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# Last Supper

MARCH 20, 2024 MATIAS TRAVIESO-DIAZ 0

**Bio** +

The long fight was over. After years of motions, pleas, trials, and appeals, Antonio Quiroga’s emergency application for a stay of execution was denied by the U.S. Supreme Court and his death sentence by lethal injection was scheduled to be carried out at the Central Prison in Raleigh. The execution was set for 7 AM on Monday, October 21.

Antonio and his pro-bono, ACLU-appointed lawyer had steadfastly maintained his innocence and argued that ethnic, anti-immigration bias was behind his conviction. It was uncontested that Antonio had shot a police officer responding to a call of a break-in at a liquor store. The alleged circumstances under which the shooting took place, however, were particularly gruesome: it was said that the officer, a white female, had been disarmed and was begging for her life as Antonio taunted her with her own pistol before shooting her in the temple.

The sole eyewitness to the homicide was Matthew Cartwright, the liquor store owner, who had been preparing to close the shop when Antonio came in, “obviously intoxicated.” Cartwright testified that Antonio had been raucous and disorderly and had demanded to be given the contents of the cash register. Cartwright had pressed a button under the counter that triggered an alarm at a nearby police station; the alarm had been installed after several attempts at holding up the store, which was located in a low-income section of Raleigh.

According to Cartwright, when the female officer arrived, Antonio – who was over six feet tall and more than two hundred pounds heavy – jumped on her, overpowered her, wrestled her gun away, and taunted and then executed her.

Antonio, testifying in his own defense, asserted that the officer had been abusive and had “pistol whipped” him; and that they had fought and the gun had accidentally gone off, killing her. Forensic analyses found fingerprints from both Antonio and the officer on the gun.

At the first trial, the presiding judge had refused to admit into evidence as “speculative” several pieces of potential testimony to the effect that Cartwright was a notorious right-wing extremist

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with links to the American Nazi Party and the KKK. The only testimony regarding Cartwright's character came from a Southern Baptist minister and a Rotary Club member, both of whom testified that Cartwright was a man of high integrity and outstanding moral character.

The all-white jury in the first trial convicted Antonio of first-degree murder with aggravating circumstances, which resulted in the judge issuing a death sentence against the defendant. The judgment had been overturned on appeal, based on the judge's failure to admit potentially impeaching testimony against Cartwright.

The second trial had been similar to the first, except that the impeaching testimony against Cartwright was admitted, as well as additional laudatory testimony by two of Cartwright's neighbors and a gun shop owner. Another all-white jury had deliberated for only an hour before convicting Antonio.

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When Antonio was advised by Harry, his pro-bono lawyer, of the failure of their last appeal, he was angry but expressed no surprise. "A Mexican can't get no justice in this country," he said. "When are they going to do this?"

"Two days from now, first thing Monday morning."

"And how are they going to do it?"

"By lethal injection. They'll give you a shot of sodium thiopental as tranquilizer, combined with a couple of drugs that will kill you."

"Will it be painful?"

"Maybe. The truth is that we don't know what will happen, other than that you will be dead in a matter of minutes.

"Those bastards! They kill you and don't even give a damn how much you suffer!"

There was a long pause. "Will they give me a nice last meal?"

"They will. Do you have any preference in mind?"

"I've got to think on this. I'll tell you tomorrow morning."

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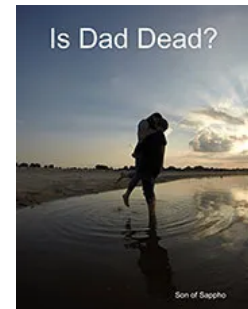
"Have you decided what you want for your last meal?"

Antonio answered Harry with an unexpected question: "Is there any real good seafood restaurant here in Raleigh?"

"I hear the seafood at a French restaurant called Chez Michel is very good. I've never been there."

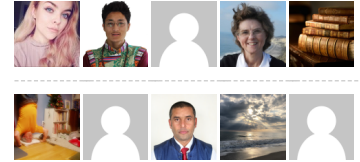
"Could you pull up their online menu on your laptop?"

"Sure."



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#### COMMUNITY



They looked together at the menu for a few minutes and Antonio announced his choice.

"This is what I want: First, peanut soup "ala Senegalese," whatever that means. Then, this scallop appetizer, I don't know how to pronounce it."

"Coquilles St Jacques" offered Harry.

"That. And for the main course, 'Lobster Thermidor.'"

"Thermidor. You're going all seafood! Anything else?"

"Maybe some wine. What do you recommend?"

"For a seafood meal, you should get a bottle of white. Here, they have a nice Sancerre. It's sixty dollars a bottle, but you're not paying for it."

"Can you put an order for me, to be delivered here at the prison about eight p.m. on Sunday?"

"I'll have to get approval from the Warden, since he'll be footing the bill."

"Well, go do it. That's what I'm *not* paying you for."

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Eric Wagstaff, the Central Prison Warden, was incredulous when Antonio's lawyer handed him a written request with the inmate's choices and the selected source (Chez Michel) of the dishes.

"French food? French wine? What does a wetback know of French food? How about some tacos, or maybe a burrito?"

"Sir, that is the most racist thing I've heard from a public official in the last ten years. Do you mean to tell me that because my client is Latino he's not entitled to have his last wishes satisfied?"

"This meal is going to set us back a couple hundred dollars. This guy is not going to even properly digest it before we pull the plug on him. I'm not going to do it."

