

THE DEATH PENALTY



Gerard Feller

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Expanded Edition

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An English translation of the expanded Dutch story

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The inner thoughts and supporting characters portrayed in this story are works of literary imagination.

1 - Beneath the City

B. wanted to smash his head against the bars, but he knew that every movement might attract the guards. So he remained crouched against a wall as cold and damp as the inside of a tomb. Above him, Jerusalem celebrated the feast of deliverance. Down here there was only the certainty of Rome.

Thirty men were packed into a room scarcely fit for ten. The air tasted of rust, urine and fear. From the torture chamber next door came a scream that stopped abruptly. An old prisoner whispered a psalm and lost the words halfway through. No one asked why.

B. counted the footsteps in the passage. Four to the left. Silence. A bolt. Seven back. During the uprising he had learned that fear grew smaller when confined within numbers. Yet one sentence kept pounding through his skull: It is over for me. It was not death he feared, he told himself, but the way Rome stripped a man of his dignity first.

Dried blood marked his wrists. In his mind he saw the courtyard where the revolt had failed: an overturned cart, a soldier with a spear, his own knife flashing. He had shouted freedom. One man had fallen. Perhaps two. Somewhere in the distance, timber scraped across stone.

2 - The Price of Resistance

Three days earlier the city had smelled of roasted herbs and fresh bread. Pilgrims crowded the streets, and every rumour spread faster than flame through dry grass. Some spoke of a king from Galilee, others of a tax revolt. B. did not believe in kings who came without swords.

His group had hidden weapons beneath sacks of grain. At the changing of the guard they would free a prisoner, raid the armoury and vanish among the festival crowds. Simple plans are dangerous, his father had once said, because people forget how many ways simplicity can break.

The boy who was to open the gate never came. A Roman patrol appeared too soon. Someone shouted betrayal. After that the world was metal, dust and bodies. B. remembered his dagger striking a leather breastplate and the surprise in the young soldier's eyes. Not a monster, but a boy. The insight came one heartbeat too late.

In the cell the survivors whispered that B. had been their leader. He wanted to contradict them. Leaders have a way out; he had merely shouted the loudest. Asked whether he felt remorse, he said remorse was a luxury for free men. Yet in the dark the soldier's face kept returning.

3 - The Interrogator

The chief jailer was called Cassianus. His hands were like millstones, and he spoke softly so that prisoners had to lean closer to hear their sentence. That night he had B. taken from the cell - not to the torture chamber, but to a room containing a table, an oil lamp and a bowl of water.

"Names," Cassianus said. "Give me three, and perhaps you will die quickly." Dust floated on the water. B. thought of the comrades who had celebrated his courage and might now be cursing him. "I know only my own," he replied.

The jailer pushed forward a wooden tablet bearing the charge: insurrection, robbery, murder. Three words, enough for one cross. "Tomorrow the governor will offer the people a favour," he said. "Festival politics. One prisoner may go. Do not expect a miracle. People love heroes only while heroes remain at a safe distance."

B. laughed hoarsely. "And you love the law while you hold the whip." Cassianus struck him once, precisely and without anger. B. tasted blood. "I love order," the jailer said. "You have discovered what order costs."

4 - Above the Dungeons

Above the prison, negotiations began before sunrise. Priests, councillors and Roman officials moved through marble corridors that returned the sound of their sandals. No one spoke of truth. They spoke of risk, public order and the hour at which a crowd might become dangerous.

The governor had questioned a man whom some called a king. The accusation was strange: no hidden daggers, no plundered arsenal, no list of slain soldiers. His offence seemed to consist of words that made people freer than rulers could tolerate.

A secretary placed two files side by side. One was thick with testimony, blood and earlier arrests. The other contained contradictory statements and hastily gathered charges. Yet politics weighed more heavily on the table than evidence. Outside, the noise increased.

Below, B. knew nothing of this calculation. He heard doors, commands and a cock crowing for the first time. A fellow prisoner said an innocent man could be more dangerous than a murderer, because his existence proved the system capable of lying. B. said every system lied. The words remained with him.

