

Dead Man Balking

When you first met Bennie Lou Waggaman, you'd find that there was one thing he liked to think about even more than cheating the executioner: His Grandmomma Lurietta's down-home cooking.

For as long as you'd listen, he'd tell you that he missed her crawfish soup more than he missed the ladies, more than he missed bellowing hallelujah in the little wooden church house by Cypress Creek, more than he missed the smell of the angry green water in Biloxi Bay before a storm.

He'd tell you about Grandmomma Lurietta's chicken fried steak, made with cheap, pounded, tenderized beef and eggs from the henhouse in back of her camelback shotgun hut in rural Perigal County where he was raised along with seven brothers and four sisters; he'd tell you about her cornbread, pronouncing cornbread like it had four syllables—*co-wurn bray-yit*—and he'd go on and on about her mud pie, a regional favorite: “Niggas useta come from aw across the county fo a slice o Grandmomma Lurietta's Mississippi Mud Pie, tell you what. An they wouldn't leave till they et some of her shrimp gumbo neither. Said it was granny-slappin good...”

Then he'd throw back his bald head and loose a big horselaugh at the odd, ironic Southern expression, showing far too much ease for someone awaiting execution in Unit 22 of the State Prison at Moreauville.

The one thing he wouldn't tell you much about was the crime that landed him there, and for me, it was just as well. At the time, I was a young journalist on my first major assignment at the *Metro Voice*, an urban tabloid renowned for its investigative work—I think the reason I was given the Bennie Lou Waggaman interview was that he was, even to the most rabid activists at the paper, although another black dude railroaded through the system, so clearly guilty of a crime so horrific that his race didn't even matter—they'd have fried Brad Pitt if he'd done what Bennie Lou Waggaman did.

That is, break into an isolated house on Highway 609, tie up a family of three—a young woman and her two school-aged children—rape the mother then slit all their throats. DNA analysis was inconclusive, and Waggaman might have gotten away with the crime. But he'd left a living witness: By the grace of someone or something on high, one of the little girls had survived the throat-slitting and had identified him without hesitation.

The crime editor of *Metro Voice* was a grossly overweight college drop-out in his mid-thirties, and I often wondered if one of the reasons he'd tossed me that assignment was that I represented his antithesis: I was a thin, eager twenty-two-year-old with a journalism degree from Emerson. I assumed there was something inherently sadistic about him, and it seemed likely that sending a petite, pretty—fact, not ego—Caucasian chick from Boston into the belly of the Deep South beast to confront a psychopathic black mass murderer probably, on some level, got his rocks off.

As far as the astronomically low odds that Bennie Lou Waggaman might actually be innocent; that he'd share some vital tidbit of information during our interview that would allow me to turn the case on its head in the few days he had left to live and save him from execution?

I confess, that's what got my rocks off.

As it turned out, I might as well have been interviewing Paula Deen. After I'd done meticulous research to see if the investigation had left any stone unturned, after I'd analyzed the trial notes to see any question had been unasked—after I'd gone through the trouble of renting a Subaru, driving the hundred miles to the prison, dealing with red tape paperwork forced on by leering corrections officers—men and women—undergone a humiliating strip search by the latter, only to be informed that the clothes I'd put back on were all I'd be allowed to take into the interview room; no pens, no video recorder, no paper—all Waggaman wanted to talk about was recipes.

At least I got him to allow me quote him from memory, so, as anti-journalistic as it is, anything I transcribe here is as I remember it, although I must say, I impressed myself with my instant-recall skills—I didn't know I had them. Obviously, I was used to the reporter's usual toolbox, including cameras, notepads and a couple of spare Sharpies, but the prison couldn't care less.

As I say, Waggaman went on for a ridiculously long time about his grandmother's cooking, but before we got that far, I did manage to wedge in a question: Since, barring the sort of miracle that had saved the life of his nine year old victim, he was facing state-sanctioned execution in less than a week. I wondered how he could present such a calm—almost beatific—front. His expression made him seem disarmingly happy.