"Sir, please reconsider. Think of it as an act of generosity towards a condemned man who you are going to put to death right afterwards."

"No way! Bring me a decent request or your client will go to his death on an empty stomach!"

Harry decided to play hardball. "I guess I'll have to tell the *Raleigh News* of your decision. And CNN has been covering my client's case for years. They will probably have something to say about your sending a poor immigrant to his death on an empty stomach. Should I tell the *Times* too?"

Wagstaff blanched. He did not relish getting involved in a civil rights controversy. "You wouldn't dare!" he threatened.

Harry pulled out his cell phone and looked up a number. He dialed. When a voice responded, he inquired: "Yes, can I speak with Albert Crawley at the City Desk? This is Harry Hudson calling."

Wagstaff ran his index finger across his neck, motioning Harry to abort the call. Harry complied.

"All right, I'll let him have his French dinner. But you must keep this thing quiet. I don't want every death row inmate to start demanding a fancy sendoff."

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Harry placed the order himself, describing the situation to the maître d' and suggesting that this unique request could result in a lot of free publicity for Chez Michel. Accordingly, the restaurant applied special care in preparing the order and having it delivered hot, in foam insulated bags. The guards at the Central Prison had been alerted to the delivery and took custody of the food and a cold shipping box containing the wine. They brought it all to Antonio's cell and placed the contents on the built-in table against the back wall.

The guards uncorked the bottle of wine and stationed themselves outside the cell. Harry shushed them away: "Please have some decency. Let the man enjoy his last supper in privacy." Reluctantly, they stepped out.

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The peanut soup was silky and smooth, spicy without overwhelming the palate. Antonio reflected that, under normal circumstances, a bowl of soup like this and some bread would have been enough to satisfy him. He ate every delicious spoonful, poured himself a glass of Sancerre and marveled at the clean, bracing taste of the wine, full of exotic flavors. It was so deliciously complex!

He opened a Styrofoam box containing his appetizer, the Coquilles St. Jacques. He had tasted scallops only once in his life, thus he approached the dish with trepidation. He needed not have worried. The box was brimming with delicate scallops, shrimp and mushrooms swimming in a rich cheese and white wine sauce topped with breadcrumbs. It was golden and still bubbling a little when he put a fork on it. He devoured it all and drank the sauce for good measure.

He felt sated, but knew he had to complete eating his meal. Opening the largest of the Styrofoam boxes, he did a double take as his eyes rested on the succulent chunks of a lobster meat in a creamy mixture of egg yolks and brandy, stuffed back into a lobster shell, and browned with a Gruyère cheese crust.

To Antonio's unsophisticated palate, this outlandish dish was too much. But he soldiered on: one delicious bite after another, washed down with Sancerre. As he forced down his last morsel, he started feeling fatigue.

Seconds later, sharp tingling started on Antonio's tongue, mouth and throat. The tingling became a swelling, and his throat constricted. He broke into convulsions and fell to the floor, breathing laboriously.

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When the guards returned to Antonio's cell, they found the prisoner unconscious, vomiting through swollen lips. "Quick, get some help!" shouted one of the guards. A couple of minutes later, a medic came to the cell, looked at Antonio and declared: "He may be having a heart attack." He called for a stretcher.

The medic saw the remains of the dinner on the table in the back of the room. "Did he just have dinner?"

"Yes, a few minutes ago" replied the guard.

"That's it!" replied the medic. "He had an allergic reaction to what he ate. We'll have to give him an epinephrine shot right away."

"Does he need to be taken to the infirmary?"

"Absolutely. We'll need to put a tube down his mouth or do a tracheostomy. I just hope we are not too late."

Just as they were wheeling him away, Antonio's breathing seemed to be slowly returning to normal. The medic motioned the attendants to stop.

Antonio opened his eyes and moaned. "Where am I?"

The guard replied with a sneer: "Right where you were. Your last supper didn't seem to agree with you."

"Oh" came back Antonio, clearly disappointed. "So, it didn't work. Am I still going to be executed tomorrow?"

"Actually, no. Given your condition, the execution would have to be postponed. In any case, the Governor showed his yellow streak. He just issued a stay of your execution pending further reviews of the evidence."

"How come he did that?"

"The election is in ten days and your death has become a campaign issue, so he punted and is playing for time."

"Do I get to stay in this rat hole?"

"Until you are executed or you croak by yourself, as you almost did a moment ago."

"That's terrible."

"What's the matter, don't you like it over here?"

As they went into the infirmary, Harry — who was walking beside the gurney — asked his client: "Did you know you are allergic to seafood?"

"Of course, to both shellfish AND peanuts."


Antonio then asked his lawyer in earnest: "Listen, Harry, now you got more time to figure how to save me. I was unwilling to let those bastards cause me more pain by taking my life with that injection. But I still want to live, so please give it another try, will ya?"

"I'll see what I can do, but I can't promise anything. I made all the arguments that I could already."

"So, they'll kill me no matter what?"

"Possibly. The powers that be have the cards stacked against you."

“Well, I better start thinking of the menu for another last dinner. Will you find me some Japanese dive that will cook blowfish?”

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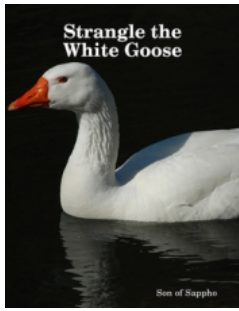
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