5 - The Square

At daybreak several prisoners were pressed against a grille in the wall. Through its narrow openings they could see one corner of the square. The crowd was not a single creature. It held the curious, the frightened, paid agitators, confused pilgrims and parents lifting children onto their shoulders.

A voice above asked a question. The answer came scattered at first, then rhythmically. B. could not make out the words. He heard only how repetition turned uncertainty into conviction. Cassianus walked past the cells, tapping his keys against the bars.

“They are choosing,” said the old prisoner. “The people always choose what they later deny having chosen.” B. closed his eyes. An impossible longing rose in him: that his comrades stood in the square, that they would sell his crimes as heroism and force Rome to yield for once.

Then came cheering - not the warmth of victory, but the sharp sound of a crowd scenting blood. A name was shouted, blurred by stone and distance. Another word followed, one everyone understood: crucify. The old man beside B. began to weep. “For whom?” B. asked. “For all of us,” he said.

6 - The Scourging Yard

On the far side of the courtyard, the man from Galilee was bound to a low post. The soldiers performed their task as craftsmen perform unpleasant labour: methodically, without needing to see the person before them. Leather thongs fell; fragments of metal and bone tore open the skin.

A young recruit turned his face away. His superior forced him to look again. “Pity makes you slow,” he said. Yet the recruit felt something he could not name. The condemned man did not curse. He did not beg for revenge. Between two blows, he prayed.

When the scourging ended, the soldiers brought a faded cloak and a crown woven from thorn branches. Their game was meant as a warning: this was what a king looked like when Rome had finished with him. They bowed in mockery and beat the thorns with a staff.

From a passageway Cassianus caught the prisoner's gaze. He had seen hundreds of broken men, but this man did not seem broken. His body was failing; something else remained standing. Two men, two death sentences - and somewhere a decision was being made about which name would disappear from the list.

7 - Free

The bolt slid back. Two guards dragged B. upright and hauled him before Cassianus. He expected the torture chamber. Instead, his belt lay on the table beside the worn cord from which his knife had once hung.

“You are free,” the jailer snapped. B. stared at him. “A filthy political game. Someone else has been condemned in your place. But you and I know who killed those soldiers. We will see you again, and next time you will receive a double portion.”

B. did not move. Freedom was a word he had shouted so often that it had lost its meaning. Now that it had become real, he did not trust it. “Who?” he asked. Cassianus pointed to the door. “You do not need to know.”

Outside, the sunlight blinded him. He expected a spear in his back, laughter, an order recalling him. Nothing came. The ordinary world continued as though a death sentence had not just been lifted from one pair of shoulders and laid upon another.

8 - The Survivor's Feast

His former comrades welcomed him with shouting. Someone smashed a wine jar against the wall. Another declared that Rome had bowed before the courage of the resistance. B. let them talk. He drank because silence would invite questions.

They wanted to know how he had deceived the guards. He did not tell them about the square, the unknown name and the word crucify. Instead he made a joke about Cassianus. Everyone laughed too loudly. By midnight they were singing freedom songs and had crowned him with a strip of red cloth.

Yet whenever someone cried that he had escaped death, B. heard the words differently: someone else had not. In the wine he saw the face of the young soldier he had killed. Beside it now appeared a face he had never seen.

A girl of about nine stood in the doorway. Her father pulled her away, but not before she asked, "Are you the man for whom they are going to kill someone else?" The room fell silent. B. put down his cup. "Children should be asleep," he said.

9 - The Hangover

Near noon B. awoke on a floor sticky with wine. His head throbbed. Outside came shouting, distant at first and then drawing nearer. Not an uprising, he realised. A procession.

He washed his face, but the water could not remove the smell of the dungeon. People streamed towards the gate. Women wept. Soldiers used the flats of their spears to clear a path. Between the bodies B. glimpsed a heavy wooden beam.