“Cause it ain't gonna happen,” he said with perfect confidence.

I reminded him that he'd exhausted all his appeals; that the initial judge had rejected them along with the District Court; the State Court had upheld the conviction and the Supreme Court had refused to hear it. And although Governor Dabney had the option of granting him clemency, not only had he scoffed at the idea, he'd publicly, (and rather unprofessionally, I

thought) suggested that not only would he perform the execution himself, he'd do it three times in a row to cover all the victims.

Bennie Lou Waggaman was not fazed in the slightest by the hourglass suspended in front of him. Again, he insisted that the execution would never happen. "King Jesus gonna deliver me from that hangman's noose, sure as He stilled the waters and healed the cripples. He maybe gonna wait till the cock crows the final time before He do, but mark my words, the hangman gonna be cheated outa this nigga's neck."

Whatever. I didn't want to remind him that he was slated to die of lethal injection, not hanging, but I did press him for some details regarding the crime. Since he claimed to have been twenty miles away at the time, he maintained that he could not provide them.

That's when he switched into his cascade of culinary reminiscences from his childhood.

And that's when I hit upon a story idea that might actually have some angles I could sink my eager young pearly whites into. Something with the brutal edge of hard truth tempered by some nostalgia. I could show a human side of a ruthless baby killer: Touchstones from his own childhood.

So, I asked him the obvious lead-in question—what did he intend to order for his last meal?

The sluice gate was thus raised; the fire hydrant busted open, and from it flooded gulf shrimp and flounder, cornpone and stewed okra, drop cookies and marshmallows. It became clear by the broad and artless grin I saw through the shatterproof plastic that separated me from Bennie Lou Waggaman, and the joyful abandon I heard through the cheap plastic phone through which we were communicating, that he had spent the last eleven years not moping, not penitent, not making his peace with his creator, but thinking about Grandmomma Lurietta's crawfish soup.

"I grew up at Grandmomma's knee," he gushed. "Watched her measure that flour and cut in that margarine; I helped her peel them shrimps and shuck them oystas. Dif'rent time, dif'rent circumstance, I coulda run circles around Commander's Palace and K Paul chefs. Hell, coulda run them kitchens single handed, I knows cookery that well."

Briefly, his eyes closed and when his lips retracted, they reminded me of panther lips. A huge set of teeth emerged. He shook his head and let fly the first of many deep, sonorous laughs I was to hear that afternoon. It was eerie, because I believed that in his mind's eye he was seeing Grandmomma's knee, probably wrapped in a dress worn from years of country washings, dusty with corn flour, sticky with molasses, smelling like ham hocks, and not what you and I would be seeing, eternally and inescapably—the hot blood of a four-year-old spurting through our fingers.

The deal with last meals for death row inmates, as I subsequently learned on-line, is this: Every state has different rules, but in this one, an inmate can request whatever he wants, and the prison chef, who is another inmate, usually tries to accommodate, albeit with the ingredients available, so long as the total expenditure is less than forty dollars. A dude in Texas, for example, requested 50 tacos and got five, while in most prisons, the common request for filet mignon winds up being hamburger, since that's what they already have in the kitchen.

Waggaman ticked off the last meal items he had ordered and it was a list indeed. Everything previously mentioned, plus potato salad, black bean dip, chicken and waffles, fried okra and barbecued pigs feet. It was a wish list of a child with an edible Toys R Us catalog who still sort of believes it all comes from an elf factory on the North Pole. But he described every item in such meticulous detail, including prep times and oven temperatures, that I sort of got lost inside the maze of his obsessive compulsions. As I say, it was my first major interview and I didn't yet have a handle on how to steer things when they went off the rail. But in the end, he admitted that the warden had sent the list back and told him to pick three items, because that's all the ball the state was willing to play.

Another horsey guffaw: "I like to went out o my mind tryin to decide! In the end I made a dart out o a Bic pen and threw it."

"And?" I asked.

