

# Chronicle of an American Execution

Dan Barry

The window blinds to the execution chamber are raised shortly after 1 in the morning, in accordance with the Procedures for Electrocutation in the State of Tennessee. And the condemned man is revealed.

He looks almost like a young child buckled into a car seat, with his closed eyes and freshly shaved head, with the way the black restraints of the electric chair crisscross at his torso. He yawns a wide-mouthed yawn, as though just stirring from an interrupted dream, and opens his eyes.

He is moments from dying.

The cause of death will be cardiac arrest. Every step toward that end will follow those written state procedures, which strive to lend a kind of clinical dignity to the electrocution of a human being, yet read like instructions for jump-starting a car engine. Remember: "A fire extinguisher is located in the building and is near the electric chair as a precaution."

Behold Daryl Holton. He is 45. Ten years ago he shot his four young children in his uncle's auto-repair garage, two at a time, through the heart. He used their very innocence to kill them, telling them not to peek, Daddy has a surprise. After he was done he turned himself in, saying he wanted to report a "homicide times four."

In seeking the execution of this Army veteran, now blinking in the cold, bright room, the state argued that Mr. Holton committed premeditated murder, times four, to punish his ex-wife for obtaining an order of protection and for moving away. He killed his children, so he must be killed.

In defending the life of this man — now pursing his lips, about all that he can move — his advocates argued that he believed his children were better off dead than to live in a profoundly troubled home; that he actually felt relief after pulling a tarpaulin over those four small bodies. He killed his children, so he must be mentally ill.

All the while, Mr. Holton adhered to a peculiar code of conduct that vexed all sides. Those fighting for his life often did so against his will. Those seeking his remorse were unrewarded.

Just days ago he said the crimes for which he was convicted warranted the death penalty, but he pointedly removed himself from that equation. Perhaps to suggest the killings were justified; perhaps to keep things theoretical. No matter. Now, at 1:09 a.m. on Wednesday, Sept. 12, 2007, at the Riverbend Maximum Security Institution, it is about to happen.

The warden, Ricky J. Bell, stands before him, supervising the first electrocution in Tennessee since 1960. Prison officials had hoped that Mr. Holton would choose to die by lethal injection, and had been gently reminding him of this option. But he maintained that since electrocution was the only form of capital punishment at the time of his crimes, then electrocution it should be.

Before the raising of those window blinds, Mr. Holton had started to hyperventilate, and Mr. Bell had sought to calm him by slightly loosening the straps. But now it is 1:10, the blinds are up, the clock is running. In accordance with procedures, the warden asks if the condemned has something to say.

The inmate's response is so slurred by his hyperventilating that he is asked to repeat what he has been planning to say for a long time. He says again, "Two words: I do."

This could be a joke of some kind, a cosmic conundrum, or maybe Mr. Holton's acceptance into whatever awaits him after life. It could be the use of his marital vow as a parting shot at his ex-wife, or perhaps a twisted re-affirmation of his belief in the sanctity of marriage and family.

The warden asks, "That it?" The inmate nods.

Two corrections officers step forward to place a sponge soaked in salted water on Mr. Holton's bald scalp to enhance conductivity. Next comes the headpiece, which the procedures describe as a "leather cranial cap lined with copper mesh inside." Finally, a power cable, not unlike the cable to your television, is attached to the headpiece.

The copper mesh pressing wet sponge sends salty water streaming down the inmate's ashen face, soaking his white cotton shirt to the pale skin beneath. When officers try to blot him dry with white towels, Mr. Holton says not to worry about it, "ain't gonna matter anyway."

After the white towels comes a black shroud to be attached to the headpiece. It is intended in part to protect the dignity of the inmate, now strapped, soaked and about to die before witnesses. His final expression, then, will be his own.

With the push of a button on a console labeled Electric Chair Control, 1,750 volts bolt through Mr. Holton's body, jerking it up and dropping it like a sack of earth. The black shroud offers the slightest flutter, and witnesses cannot tell whether they have just heard a machine's whoosh or a man's sigh.

Fifteen seconds later, another bolt, and Mr. Holton's body rises even higher, slumps even lower. His reddened hands remain gripped to the arms of the chair, whose oaken pieces are said to have once belonged to the old electric chair, and before that, to the gallows.

It is 1:17. Procedures require a five-minute pause at this point. A prison official off to the side watches a digital clock on the wall while chewing something, perhaps gum, perhaps to calm his nerves. Two minutes, three, four, the only things moving in the room are his eyes and his jaw, five. The window blinds drop, and a physician begins a private examination.

Later, in the foggy darkness outside the prison, someone will read a statement from the ex-wife, Crystal Holton, in which she says that all the anger and hatred can finally leave her, to be replaced by a child's innocent love — "love times four."

Later, well after sunrise, Kelly Gleason, one of the lawyers who fought to keep Mr. Holton alive, will set aside her mourning for a friend and give in to fitful sleep.

Later, in the hot afternoon some 50 miles to the south, four polished tombstones will again cast shadows toward a playground at the bottom of a cemetery's hill. Arranged in order of age, the stones bear the names of the four Holton children: Stephen, 12, Brent, 10, Eric, 6, and Kayla, 4.

But first confirmation, in accordance with procedures. And now the disembodied voice of Tennessee: "Ladies and gentlemen, this concludes the legal execution of Daryl Holton. The time of death, 1:25. Please exit."