[Snap Judgment intro]

[somber music]

**Glynn:** There are elaborate, multimillion dollar exquisitely maintained machines used to help preserve someone's life. But machines used to take someone's life away. They're often very simple.

Today, a very special Snap Judgment. We proudly present Father Forgive Them. My name is Glynn Washington. Please tell everyone, you're going to need a minute because you're listening to Snap Judgment.

[upbeat music]

**Glynn:** Due to the extraordinary generosity of people giving us a window into their lives, this week, Snap Judgment visits a very different kind of place with a very different kind of community. We're going inside Oklahoma State Penitentiary's death row. And as such, this program includes strong language and references to penal executions. At the time of our recording, Oklahoma was trying to fit in as many executions as possible. We're going to meet three of the men on death row. And you'll also hear from two reporters, Ellie Lightfoot and Gaby Caplan, who are going to help us navigate through an often, unseen world. Snap Judgment.

**Ellie:** In Oklahoma, there's one prison that holds all the men sentenced to death. It's called Oklahoma State Penitentiary. And in that prison, there's a row of cells called the death watch cells. They operate almost like a conveyor belt. As one man is killed by the state, the next man moves into his cell and takes his place in line. And every man in every cell that follows moves down that line. The final cell is cell Double L.

**Bigler:** They moved me today. And LL is next to the execution chamber.

**Ellie:** There's Bigler Stouffer in the cell closest to the execution chamber.

**Bigler:** I'm 79 years. If the Lord wants me to come home, I'll be ready.

**Gaby:** And two cells down the hallway from him is Wade Lay.

**Bigler:** I'm only about 30ft away from his cell, and about 45ft away from the death chamber.

**Ellie:** And then finally, in that last cell is Donald Grant.

**Donald:** You know, officers are saying that they'll botch me. I'll have a botched execution and make me suffer.

**Gaby:** Just as a disclaimer, although we will mention what these men were convicted of, this story is not about that. It's not a story about guilt or innocence.

**Ellie:** It's a story about existing in this kind of liminal space with one foot in life and one foot beyond.

**Automated Response:** Hello, this is a collect call from--

**Bigler:** Bud Stouffer.

**Automated Response:** An incarcerated individual at Oklahoma State Penitentiary. To consent to this recorded call, press one.

[automated phone call response]

**Automated Response:** Thank you for using Securus. You may start the conversation now.

**Ellie:** Bigler has been on death row now for 36 years. He's here because, in 1985, he was sentenced to death for the fatal shooting of an elementary school teacher. When we start talking to him, he's nine days away from his execution. He's just moved a cell closer to the chamber.

When did they move you over here, and what was it like?

**Bigler:** I can't tell a difference. Let me feel. I feel the same.

**Ellie:** [laughs]Understood. Understood.

All the cells are dark. These concrete boxes, no bigger than a parking space where he has to spend 23 hours a day trapped inside.

**Bigler:** It's about 7.5ft and or 8ft wide. Has a concrete bunk on each side. It's concrete upon concrete upon concrete.

**Ellie:** No windows?

**Bigler:** [chuckles] This whole unit is underground.

**Ellie:** What's that process like, do you know?

**Bigler:** The execution?

**Ellie:** Yeah. The lead up to in the final hours and days.

**Bigler:** They strap you to a bed, put your arms out to your side, put needles in your veins and then they just add the drugs that they want to kill you with.

**Ellie:** Does that make you nervous, knowing that?

**Bigler:** No, ma'am. Not at all.

**Ellie:** Have you thought about if you would say anything?

**Bigler:** I have and I will, and my last comments will be, "Father, forgive them."

**Ellie:** For Bigler, everything comes back to this unwavering faith that the Lord has a plan.

**Bigler:** I'm ready to go anytime He's ready. And if next Thursday is His time for me to come home, then that's fine with me. If He has something more purposeful me to do on this earth, I'm ready to do that too.