He pantomimed as if he was opening an envelope in an awards ceremony and read off the invisible winners, grinning, "Crawfish soup, shrimp gumbo and Mississippi mud pie. Done. Like to starve me to death, know what I'm sayin? No seconds, and no doggie bags. I know cuz I axed."

He was making jokes, this rapist toddler-killing throat-slitter, and I—cub reporter for a somewhat less-than-great metropolitan newspaper—was laughing.

And then, zip, like that, my interview was over. We were out of time, and essentially all I had gotten out of him was when to fold the whipped cream into the cream cheese. If I was going to convince my slovenly, misanthropic boss that I had an interesting last meal story, it was going to take some foo-foo dust.

In the end, the killer provided the dust. As I thanked him for his time—an awkward nod to how little of it he had left—I said, rather shallowly, that if there was anything I could do for him to help him through his final days on earth, I'd try. He dropped his voice down a couple decibels and said that, as a matter of fact, there was. He asked me if I remembered the key ingredient that made Grandmomma Lurietta's mud pie famous throughout Perigal County.

“Almonds!” I said brightly, proud of my newly discovered phonographic memory.

Waggaman frowned. “Not jest any almonds, missy—on’y the wild almonds grow in the woods by Cypress Creek. That’s all Grandmomma would use. They called Amara almonds.”

I blushed at my error. “Amara almonds. I will remember that,” I vowed.

“Well, missy. If y’all could find it inside yo’self, I really need you to do more than remember it. I need you to get me some. See, prison cook be a righteous cat, eager to do me right, but he incarcerated, like me. He got no access to Amara almonds. If there’s any way you could bring up a l’il ol’ bag o Amara almonds from Cypress Creek, you’d be doing a poor old nigga a solid, cuz it jest ain’t Grandmomma Lurietta’s mud pie usin state-issued almonds...”

“Well, I...” I stammered. “I mean... How...?”

“Easy as... *pie*. You all go down to Cypress Creek downtown and behind the colored folks theater be Grady Dunn Lane, and you all follow that all the way to the gully, and there at the end is a little wooden juke wit my big brother Tiger-T behind the bar. He gon set you up with a bag o Amara almonds, then you all come on back up heah—I been on Death Row these eleven year and ever’body I met didn’t become an enemy. You bring them Amara almonds back in a day or two; the right folk’ll get ‘em to the prison cook.”

My face must have gone all Suzy Creamcheese, because Waggaman’s panther grin widened until his bald black head looked like a skull wrapped in electrical tape. “You wanna be a newspaper gyal?” he said. “This all gon make a helluva story.”

Actually, it would. And it did. It was crazy, and although I didn’t understand exactly how crazy until I got home. As it happened, this was the stuff I thought I wanted; this was The Seymour Hersh-Woodward/Bernstein-Daniel Ellsberg muckraking career path I’d been envisioning for myself.

How crazy was it? Well, first thing the next morning, I brought a written version of my mental notes into my editor’s cluttered shoebox office in the rear of Campus Books, where *Metro Voice* is published. He had his feet on the desk, with a pile of police blotters on one side and empty Arby’s bags on the other. He did appear to be listening to me with undistracted interest, although I confess, his bloated gut, partially exposed beneath his ‘Booty Pirate’ t-shirt, was to me pretty distracting. I was running through the specifics of the interview, including the detailed culinary methodology behind Waggaman’s detailed last meal requests, when suddenly he interrupted and sniffed, “That’s preposterous!”

“What is?” I asked.

“A quarter cup of margarine? Why would you use all those authentic, fresh, heirloom ingredients and then rely on margarine? That shit’s Satan’s spread.”

I allowed my notepad to sag; I raised the left half of my upper lip and made eye contact. “Seriously?”

“Yeah,” he shrugged, making even more of his gut protrude. “All I’m saying is margarine is filled with trans-fat and synthetic carcinogenic chemicals and stuff.”

“You think roast beef sliders aren’t?”

Another shrug: “Margarine’s worse. Especially for, like, nursing mothers.”

The proximity of his moobs to the mental image of primates lactating made a little puke back up in my drainpipe. “Look, with respect, that’s hardly germane to the story.”

