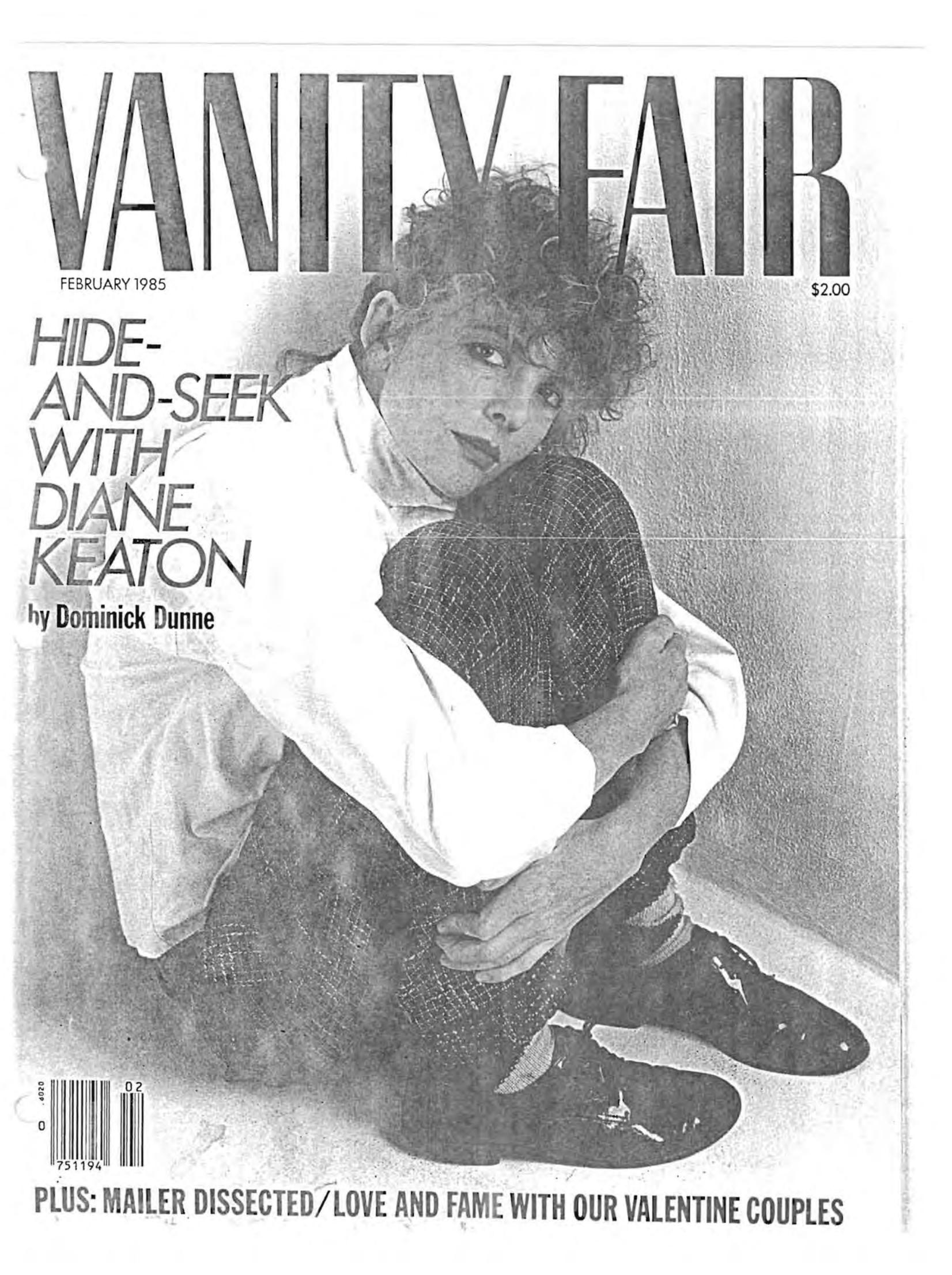


VANITY FAIR



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HIDE- AND-SEEK WITH DIANE KEATON

by Dominick Dunne



PLUS: MAILER DISSECTED/LOVE AND FAME WITH OUR VALENTINE COUPLES

INVITATION to a

The story of Velma Barfield, confessed poisoner of four people, including her mother, didn't end with her execution in a North Carolina prison. Minutes after her death by lethal injection, a team of medical experts in a speeding ambulance was working over her body, trying to get the heart pumping again. JAMES RESTON, JR., was present for the macabre event, a witness to American justice with a bizarre twist