**Ellie:** Bigler has a daughter. She lives in Tulsa, about an hour and a half away. And unlike her dad, she can't rely on faith alone for comfort or answers.

**Suzanne:** It is about 06:58, and I am fixing to walk out the door to go see my dad for potentially, what may be, my last visit with him.

**Ellie:** Her name is Suzanne, and we asked her to record audio diaries. Her dad is now just five days away from his execution.

**Suzanne:** I really don't know how to conduct the visit. I don't know, if I just talk about life or do we talk about what's possibly up and coming?

**Ellie:** It's been two decades since they've seen each other.

**Suzanne:** Prior to the charges, he was absent father, still. My mother was married when she slept and got pregnant with me. Yeah, I'm the product of an affair.

**Ellie:** Bigler was the type of dad who was absent the majority of the time. But when he was present, he was present.

**Suzanne:** He would come and he would take us out to dinner and things. He's always dressed to the nines. He's just always presented so invincible to me.

**Ellie:** But then, Bigler would leave. And over time, the space between their visits got longer. And then one day, she was cooking dinner and heard something on the news. It was her dad's name.

**Male Newsreader:** That death row inmate Bigler Stouffer, will be executed on December 9th.

**Female Newsreader:** That is, unless Governor Stitt grants clemency or an appeal is granted by a higher court.

**Suzanne:** Seeing flashes of my dad on TV, it was almost easier to dissociate from the man that's on death row now, because that's not who I remember. But when they started flashing pictures of my daddy, just triggered everything. It just came back. And all I knew is I needed to get to him.

So, on Friday, I arrive at the Oklahoma State Penitentiary, 10:00 after 09:00, desperate to get to the front doors to not lose one more second of time with my dad.

**Ellie:** When she finally gets to the visiting room, she sees a row of windows.

**Suzanne:** It's so uninviting and concrete. You're surrounded in concrete. So, every sound was so loud and magnified.

**Ellie:** On Oklahoma's death row, there's no phone you can pick up to talk. There's just a few holes punched in the plexiglass that divide the men from their loved ones. So, at each window, people are yelling to the person opposite them, trying to be heard.

**Suzanne:** You pick a window and you wait. You wait for your dad to arrive, searching for any sign of distress that he may not convey to me, because that's not how dad portrays himself to his daughter.

And he kept saying, " We're good. This is going to be a happy. This is a happy thing. This is a happy thing."

**Bigler:** I have zero fear. Zero. The word tells us that to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord. When this earth suit dies, my soul goes on forever.

**Ellie:** Man, if he's putting on a game, he's doing a hell of a job of it, because I'm impressed.

**Bigler:** She was in tears when she first got here, and she was in tears when she left. That part hurts.

**Suzanne:** It was the tears in my eyes looking at him in his eyes like, “How did we get here and where is this going?”

**Ellie:** The visit is non-contact, so they can't hug.

**Ellie:** Can you explain to me how that fails?

**Bigler:** Oh, it's so restrictive. It's just exactly like what you think it would be. You feel like an animal. It made it very hard to not be able touch her or hug her. She didn't want to leave, obviously, but I told her to get on back to work.

**Suzanne:** After I left that visit, I was full of positivity, hope. So, I went ahead and I went home and I laid down on my bed and I crashed.

Hello, bud. How are you?

**Bigler:** Have you been watching the news at all?

**Suzanne:** I have.

**Bigler:** Hold on just a second. I'll turn this up for you.

[TV playing]

**Bigler:** Okay. It was just on ABC. That's what they were just saying.

**Suzanne:** What happened?

**Bigler:** The governor has turned us down on clemency. One step closer to the Lord.

**Suzanne:** I woke up in a panic, reached over and grabbed my phone, and there it was. Governor Stitt has denied the clemency for Bigler Jobe Stouffer. Execution is planned for December 9th.

**Ellie:** Two days before his execution date, we talked to him. And one of the things we ask him is if he's chosen a last meal.