“Okay,” he frowned. “Continue.”

I took the wise course, leapfrogged the rest and went directly to the Mississippi Mud Pie, telling a small white ingredient lie when I rattle off one-and-a-half cups of *fresh creamery butter*, but told the absolute truth when I mentioned the ‘secret’ ingredient, sixteen ounces of crushed, lightly toasted Amara almonds.

“So,” I spouted eagerly, “I went home and Googled ‘Amara almonds’, and it turns out they *do* grow wild in Perigal County. *Prunus amygdalus amara*. There are two kinds of almonds the world, sweet ones and bitter ones, and this is the bitter kind. Now the kicker: Amara almonds are totally toxic; they are loaded with naturally occurring cyanide and a handful of them can kill you. Waggaman asked for a whole frickin’ bag. I think that’s his end game! He kept going on and on about how he is going to ‘cheat the hangman’ and I think that’s exactly what he’s trying to do: I think he wants to commit suicide before they can execute him!”

My editor spent a moment with his fat brain in overdrive, then said, “That’s a stretch, I gotta say. How was he going to get the poison almonds if you didn’t happen to score the interview?”

“I don’t know. If not me, then someone from *ProPublica* maybe. Possibly a relative. Who knows? He’s resourceful, obviously. And you have to admit, it’s pretty diabolical. Lucky I was on my A-game, huh? I might have done it, too—fetched the almonds and delivered them. There is something unaccountably... charming about the dude.”

“Really,” said the uncharming editor, sniffing, a trifle piqued. “So you *aren’t* gonna do it?”

“Are you on crack?” I laughed. “What do you suppose the legal penalty is for smuggling lethal contraband into death row? I don’t want to be Christiane Amanpour that bad.”

He removed his legs from the table and folded his fat arms over his fat torso. “So, to summarize then: All that work and we still have no story. Hip hip hooray. You don’t even have a video of the nut asking you for the nuts. Groovy. Say, there’s a new nightclub opening up on North Central. Maybe I should send you out to review it. Maybe you could be our entertainment editor.”

“Maybe I could go back to school and get a marketing degree,” I said wistfully. “But, hear me out. I won’t give Waggaman enough almonds to hang himself, but I do have the address of the place I was supposed to pick them up... Some old dive bar down in Cypress Creek where his brother works. On the night of the execution, I could show up there and do a piece on the family’s reaction, before and after he’s put to death.”

“Won’t the family be at the prison?”

“I doubt it—he comes from one of those whackadoodle rural families with twenty-five children. I’m sure they don’t execute people in stadiums. Besides, Waggaman is absolutely, unshakably convinced that he won’t be executed. It’s like his mantra. I think he’s just looking at the whole last meal thing as a cheap excuse to get some of Grandmomma Lurietta soul food.”

Now I saw a glitter of lasciviousness light up behind my editor’s thick glasses as he painted himself a portrait of a trim (I’m a vegan obsessed with yoga) pretty (so sue me) little blond cheerleader-type sitting in a seedy backwater honkytonk and trying to pry private information from poor black people. “That might get squirrely...” he warned, leering. “It isn’t all moonlight and magnolias down there.”

“Ye of little faith!” I p’shaved—as my senior thesis at Emerson I’d done an exposé of functional heroin addicts in the Ron Brown Scholarship program. The key, I found, is respect, understanding and Mace.

“If you’re willing do it,” he said at last. “And provided it’s halfway decent, I’d be willing to run it as a lead.”

That decided it for me: ‘Halfway decent’ *this*, Lives-In-Mom’s-Basement Boy.

Bennie Lou Waggaman was scheduled to die on Friday night at 12:01, which, of course, would technically make it Saturday. The reason for this is that specific dates appear on death warrants, but not times; they schedule them as early as possible so if there are any execution snafus, they have the rest of the day to fix them. If they can’t and it dragged on to the following day, they have to start over with a whole new court order.