The evening in Raleigh was cool and clear on November 1, light-sweater weather. By midnight it had become damp, and the crowd of five hundred people on the slope across from Central Prison pressed closer together. The prison had been designed like a medieval fortress; it was once awesome and frightening, a Gothic Revival castle in a swale, but now the brick towers were gone, replaced with bland, prefabricated squares of pebbled cement. The gaping entrance to the sprawling structure made it look like a basketball coliseum. Most of those standing vigil held candles, and from time to time some grave-faced soul moved his candle up and down, making a benediction in response to a flash of flame from a slit window far across the expanse of lawn, over the barbed-wire fences. Prisoners were burning envelopes.

I stood with an old friend, Daniel Pollitt, a law professor at the state university in Chapel Hill who had been Governor Jim Hunt's teacher. As a student, Hunt had openly opposed capital punishment, but in those days most North Carolinians did. Twelve years ago the governor, the lieutenant governor, and the state attorney general all opposed capital punishment. Twelve years ago, before the J. P. Stevens labor disputes, the Joan Little case, the Wilmington Ten, the 1979 Ku Klux Klan killings in Greensboro, the dignification of Jesse

Helms, the state of North Carolina was seen as the progressive beacon of the South. What had happened to this society? It was as if some curse had befallen it. Now, as the minutes ticked closer to two A.M., North Carolina was about to become the first state in twenty-two years to execute a woman.

Troubling images had filled the television screen all day. Interviews with the condemned prisoner—fleshy, stout, walking slowly and uncertainly as a consequence of six years' confinement in a small space—were replayed endlessly, and one searched her deep-blue eyes for some sign of the cold-blooded murderer. But she appeared to be a simple farm woman, and had the sound been turned off you might have thought that the topic of the interview was tomato canning. She spoke slowly about her remorse and her religion.

Along the street at the brow of the embankment where we waited, the Raleigh police had lined their cars bumper to bumper. They were afraid that some nut would careen off the road and plow into the crowd. Across Western Boulevard, a clutch of death-penalty boosters egged on the state. "Hip, hip, hurrah . . . K-I-L-L." "Burn, bitch, burn." Their delirious, high-pitched cackles floated over the scene like a bad odor. Among the sanctions brandished on their placards was Romans 13, a teaching that, ironically, Velma Barfield had quoted often in the last months, reminding her guards that they were the ministers of God. "For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil. . . . [The ruler] beareth not the sword in vain, for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil." Barfield's defense attorneys had pointed to her acceptance of that philosophy in attempting to prove the sincerity of her conversion and the transformation of her character. She had ceased to blame her crimes on her addiction to prescription drugs or on childhood abuse or on her rape by her father or on the mistreatment she had suffered from her husband or on deep depression.

This night, the boosters across the avenue were the true representatives of the people of North Carolina, 80 percent of whom were said to favor Barfield's execution. Since capital punishment was reinstated in North Carolina in 1977 there have been 3,500 murders there. In the last ten years, North Carolina has had two periods of no capital punishment, a period of optional capital punishment, a period of

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POISONING

mandatory capital punishment, and now bridled capital punishment. During those ten years the murder rate stayed about the same. Governor Hunt, nonetheless, said that common sense showed that executions deterred crime and "maximized life," as if potential murderers would now be glued to their TV screens, to see if the state would flinch.

In the parking lot across the way, a dozen television sound trucks were lined up in a row. Lights washed over their roofs, where anchormen sat in director's chairs. Generators whirred relentlessly. On the grass, newsmen milled about in front of a stained plywood lectern that had been placed upon a dais of raw lumber. A cove of microphones protruded from the lip of the lectern, awaiting the four "media witnesses," who were due to arrive around 2:20 A.M.

Earlier in the day, Patty McQuillan, the press official for the spectacle, had expressed the hope that these four witnesses would be as good as the ones who had described how life expired from James Hutchins, a cop killer who was executed at Central Prison seven months before. They had been so vivid, she said admiringly.

McQuillan had to handle the press hordes because the governor was unavailable, his aides insisting that he was preoccupied with his Senate race against Jesse Helms. The secretary of correction, the prison wardens, even the chaplains who had dealt with the condemned woman were forbidden to talk to newsmen. So for several days reporters lined up in McQuillan's office to get their briefings, and time after time she recited the mechanics of the execution with measured precision and an air of studied concern.