**Bigler:** No, I don't know what I would want for a last meal. I got me some tuna fish and I got some peanut butter and jelly crackers. So, I'll be just fine.

**Ellie:** At this point, it doesn't seem to matter to Bigler, if they kill him or even how they kill him. All that matters to him is this final rite of passage known as laying hands. In the Bible, laying hands symbolizes the transfer of something invisible, something holy. For Bigler, it means that his soul would be guided to heaven by the Holy Spirit Himself.

**Bigler:** Then you're out of all pain. You have no subjection to hate and envy. You have total peace forever.

**Ellie:** Technically, the rules say the men can choose a spiritual advisor to be with them during the execution. So, Bigler chooses his friend, the Reverend Howard Potts. But he's worried something could go wrong.

**Bigler:** I have always sensed that as he starts to lay hands on me or something, they're going to throw him out of the room. We're dealing with people who have no integrity. If a CO walks up to him and says, "You got to get out of here," then he has already agreed to comply with any instructions.

**Ellie:** The morning of the execution, Reverend Potts sends us an audio diary.

[audio playing]

**Reverend Potts:** I am calling this Buddy Stouffer's going home party. This is the day that he actually escapes the three decade long terminal prognosis that he's been under, wondering every day, will this be my final activity on earth? Will this be the end of time for me?

**Ellie:** At 09:30, Bigler is escorted to the execution chamber. It's the first time in 36 years, he's allowed to walk without his arms and legs shackled. Reverend Potts is allowed into the chamber, but Suzanne decides not to go.

**Reverend Potts:** The atmosphere in the room was absolutely of peace. Not solemn, dismal, grizzly of someone being put to death.

**Ellie:** Bigler is strapped to the gurney and allowed two minutes to say his last words. He says in that room what he'd promised us he'd say, "Father, forgive them." As they inject the drugs, Reverend Potts lays his hands on Bigler's shoulders and begins to read Psalm 23.

**Reverend Potts:** The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want--

**Ellie:** And at the very same time, outside the prison gates, a small group of people are gathered to recite the same prayer. It's one they recite here every morning there's an execution.

[people reciting the prayer]

He guides me in right paths for his name's sake. Even though I walk in the dark valley, I fear no evil, for you are at my side. Lord, have mercy. Lord, have mercy. Christ, have mercy. Christ, have mercy. Lord have mercy.

**Automated Response:** Hello, this is a collect call from Wade Lay, an incarcerated individual at Oklahoma State Penitentiary. To consent to this recorded call, press one.

[button press sound]

**Automated Response:** Thank you for using Securus. You may start the conversation now.

**Gaby:** The day Bigler was executed, Wade Lay, who was next in line, couldn't see anything beyond his cell. But he could hear something.

**Wade:** I heard him open the door when he went in there, and I heard them coming out after it was done. But it is something that makes you really look inside yourself.

[somber music]

**Glynn:** WhenSnap Judgement returns, we'll hear the story of Wade Lay, who will take the place Bigler Stouffer left in the death watch cell. Stay tuned.

[somber music]

**Glynn:** Welcome back to Snap Judgment, the Father Forgive Them episode. And for this story, we are inside Oklahoma State Penitentiary's death row. And as such, it includes references to penal executions and strong language. When we last left, we were introduced to Wade Lay, the next man waiting his term to be executed by the State of Oklahoma. Snap Judgment.

**Gaby:** Wade is 62 years old. He's in there because in 2005, he was sentenced to death for the fatal shooting of a bank security guard during a robbery gone wrong. He's been on death row for 17 years. The morning, he was transferred to the death cell, he was strip searched, x rayed and issued a new set of clothes and shoes. Unlike Bigler, Wade felt the difference between his old cell and this new one.

**Wade:** In the death watch cell, you have nothing. Just the clothes on your back, the mattress and then my Bible and my dictionary. You can't even go to the bathroom without them sitting right outside your door.

**Gaby:** He's talking about the guard stationed directly outside his cell. The guard instructed to observe him 24/7 a day under these bright fluorescent lights.