Following capital punishment rules to the letter, the legal mechanics hour-by-hour—even minute-by-minute—is vital to officials involved in the process. It’s probably what allows them to

deal with the oxymoronic hypocrisy of murdering people to teach people it's wrong to murder people.

On Friday afternoon, I rented another Subaru and made the trek down Highway 609 to the swamps of Perigal County, excited and full of spunk, vinegar and pepper spray. The fog was thick where the rich bottom land of the gulf plain gave over to hardwood forest, and still thicker where it united with dense thickets of briars and cane and formed a nearly solid sub-tropical jungle, broken only by a handful of fields and derelict towns like Cyprus Creek.

My research had shown that this had once been a thriving, hustling epicenter for the timber industry; L, NO & T Railroad agents had come for crossties and wagon makers for stave-bolts and spoke material. At one time, there had been a sawmill and an apparel factory, a post office, five churches, a bank and several public and private schools and the community had proudly produced most of its own cotton and corn.

Then, inevitably, reality reared its head and the fledgling, mostly-black colony of Cyprus Creek felt the triple whammy of mechanized agriculture, natural disasters and hostile race relations. The factories closed, the bank failed, Main Street died, and finally, even the Sister Workers of the Baptist Church of Perigal County, whose dormitory had proved accommodations to pupils from the surrounding farms, had given up the ghost.

Today, Cypress Creek existed as the poorest of the poor—evident by the downtown I wended through, where the two remaining anchors, Burkett Feed & Seed and Taylor Sheet Metal Work, looked like they hadn't been painted in decades. The movie house, which was actually called 'Rex Colored People Theater', still had a marquee with the letters 'T WZ' remaining from the last film they'd shown—*The Wiz*.

Behind it, though, was a creepy lane called Grady Dunn, and it dropped away into a neighborhood of shotgun houses, many with boarded windows and doors obscured by untended vines. Some displayed a now-vanished sense of rural enterprise, with faded signs advertising services that likely were not still available: 'CC Pawn & Firearm' yawned next to 'Darius Legal Services'.

At the end of the lane, pushed back against the pine barren, stood Waggaman Catfish House. It was built of rough-hewn boards and roofed with the sort of shingles hand-split with an axe, and unlike the peeling-paint businesses in town, this place looked like it hadn't been painted ever. The lot contained nothing that could have been confused with a working vehicle—only an Oldsmobile on cinder blocks and some rusted farm equipment.

It was open though, and the faint light coming from the only window indicated that contrary to appearance, it was actually wired for electricity. I gathered up my Sony Voice recorder, my

spiral scratchpad and my Sabre Red mace, took a few deep breaths of thick swamp air, steeled myself and went inside.

The interior was dimly lit and consisted of a few rickety tables scattered around a sawdust floor, a long pine bar, a pool table and a few posters of Dallas Cowboys' linebacker DeShawn Everett stapled to the wall; Everett was, I'd read the only Cyprus Creeker besides Bennie Lou Waggaman to achieve any sort of national notoriety.

My attention was quickly diverted by the man behind the counter—he looked so much like Bennie himself that I thought I'd been punked—that Bennie had escaped and had simply waited for me to show up for the almonds so he could rape me and slit my throat. The rictus grin was identical, peeling back from shovel-shaped incisors like the dome at Cowboys Stadium; the bald head was covered with the same thin, glittery black skin. Even the equine chortle and the penchant for referring to me as 'missy' matched: "Well, missy, you a bit late fo the almonds, ain't you? Ain't no time lef now..."

I was flabbergasted. "You look like his... twin," I said.

"Cuz I am. Come into the world ten minutes afo him, but look like I'm gonna leave it a good spell afterward."

"Look, sorry about the almonds— but *that* wasn't going to happen: Killing a condemned prisoner is a federal crime. But you may know, I'm from *Metro Voice*; I'd like to ask you a bit about Bennie Lou's life—would you consent to an interview?"

"Not sure much lef to be said that ain't been said. Bennie just born wit meanness inside—all us uns knew it. I mean, ever'body else fled town long since, nobody made no amends, and I think the on'y reason Bennie stuck around for the revenge."