"In the preparation, the condemned person will be secured to the gurney with lined ankle and wrist restraints. Cardiac-monitoring leads and stethoscope leads will then be attached. Two intravenous injection devices are attached, one in each arm. Fluid lines are begun to open the veins, and that is to make sure that the vein does not collapse. The IV solution will flow for twenty minutes, and during this time the chaplain will pray with the condemned person. The warden will ask if there are any last words. . . ."

She spoke of the lined ankle and wrist restraints as evidence of the sensitivity of the state to any unnecessary pain.

Particular care had been given also to the special needs of a woman, like permitting her hair curlers and makeup, and letting her wear her own pajamas, instead of prison issue. Even though Velma Barfield would be hooked up to the apparatus and poisoned by five men, the warden had seen to it that matrons would attach the heart-monitor leads and the stethoscope to her breasts in private. She would be allowed to wear a bra. A matron would also assist in attaching Barfield's diaper. When the poison, which McQuillan generally referred to as "the muscle relaxant," reached the anal sphincter muscle, there would be a mess.

The matrons who were to assist had been brought in from rural prisons south of Raleigh because they could spare the help, I was told, but in fact strangers had to be used because of the affection for Barfield that pervaded the entire population of Women's Prison. There was anxiety that a friendly guard might do something "unprofessional" at the end.

"After the preparation of the condemned person, the correctional officers will push the gurney into the execution chamber, positioning it by the witness window. Then the curtain will be pulled behind the gurney, and the executioners will enter behind the curtain. . . ."

Three executioners, three lines running through the curtain, but one would be a "dummy line." The men would assume their stations before their respective plungers. The syringe was about the size of a generous knockwurst, the sort of thing you might use to put to sleep a cow with foot-and-mouth disease. When the plunger of the dummy line was pushed, the poison of that line would squirt harmlessly into a basket alongside the gurney. This offered each executioner the solace of thinking that perhaps he had not actually administered the *coup de grace*. It was the modern equivalent of the blank that is traditionally inserted in the rifle of a member of a firing squad.

Consoling the conscience of the executioner did not seem to be a problem, however. Aides of Warden Nathan Rice had volunteered for the job, freeing him from the burden of doing it himself or hiring someone. He was legally authorized to pay an outside executioner thirty-five dollars, but, given the present mood of the nation, Rice could probably have auctioned off the job for a pretty price.

Warden Rice is not the fat, cigar-smoking, mush-mouthed southern redneck prison overseer of American folklore. He is slender, diminutive figure with dark eyes, a brush mustache, and a round hairdo in the latest shopping-mall style. He has a soft, slightly effeminate voice, with which he occasionally shapes phrases like "*beaucoup* of volunteers." He wears tailored three-piece pin-striped suits. Such smoothness reflected well upon the system, and Rice managed to emerge from the execution spectacle with the admiration of the Barfield clan. "Within his guidelines," he had consistently been gracious and sensitive, and it was appreciated. The night before she died, when Barfield hankered for a Kit Kat candy bar, Rice *personally* saw to it that she got one. "He didn't have to do that," the condemned woman had observed gratefully.

For the execution, the warden needed sixteen people, once the guides for the condemned, and the witnesses, and the chaplain were thrown in. Several weeks before the poisoning, he gathered his team together and spoke of how he counted on them to behave "professionally" and "with as much dignity as possible." Then they had five dry runs. They practiced from a checklist that was timed out to the minute. The two men who would insert the needles had the hardest job, because hitting a vein accurately takes skill. Nervousness alone causes normal veins to flatten, and if the subject is on the heavy side, as was Velma Barfield, the vein might be so covered with layers of fat as to make it invisible. An amateur injector could miss the mark and cause excruciating pain. Later, Warden Rice told me he uses people who were battlefield corpsmen in Vietnam.

"We had no problems with the Hutchins execution," McQuillan reassured me, "and we don't anticipate any problem with this execution."

The official explanation for carrying out the deed in the middle of the night was security. All the prisoners would be safely locked up. But at one o'clock on the morning of November 2, the eerie metallic sound of inmates beating cups against their cells seeped from the prison. That the sentiments of protest did not create further problems for the warden was probably due to Velma Barfield, who had asked her lawyer to announce at a prison church service several weeks earlier that the last thing she wanted was any action by the inmates which would prevent her from going with dignity.

The real reason that the execution was hidden in darkness, of course, had to do with public relations. It was a good guess that the crowds would be small at two A.M., and it was not likely that many North Carolinians would stay up to catch the live coverage provided by the local TV stations. By the following evening Barfield's fate would be stale news and buried on network television.