**Wade:** They sit there. Every time you do anything, you get up, whatever you're doing, they're writing it down. And it's not like these are honest people, so they write down anything they want.

**Gaby:** This is particularly painful for Wade, because Wade has schizophrenia and he struggles with paranoia. But after only two days of being on death watch, Wade, he gets some big news.

**Female Newsreader:** This morning, an Oklahoma death row inmate had his execution put on hold by a Pittsburgh County judge. Wade Lay's lawyers want his mental competency assessed, saying, there's good reason to believe he is not competent to be put to death.

**Gaby:** A judge rules to postpone Wade's execution indefinitely until he can have a hearing to determine, if he's competent enough to be killed.

**Wade:** I said, I would like to have my property back and go back down to my former cell. But the warden is now saying that they're not sure how they're going to handle it and he's got to talk to the attorney general. And that's against their own protocol.

**Gaby:** By law, OSP isn't allowed to keep him in the death watch cell without an execution date on the books. But one day passes, and then another day and they don't move him. He's still in the same cell, Cell KK, only a few feet from the execution chamber.

**Wade:** It causes me to be pretty-- I'm very anxious and scared. I feel like there's a conspiracy where people are just going to kill me anyway.

**Gaby:** I can't even imagine what that's like.

**Wade:** Yeah.And then if people make this claim that I'm suffering from a severe mental illness, well, why does nobody follow the rule when it comes to me? Why do you treat a man that you say is mentally ill that way?

**Gaby:** Most of those days in the death chamber, he calls us. And if we don't pick up, he'll call again. Here he is.

**Gaby:** Hello.

**Wade:** Hi.

**Gaby:** Hey, Wade.

**Ellie:** Hi, Wade.

**Wade:** Hello.

**Gaby:** Hey. Happy New Year.

Our conversations follow a pretty predictable rhythm. He'll start out by promising us that he won't try and convince us of any of his conspiracy theories about the government.

**Wade:** I'm not going to be pressuring you, guys. Let's start a revolution and that kind of thing.

**Gaby:** But then he'll go on to do exactly that.

**Wade:** I can't help but say it. The elite want the war to happen, and they have an agenda.

**Gaby:** But the more we talk, the more we learn about his life. Wade is the youngest of five, the black sheep of the family. His dad was a country musician, a pretty good one, in fact. But he gambled and drank all the money he made away, which made his mum mad.

**Wade:** When I was little, I got the abusive end of my mother's wrath.

**Gaby:** In the midst of this, he always found some kind of comfort or protection almost in immersing himself in the world of rules and laws.

**Wade:** Then I really got into studying the original writings of Jefferson, Madison, Hamilton.

**Gaby:** Even when he was a young man and his job was hanging drywall in DC, at lunchtime, he would take off running.

**Wade:** It would take me running as fast as I could with my lunch to sit in front of the Capitol, so I could eat my lunch sitting in front of the Capitol.

**Gaby:** No way. Really?

**Wade:** Oh, yeah. I wanted to look at that building and just walk around the holy sacred ground, you know?

**Gaby:** So, when we learn that he has a daughter named April, we reach out and we ask her to send us some audio diaries.

**April:** I'm sitting here on my sister's back porch. It makes me think of when I was a kid, it really does. I would be dancing and singing to the little mermaid and my dad would let me, he'd be like, "April likes to sing and dance."

**Gaby:** April describes the robbery that landed her dad in prison and nearly killed him.

**April:** So, the weekend before that happened, my dad and brother, they're telling me, I wouldn't say they, that my dad had this idea and my brother was going to go along with it. Anyways, the day my dad and brother robbed that bank, I remember going to their apartment and they were loading up all their things. And to me, I looked at it as they were just doing what they'd always done. They were going to pack up and go to another state.