He had watched execution processions before, with the detachment of a man convinced that he himself would never end that way. Now every scrape of timber burned in his wrists. He wanted to return, close the door and drink again. Instead he followed the crowd.

A merchant said three men would be crucified. Two were criminals. The third was a wonder-worker who had allowed himself to be called a king. “Nonsense,” another said. “He healed the sick.” A third replied, “Today no one will heal him.”

10 - The Man Beneath the Timber

When the dust thinned, B. saw him. The condemned man was younger than he had expected. His face was swollen, his back a single open wound. Blood ran from a crown of thorns along his temples and mixed with dust. The crossbeam pressed upon ruined muscles.

He fell. The timber struck the stones. The crowd recoiled and immediately surged forward again. A soldier cursed and seized a man from the spectators to carry the beam. The prisoner tried to rise, not from strength, B. thought, but because some task awaited him farther along the road.

B. hid behind a group of jeering men. Was this the one who had received his place? Had this man attacked a soldier with a knife? Had his hands shed blood? The hands B. saw were bound and swollen.

A woman beside him whispered the name Jesus. She spoke it not as an accusation but as a prayer. B. knew stories about him: a teacher who loved enemies and spoke of a kingdom that did not come by violence. He had laughed at them. Now that kingdom passed him, bleeding.

11 - Eyes

At the narrowest part of the street the procession stopped. A donkey cart blocked the way. Soldiers shouted, people pushed and children cried. Amid the chaos Jesus raised himself. It seemed impossible that he was still able to look at anyone.

His eyes passed over the mourning women, the soldiers, the curious and the mockers. Then his gaze rested on B. Not by accident. Not fleetingly. It was as though he had searched for him among hundreds of faces.

B. felt everything he had concealed exposed: the first theft that had bought bread for his mother, the pride when men called him leader, the knife, the soldier, the lie that violence had kept him pure. He expected disgust in Jesus' eyes. There was sorrow, but no contempt.

The sounds of the street receded. B. heard no words, yet a message entered places language could not reach: I know who you are. I know what you have done. I am going on. He seized the wall to keep from falling. Then the procession moved again.

12 - To the Place of the Skull

B. followed at a distance. Every step was a choice not to flee. Outside the gate the sky widened and the people grew crueller. The execution hill lay bare beneath the heavens. Upright posts stood like dead trees.

The other two condemned men screamed and resisted. Jesus allowed himself to be laid upon the wood. When the hammer fell, B. flinched at every blow as though the nails passed through his own wrists. He knew how crucifixion worked: a prisoner had to raise himself again and again in order to breathe.

Above Jesus they fixed a notice calling him king. Some laughed. Others objected to the wording. Rome turned every title into a joke once a body hung beneath it.

B. stood behind a rock. He could leave. His friends were waiting, wine remained, and the city offered a thousand alleys in which a guilty man might disappear. But he stayed. For the first time, he wanted to witness history without forcing its course by violence.

13 - The Hours of Guilt

The sun climbed and breathing on the crosses grew heavier. Soldiers divided clothing and cast lots. An officer kept track of time. For him, death was a schedule. For the women near the cross, every minute was a wound.

One crucified man cursed Jesus. The other defended him with failing breath. B. heard only fragments, yet saw that even there - between nails and mockery - a promise was given. It angered him. Why should a dying criminal receive hope while he walked free?

He picked up a stone and wanted to throw it at the inscription above Jesus. Not at the man, he told himself, only at the lie of his kingship. His arm would not rise. The stone dropped from his hand.

Jesus spoke of forgiveness for those who did not know what they were doing. B. wanted to shout that he had known exactly what he was doing. Yet beneath that truth lay another: he had never understood what hatred would finally make of a man.

14 - Darkness

Around midday the light changed. Shadows widened strangely and conversations died. Even the soldiers looked upward. Darkness pressed upon the hill as though creation itself had closed its eyes.

B. heard Jesus cry out from an abandonment greater than bodily pain. It was not theatre, nor any defeat he could understand. The man who had promised others nearness passed through a loneliness no one could share.