Two days before the vigil for Velma Barfield, and six days before the election, the polls in the tight senatorial race showed Jesse Helms, cult leader of the New Right, ahead for the first time, with 47 percent of the vote. Jim Hunt, symbol of the progressive New South, limped behind with 43 percent. They had campaigned for two years. Now, at the end, a thick-tongued and snarling Helms was blustering about the queers, crooks, labor-union bosses, and jerks who supported

Hunt, while his opponent, earnest and humorless, was talking about Jerry Falwell, Sun Myung Moon, and the right-wing dictators who supported Helms.

Governor Hunt had been Velma Barfield's last real hope for a reprieve, and he had failed her by refusing clemency. The South, a region encumbered with notions of chivalry and gentility and the pedestal, was about to break a twenty-two-year-old taboo against executing women. And the woman these Southerners were going to kill was a born-again Christian.

Six years earlier, sometime deep into the eight months that she spent in the tiny Robeson County Jail, Velma Barfield was listening to a radio evangelist named J. K. Kinkle. Kinkle had said, "Jesus loves you prisoners too. He died for you too. No matter what you've done, the Lord will forgive you." Velma Barfield had fallen to her knees, weeping and asking the Lord if He could forgive even her. Since her conversion, she had been instructed by two ministers, the Reverend Hugh Hoyle and the Reverend Sam Roane, who during the last five months had been joined by Anne Lotz, the daughter of Billy and Ruth Graham.

Up until the day Barfield died, those who wanted her dead—primarily the families of her victims and her prosecutor, Joe Freeman Britt, who is distinguished by having put more people on death row than any other prosecutor in America—maintained that this born-again-Christian stuff was a pose. But during the months before her execution, Velma Barfield got sweeter, more serene, more sensitive to the needs of her family and her guards. To a friend she said, "The best years of my life were in Women's Prison." Her sincerity was testified to not only by the preachers who counseled her but by the guards who attended her. (At Barfield's memorial service, Jenny Lancaster, the superintendent of Women's Prison, spoke of her profound grief and sense of bereavement. "I feel as if I've lost a child.")

Barfield's case posed the question of how the justice system could deal with genuine contrition and rehabilitation. If the state would not temper its justice with mercy for her, it would stop at nothing. The boundaries of redemption and gender were about to be transgressed, and what did that leave? Only adolescence. On death row in North Carolina there was a murderer who had committed his crime at the age of fifteen. The boy came from Velma Barfield's county, and had been prosecuted by Joe Freeman Britt.

On September 27, Governor Hunt had announced his decision. "I cannot in good conscience justify making an exception to the law...or overruling those twelve jurors, who...concluded that Mrs. Barfield should pay the maximum penalty for her brutal actions. Death by arsenic poisoning is slow and agonizing. Victims are literally tortured to death." Justice would be pure: the arsenic poisoner would in turn be poisoned. Her arsenic was to be matched by the state's pancuronium bromide, its "muscle relaxant," which works like the substance with which South American savages poison the tips of their spears.

To have commuted the sentence would surely have won Hunt the election, but not commuting it was doing so as well. Jim Hunt was supposed to be the candidate of light against the forces of darkness, and yet he was letting

woman die. The carnival of death dampened the enthusiasm of his supporters, especially in the final week. Quietly but inevitably, this was reflected in the polls.

Barfield had become the "emotional wild card" of the election. Liberals were afraid to mention her for fear that any criticism of Hunt would benefit Helms. An old friend and a Hunt appointee, Judge Karen Galloway of Durham, said to me, "This woman is going to die because of politics."

Velma Barfield, with her spiritual advisers, began to plan her funeral. The Scriptures she chose emphasized the wisdom of God's overall plan. She liked the idea of Acts 7 being woven in, about martyrdom and the stoning of Stephen: "They stoned Stephen... and he kneeled down, and cried with a loud voice, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge." The choice of being gassed or poisoned was put to her. Warden Rice explained the specifics. There was no hard evidence on which method caused the most physical pain, and for Barfield it was a question of the final spectacle. She chose poison. To visitors she kept repeating that the death chamber would be her gateway to heaven.

Shortly after the governor's denial of clemency she announced her desire to donate her organs for transplant. This was to be her final act of restitution, and while her children at first shuddered at the idea, they had been convinced that this was a way that their mother could go on living. They liked the idea of Velma Barfield's heart pumping in someone else. Under the Anatomical Gift Act of North Carolina, she clearly had the legal right to make the donations, but there were medical and public-relations questions involved. How might her right to donate conflict with the state's right to kill? What effect would the poison in her system have on her organs? What would it look like to the public? This was new territory. For three days before Barfield's big moment, state officials were thrown into a sweat.

