read a statement that the will of the state was that Eric die, his execution would now be carried out, and, by implication, that we residents of Arizona stand culpable for his death.

Nothing changed. Eric had the stage to himself. In ten minutes a medical person appeared in a white gown with his hair neatly inside of a green snood, pulled back Eric's eyelids, prodded him with a wooden tongue depressor, and pronounced him sedated. In another ten minutes he was dead, said an expressionless disembodied voice. The curtains closed.

Extraordinary beyond words. The death of any one of us is the destruction of a universe of possibilities. What does it mean when the state takes a life?

Everything reversed and we the friends of Eric were the last out of the death theater. The grim-faced woman brought us back through the prison complex. We walked out to our car with Eric's legal team and embraced. Some of us wept. The sun shone. We drove out and stopped

at the check point by the stand of palms, showed our i.d.s, and the guards thanked us. We'd visited the Prison Complex so many times. We have no idea whether we can bear to do it again another day for a different prisoner. Probably not. When the red light that marks the edge of the complex turned, we drove into the center of Florence, stopped at the Circle K, and bought a couple of iced teas for the return trip.