In the darkness B. saw himself once more in the dungeon. He remembered wishing that another might take his place. He had not asked who. Now he stood inside the answer to his own cowardly prayer.

Beside him an old woman said, “He is carrying what we cannot carry.” B. asked what she meant. She did not answer. On the hill Jesus bowed his head, but not yet in death. He seemed to be listening to a voice beyond Rome and beyond the guilt of one released prisoner.

15 - It Is Finished

When the end came, it did not resemble the fading of a defeated man. Jesus gathered his last breath and spoke with a force that did not belong to his broken body. It is finished. Then he yielded his spirit.

The earth moved. Stones rolled, people screamed and the crowd fled from the hill. A Roman officer remained, staring at the cross as though his entire vision of the world had been split open. B. fell to his knees.

He had believed freedom meant an opening door and no one stopping him. Now he saw that he remained imprisoned: by anger, by his heroic self-story, by the need to place guilt outside himself. The man on the cross had borne his Roman sentence. The gaze in the street had pointed deeper.

When a soldier pierced Jesus' side, B. finally turned away. Not because he could endure no more, but because he had to return to those who celebrated him. He must tell them that his release was not a victory.

16 - The Empty Chair

The wine jars had been filled again. The men cheered when B. entered, but their voices faded when they saw his face. He removed the red strip from his head and placed it on the empty chair.

“Rome has lost,” a comrade said. “You are alive.” B. shook his head. “Someone else has died.” He told them about the procession, the nails and the gaze. Not everyone believed him. One man called Jesus a weak dreamer who had failed to seize power.

B. almost struck him. His fist was already clenched when he saw Jesus' eyes again - sorrow without contempt. Slowly he opened his hand. That small gesture cost him more than a battle.

The girl appeared in the doorway. “Was he angry with you?” she asked. B. sank to his knees. “No,” he said, his voice breaking. “That was the worst of it. And perhaps the best.” For the first time since childhood, he wept where others could see him.

17 - The Third Morning

During the following days B. wandered through Jerusalem. He avoided the guards while seeking people who had known Jesus. A fisherman told him the tomb had been guarded. A woman said Jesus had given forgiveness to those whom no respectable person would welcome at a table.

On the third morning an impossible rumour spread: the stone had been moved, the tomb was empty, women had seen him. B. answered with his old reflex of mockery. The dead did not return. Crosses were the only promises Rome always kept.

But hope moved deep within him, more dangerous than revolt. If Jesus lived, the encounter in the street had not been merely the final gaze of a dying man. B. could be seen again - wholly, without a mask. He did not know whether he longed for that or fled from it.

Cassianus found him beside a well. The jailer wore no helmet. "I examined the execution list," he said. "His death stood where yours should have been." B. replied, "I know." Cassianus studied him. "No," he said. "You are only beginning to know."

18 - The Name

Weeks later B. stood again in the street where Jesus had looked at him. Rain had washed the stones clean, yet he knew exactly where the blood had lain. Cassianus stood beside him. The girl was there too, her hand safely held by her father.

“If he truly lives,” Cassianus asked, “what will you do with the life you were given back?” B. looked at his hands. “I cannot undo the past,” he said. “But I can refuse to let it remain my king.”

At the end of the street appeared a woman who had followed Jesus. B. wanted to leave, but she did not stop him with an accusation. She said Jesus had wished peace to his followers - even those who had fled, even those who had failed.

Then at last she spoke his name. Not like the cry of an incited crowd. Not like an entry on a charge sheet. She spoke as though a name could be returned to the human being hidden beneath it.

“Barabbas.”

He raised his head. In memory Jesus stood once more beneath the beam, tortured and near collapse, yet with eyes in which love was stronger than the sentence. Now Barabbas understood the silent words: Out of love for you, I took your place.

The released man closed his eyes. For the first time, freedom did not feel like escape. It felt like a road on which every step would forever be owed to Someone else.