The secretary of correction, James Woodard, a large, fleshy man who had spent much of his career as the clerk of a rural county court, was against it. On Tuesday before the fateful Thursday night, a representative of the National Transplant Foundation, which was coordinating the donation, laid out a proposal. The medical team needed to get the body quickly, for her greatest gift would be her kidneys, which could save someone's life, and to save her kidneys her heart had to be restarted within three to six minutes so that blood would continue to pump.

Woodard's paranoia shot up. He bridled at the idea of outsiders in his institution, telling his people what to do. What if the media witnesses saw that? And he recalled in agitation the "New Mexico" rumor. This was the story that James Hutchins, the man killed by injection in March, had recently been seen walking the streets of New Mexico. Now doctors were proposing to receive Barfield at the door of the death chamber, after she had been injected and pronounced dead, to inject her a second time, with epinephrine, a heart stimulant, and to slap an Ambu bag on her chest in an attempt to get her heart pumping again. What if she rose up from the table! Even if she didn't, the public might believe

she never died. Might they have to execute her again?

The National Transplant Foundation had other problems. Duke University Medical Center and eventually the Wake County Medical Center in Raleigh refused to be involved. The team of doctors who had agreed to perform the extraction came from the Bowman Gray Medical Center in Winston-Salem, a hundred miles away. All they needed was an operating room, but none in the vicinity was being offered. There was, of course, a fully equipped hospital inside Cen-

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tral Prison itself, but there was no point in asking Woodard for that. He was running an execution, not a charity.

Wednesday morning, with the execution less than forty hours away, Jimmie Little, Barfield's attorney, was locked in argument before the U.S. District Court in Raleigh when he learned that Woodard's obstructionism had hardened into total opposition. Within hours, Little had a judge lined up for the next day, poisoning day, to hear Barfield's complaint against Woodard. Since Woodard was Hunt's political appointee, the governor's office was notified that afternoon that Hunt would also be named in the lawsuit. If the hearing took place, a stay of execution for another thirty to sixty days was very likely. With the circus atmosphere building, reporters arriving from all over the globe, HBO doing a documentary film, and Canadian officials in attendance to observe the process (as Canada considered reinstating the death penalty), the last thing the governor wanted was a stay over this. He was now in jeopardy, three working days before the election, of being named in a lawsuit charging that he was not only allowing Barfield to die but blocking her legal right to donate her organs as well. Hunt told Woodard to back off.

But Woodard still had charge of the policy under which Barfield was to be declared dead, and what was *dead*? When the brain was dead? Or when the heart was dead? Or both? If the brain was dead but the heart still functioned by pumping blood to the organs, was that *alive*? If so, were the doctors who performed the organ extraction the real executioners? To several people Woodard repeated the question, What if she rises up and starts talking? He insisted that the cardiac monitor show a straight line, and that the prison doctor wait a full five minutes before pronouncing her dead. This decision made the chance very remote that Barfield's kidneys would be usable.

Meanwhile, Velma Barfield, composed and reportedly in good spirits, spent her time in prayer and crocheting. If she was the ultimate victor now, in some metaphysical sense, her victory lay in this last scene. She (*Continued on page 101*)

A Poisoning

(Continued from page 85) was totally at peace with herself and with the world around her. Each day that last week her minister and his wife had come to the prison, bringing with them a battery-powered portable organ. While his wife played, Roane sang Barfield's favorites: "His Eye Is on the Sparrow," "He Hideth My Soul," "He Is So Precious to Me." Cramped in the tiny visiting booth, the minister pressed the words against a glass divider, and while Mrs. Roane played, Barfield sang along.

Thursday morning the documents were signed, clearing the way for the transplant. But where to do it? The last resort was Bowman Gray hospital, but the hospital lawyer there was not satisfied that things were in order until 10:30 P.M. on Thursday night, three and a half hours before Velma Barfield was to be wheeled into the chamber.

It was the week that Baby Fae got the heart of a baboon. "Perhaps," Professor Pollitt remarked as we stood on the grassy slope outside the prison, "they will give Velma's heart to a baboon."

Toward two o'clock a gaunt official with a tweedy Princetonian look passed among the milling press, handing out Barfield's statement of apology to those she had pained and gratitude to those who had supported her. Reporters clustered around him for information about the last meal.

