

On What It's Like to Be on Death Row

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Voice-over narration from the 1967 film “On Cold Blood,” about two men, Perry Smith and Dick Hickok, sentenced to death for the murder of four members of a Kansas farm family:

What happens next?

They wait to die.

Perry and Dick began that waiting in the “S and I” building—security and isolation. The second floor is death row. Through the window they can see the baseball field. Beyond the outfield, over the wall, is an old warehouse with a tin roof.

“This warehouse got a name?”

In the prison, it's called the Corner. On hanging day, the men say, “He's gone to the Corner.” Perry and Dick have a date at the Corner, one minute after midnight, May, Friday the 13th.

Death row has its own routine. Shower, one man at a time, once a week. Shave, twice a week. The guard locks the safety razor. Safety first. No radios. No movies, no TV. No cards, no games, no exercise. No mirrors, no bottles, no glasses. No knives, no forks. No suicide allowed. They could eat, sleep, write, read, think, dream. They could play if so inclined.

But mostly, they just waited.

I know an old retired person on death row who isn't on death row, if you catch my drift. The big differences between him and Perry and Dick is that his S and I isn't in an actual prison and he isn't sure when he'll go to the Corner. But like them, he's waiting.