Suddenly, I had a thought: "Do you have a phone?" I interrupted, holding up my iPhone, remembering that I had promised to call my editor when I got here—probably so he could gloat and do other nasty things. "I can't get a signal."

"Naw, nearest phone at the feed sto, and they closed. Got no internet down heah in the holler, missy. Ain't no need. Internet jest a bunch o tubes. And tubes be filled wit cats."

I had to admit, that was the single strangest comment I had ever heard about wifi, even from inveterate luddites. Flustered, I asked, "You don't like cats?"

"I likes 'em, but Wee-Gurl don't." He pointed and, as my eyes adjusted to the dim light, I saw that there was a full-grown hog in the corner, in the sawdust, sound asleep, snuffling.

It would be an interesting interview, albeit a short one. He told me his name was Lennie Lou Waggaman and offered me a plate of fried catfish and a glass of homemade liquor, neither of which I accepted. But I did ask him pointedly about the Amara almonds. “Did you know what they were for, Lennie?”

“Course I knew. Ain’t got computers down heah in Cyprus Creek, but we have Grandmomma Lurietta’s know-how—taught us ever’ herb, ever’ leaf, every’ flower, every’ nut grow round these muck swamps. Knew which uns would cure ya an which uns would kill ya.”

“And you were willing to go to that length to see that ‘the man’ didn’t get his pound of flesh?”

I’m not sure if he recognized the Shakespearean idiom, but something sure cracked him up. He did a mirrored replay of his twin’s explosive snort, head back, slapping his thighs. He fetched a mason jar from beneath the bar and poured himself a few fingers of clear fluid from a dusty bottle and sucked down half of it, which made his bright black eyes sparkle even more.

“White man done took his pound of flesh five hundred years gone by, missy—chewed it up and spit out the bones. We Waggamans be the bones. Me an Bennie, tryin to go to them Sister Workers school, county commissioner come by and said, ‘Why you tryin to teach them niggers anything, we needs ‘em to drive tractors.’ School closed and we was spat out. We bones alrighty, but we smart bones nonetheless; Grandmomma Lurietta made damn sho o that. What time you spect it is rightch now?”

“8:37 exactly,” I said, a bit smugly since phone clocks still work in anti- technology black holes like Cyprus Creek.

“And when Bennie spected to take his las’ walk?”

“12:01.”

“He ain’t gonna take it, missy. Make no mistake there. He know’d that long afo you come along. All us uns knew it. State decree say last meal got to be served three hours afo the execution, an Lawd knows, white screws likes they rules. Bennie born wit a meanness inside, like I said, and he gon leave with it too, in under half an hour—right after he polish off that damn meal!”

“Oh, my God—somebody else got him the Amara almonds...?”

Lennie Lou went *haw-haw, haw-haw*, sounding more like a donkey than a horse—as far as I could tell, some guy who thought cats lived inside internet tubes was making fun of *me*.

“Naw, them nuts was nothin but icin on the cake, missy—o rather, icin on the mud pie. What Bennie request for his las’ meal? Lemme guess: Shrimp etouffé? Crawfish boil? All yo

internets, all yo research, all you interviews, and nobody thought to ask anybody down heah, did they? All us Waggamans the same, even Grandmomma Lurietta, been that way fo always. We got smart bones all right, but we also deathly allergic to shellfish.”

I sat there for a moment, blinking like a stupid little blond vegan cheerleader, then I packed up and ran. But with the nearest phone in the feed store and the feed store closed, of course, I was too late.

Bennie cheated the executioner, just as he had guaranteed me he would, and more than once; I was just too dense to work out the details.

I titled the feature ‘*Smart Bones*’ in acquiescence to his smart bones. It made a good story, for sure. My only one, as it happens—I quit the tabloid game right after filing it.

Metro Voice went belly up a few years later, and as far as I know, my editor hasn’t worked since—I believe he still lives with his parents. I went back to Emerson and got my marketing degree, and ironically, today I am the public relations ambassador for Fleischmann’s, the world’s largest producer of margarine.