That part of the show fascinated everyone. It was as if the public expected their condemned to end life on a note of gluttony. But Velma Barfield disappointed. She said she would have the regular prison fare for the night: fried chicken livers, collard greens, and sheet cake with peanut-butter icing. When it arrived, she lost her appetite and asked instead for a Coke and a bag of Cheez Doodles from the canteen. Her guard collected forty-five cents.

At 2 A.M. the cheerleaders, inspired by the collective sadism induced by the spectacle, began to chant "Kill her! Kill her! Kill her!" and at 2:15 it was as if the home team had just scored the winning touchdown. They called out her name over and over, "Velma! Velma! Velma!" and spelled it out, "V-E-L-M-A." At 2:20 A.M. the witnesses

emerged, escorted by Woodard's special assistant, Phillip Brown.

Within the prison walls the gurney was being raced down the corridors. When the elevator doors on the ground floor opened, officials signed and flung documents at one another: the death certificate, the receipt for the body, and the like. A doctor slapped an Ambu bag on Velma Barfield's chest, another inserted the endotracheal tube. Because they had not received legal permission to do so, they did not inject her with the heart stimulant, epinephrine. Someone was yelling "Move it! Move it!" as the team raced toward the waiting ambulance. First attempts at resuscitation brought no response. Twelve minutes had passed since Velma Barfield's heart had "straight-lined." Once inside the ambulance, the medical team worked feverishly, shouting instructions to one another. Dr. Jesse Meredith, who is also chairman of the state board of health, pushed forcefully on the chest with regular, hard thrusts. Pressed against the back of the cab, the representative of the National Transplant Foundation watched, with the death certificate in his hand. Barfield's complexion began to turn from ashen gray to a rosy color, and he grew frightened. It was 2:23 A.M.

"I have an announcement to make," Phillip Brown was saying to the press outside. "At 2:15 Velma Barfield, in accordance with the mandate of the sentencing court, was pronounced dead. The execution was carried out smoothly and without incident."

The four witnesses assumed the podium one by one. It was another public-relations triumph, for, as one witness would say, more to justify her own presence than to underscore the official embarrassment, "I don't know how many law-enforcement officers would want to come out here and face you all now." The reporters had been allowed no pen and paper in the witness room, but they were given two minutes for notes afterward. Now there issued forth a tissue of nearly irrelevant detail. The time was 1:48 A.M. when the door of the death chamber was first opened and they could see Barfield on the gurney. The guard in the suffocatingly intimate witness room, an eight-by-thirteen-foot trapezoid, kept jingling change. A fat fly buzzed over Barfield's face once as she was positioned in front of the window. The curtain behind

which the executioners stood billowed when someone brushed against it. Afterward, Warden Rice thanked them for coming. They had seen everything, and nothing.

Velma Barfield had glanced once into the chamber, into her exotic gateway to heaven, and then she had turned her face to her right shoulder, closing her eyes.

Meanwhile, in the ambulance, hope dwindled. The doctors had said that they needed to receive the body within three to six minutes of a straight line to have a chance to start the heart and "harvest" the kidneys. They had wanted to be just outside the chamber. Woodard would not permit it. The witnesses might see them. They wanted to be down the corridor. No. The witnesses would still be jotting down their notes. Their donor arrived in nine minutes. Even with hope virtually gone, Dr. Meredith continued his efforts for twenty-five minutes into the two-hour trip to Winston-Salem before he slumped back exhausted. That Velma Barfield might have sat up and spoken was to him only science fiction. The ethical issue lay in the act of attaching a brain monitor to see if there was any sign of life. Later Meredith told me that he didn't attach the brain apparatus. He would not ask the life-or-death question. "It was not my question to ask," he said.

Karen Finucan, a witness from a Fayetteville radio station, stepped to the microphones. "About seven minutes after the procedure began, you could see the color draining from her face. It started across the forehead, becoming an ash gray, and slowly moving down the rest of her face... into her neck... her ears losing color..."

"How do you feel?" someone shouted from below.

"A little numb right now," she replied. "I don't think it's quite hit me yet. It's going to take some time. It's amazing how distracted you can be from what is going on. It was easy to keep my mind on things other than the fact that this woman was actually dying."

A week later I called Finucan to see what, over time, had hit her.

"It did not change my mind," she allowed. "I favored capital punishment before, and I still do, despite the experience. Indeed, it reinforced my view. It was so peaceful. The amazing thing is that there was so little to it." □