

Chapter 18

Execution

Not long after that I walked out onto the recreation yard to enjoy the afternoon sun. My mind was on playing Skooby in handball, when, to my surprise I saw Mingo in the single man recreation yard. It struck me odd to see him back here. I knew he was supposed to be on the Terrell unit and I had not heard that he was back on the Ellis Unit. I thought to myself, why would he be back?

I walked out to the fence and stuck my finger through the chain links to shake his hand, I said, "Que rollo Mingo - you doing all right? It's been a long time since I have saw you, my friend. I've been thinking about you, then BAM! here you are! It's good to see you."

I looked into Mingo's eyes and could tell that something was wrong. While talking to him I noticed worry etched on his face. Something was really bothering my friend.

He said, "Que onda Flores? It's good to see you, hometown. How's life treating you, boo? Things going OK with your family? I hope so. Aaaah man, they got me on F-wing. Solitary. You know they think I'm crazy and don't trust me. They're always thinking that I am going to do something wild, so they got me on F-wing."

In the time since I had last seen Mingo, I had heard more about him, he was crazy. He had acted out violently many times while on death row and this made the guards fear him. He was another Mexicano that would strike out at them with deadly violence if they disrespected him in any way. This went for guards and prisoners. It didn't matter to Mingo, he didn't give a damn.

He went on, "Flores man, they gave me an execution date. That's why I'm back on Ellis. It's two weeks away."

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Printed in the USA by Patterson Printing: Benton Harbour, Michigan.

things. He wanted to tell me about his German wife and I let him. I smiled and laughed when he would say something funny, but inside my heart was aching. For that small period of our lives we enjoyed each other's company as two friends might do. We shared pieces of our lives with one another. We talked of happiness, of joy and dreams we had not yet reached. Mingo wanted to travel to Europe, and he told me of the different places he wanted to go. Of course we discussed uncertainties and the fear of the unknown. It was an afternoon that I will never forget. Too soon the recreation period was over and I had to say goodbye.

"Mingo, you stay strong loco, don't let them get to you. Keep your hope. As long as you're alive it's never too late." He smiled and said, "You too Flores, I hope to see you real soon. Maybe they will move me back to J-21 if I get a stay. I'll talk to you later."

That day I learned another hard lesson. I learned what it was like to have a friend standing on death's doorstep. I hated that knowledge with everything that I was. In the days to come I tried to go about my life like everything was OK, but deep down inside I knew it wasn't. The words Mingo had said rang through my ears. "I wish I had had a paid attorney at the beginning of my appeals. Then everything would have been put into it. Now I got a good attorney and it may be too late!" I understood that if I wanted to live then I needed a paid appeal attorney. I had to get one before it was too late! I did not know how I was going to do that, but I told myself that somehow, some way I was going to get myself a paid attorney.

The days turned into weeks, and more times than I can count I thought of my friend Mingo. I never saw him again on the recreation yard. I wondered how he was doing and if he had gotten any good news. If he did not get a stay, tomorrow he would be executed. That evening I was passing the time not doing anything important when two escort guards appeared before my cell. I removed my headphones to hear what the guard was saying.

"Flores, do you want to have a five minute visit with Mingo Cantu? He has you on his list of people he wants to see before he is executed." I told them yes, I would go visit with

a typhoon, was being slammed from corner to corner. Everything seemed to blur. Mingo was telling me things that I never wanted to hear, much less imagine and think about. Yet, I knew I had to be strong for him. He was looking to me for strength.

I said, "That's good man. I'm happy for you, that you've got your family there with you when you need them the most, and your wife. That's beautiful, Loco. You be strong Mingo. Don't let them break you, you hear me?"

He said, "I hear you, Flores, I'm strong, Loco, I've got to be for my jefita, for my mom, hometown, I've got to see it through to the end for her. Man, I've been talking to the chaplain, hometown. I've given my life to the Lord. I don't want to go to hell. I want to go to heaven, man. I don't want to burn in hell forever."

I could clearly see that my friend was very afraid of going to hell and burning in fire and brimstone forever. He was looking to me for assurance that he would not go to hell. So I asked, "Mingo, do you really believe in God? In Jesus Christ?"

He replied, "Yeah hometown, I believe."

I said, "Then you're saved. You can go to heaven, Mingo, and I promise you that you will not burn in hell."

He smiled and nodded his head yes, like he knew it was true and only needed my confirmation for it to be so. Later on I would look back at this episode in my life, and be thankful that I had been able to give my friend this small bit of comfort. I truly believed that's what he was looking for, needed more than anything when he asked for a visit with me. I then heard the guard approach us and say, "Flores, time's up. We've got to go."

I moved as close to the wire mesh and bars as I could and I told Mingo, "The raza send their saludos y respetos. Now listen to me, hometown, Brown and proud boo, never show them any weakness. Show them only the Indian warrior that you carry within, you hear me? I'll be praying for you, Mingo, and remember, if you believe, then you're going to heaven. I promise you, Mingo."

respectos, OK?" I told him that I would. That night I learned that when a man had an execution date on Ellis Unit, he would give the supervisors a list of friends he wanted to talk to before he was executed. He was allowed to talk to each man for five minutes. I was escorted to another wing. We stopped in front of G-13. This is where they had Mingo now, in one of those bar and wire mesh cells used to house prisoners on death watch. I walked up to the wing with the guard. They led me to the first cell on l-row and said, "Flores you got five minutes."

It was quiet on this wing and as I turned to look in the cell I saw Mingo sitting up on the bunk, then getting up and making his way to the bars. He stuck his finger out the wire and I twisted my torso to shake his hand. I said, "Hey Mingo, que paso loco? You doing ok my friend?"

He answered, "Que rollo Flores, I appreciate you coming down to talk to me. I wanted to see you. Damn, hometown, it looks like tomorrow I'm going to be executed. The judge refused to hear the issues we were trying to get before him. I'm not going to get a stay of execution. I wanted to be the one who told you that personally, Flores. Sometimes it's like that on death row."

Each word my friend spoke was a slap in my face. We stood together at the edge and stared death in the face. Even though he was trying to be strong, I could see the terror in Mingo's eyes and felt such empathy for him. I felt helpless. No, I knew I was helpless. I could do nothing for my friend. When it comes to our executions, we are all defenseless. They exterminate us at will.

Mingo said, "My family has been up here visiting with me for the past couple of days, and my wife as well. I've really been enjoying my visits, my time that I'm spending with my family, Flores. Me and my parents have planned my funeral. They are going to bury me in the barrio, Loco. They're planning a celebration for me. There's going to be mariachis playing music at my funeral, and they're going to play my favorite song, "Puno de Terria," when they lower my casket into the earth."

shook it as I said goodbye to my friend for the last time. We both knew that come tomorrow this time his body would be dead and cold.

I walked out of the wing and when I hit the main hallway, my head hung low. I had just been part of something that made me feel sick inside. When I got to my cell I lay down on my bunk attempting to lose myself in the music, but I couldn't. I kept imagining them playing Mingo's favorite song as they lowered him into the cold, cold earth. I did not sleep that night. There was no way that I could. I know Mingo and I stayed up together for the last night of his life. The next afternoon came around and on the evening news I heard that Mingo had been executed. It was proof of what I knew had taken place. That day I had one of the worst feelings I've ever had in my life. That day I knew what it was like to have death sitting on your shoulder, waiting like a vulture to pick your bones clean when your number was called.

Executions have never been impersonal or abstract again.