A few hours later, my brother shows up at the house and he has been shot. He has blood all over him and he tells me that "Our dad is going to die, that he has been shot four times." My brother starts praying. He's like, "Please, God, forgive me for what I've done. Please God, forgive me for what I've done. Please God, forgive me for what I've done." And he held my mom's hands and said--

**Gaby:** Suddenly, we hear April's seven year-old daughter, Lily, in the background.

**Lily:** It's not like you're dying out here.

[sobbing]

**April:** No, because I am, Lily. And maybe you should go away and let me just die on my own. Go, be a kid. I don't want my kids to know these things. But they do. They do. They see me. Even talking about this, how the hell am I supposed to get away from three kids and able to tell this jacked up story.

**Gaby:** On day five of Wade being in the death watch cell, April tells us she's not talking to her dad anymore.

**April:** I'm not talking to my dad currently.

**Gaby:** Why is that?

**April:** I believe in generational curses being beat, and I'm trying to beat mine. I hold a lot in and my dad, I have never told him that. He's really let me down. I feel like a lot of the things I'm accomplishing now I should have accomplished in my 20s. And had I had a better upbringing, I probably would have been more stable and done these very simple things, like getting a bank account. My kids won't have to do that. These simple things that have really crippled me in ways through the years. They won't have to do that.

**Gaby:** But then something happens to Wade that pulls April back into his orbit. Day 20 in the death watch cell, Wade hears a bang on his cell door. It's his unit manager holding a piece of paper.

**Wade:** And she came up with a notification list and said, "Are these the people you want notified about your execution?"

**Gaby:** It's a list of his family members.

**Wade:** And I said, "You do know there's not going to be an execution on January 6th. Why would you send that to family and scare them?" And so, she stuck her finger in my face and said, "Shut your lips," I just said, "Blank you. Blank you. Get the blank out of my face."

**Gaby:** The next morning, he's notified he's going to be dropped to level one for a month, prison jargon for solitary or the whole. Starting the next day, he'll have his phone privileges revoked.

**April:** They're not going to let my dad talk to me for a month. And he's coming up on death.

**Lily:** Mommy, when I'm older and I get rich, I'm going to sue them.

**April:** That attorney lady told me that. "We're so sorry. We just don't understand." “Maybe you should understand. Maybe you should put yourself in his shoes. Maybe you should try to see it from the side of knowing that I won't be able to ever fucking talk to my dad again.” I don't believe it's very hard to relate to pain. Even if I've never experienced what that person has experienced, I can look in their eyes and I can see the hurt. I want to help them, because I know what it's like to feel that kind of pain. I guess people just aren't like that anymore.

**Gaby:** After a month in solitary confinement, Wade is finally moved off the death watch cell, back to his normal cell, where he's still awaiting his competency trial.

**Automated Response:** Hello, this is a collect call from--

**Donald:** Donald Grant.

**Automated Response:** To consent to this recorded call, press one.

[automated phone call response]

**Automated Response:** Thank you for using Securus. You may start the conversation now.

[somber music]

**Glynn:** When we return, we'll hear from Donald Grant, and what he fears the most as the date of his execution approaches. Stay tuned.

Welcome back to Snap Judgment, the Father Forgive Them episode. This week, Snap is embedded inside Oklahoma State Penitentiary's death row. And as such, this episode does include references to penal executions and strong language. The last we left, Wade Lay's execution was postponed due to his mental health. While he awaits his competency trial, another man is moved to the death watch.

**Ellie:** When Wade is eventually moved off the death watch, a man named Donald Grant takes his place in line. Donald is here because he was sentenced to death for murdering two young women who worked at a motel in Dell City, Oklahoma. He's been on death row now for 17 years. Like, Wade, the morning he's transferred, Donald watches as officers pack all his belongings into a single box. That box would eventually arrive on the doorstep of his older brother, Joe, in New York City.

**Joe:** It's 06:47 PM, and I just got home from work.

**Ellie:** We asked Joe to record his thoughts in an audio diary.

**Joe:** When I arrived home, I saw in front of my door a box from my brother Donald with his property, some belongings. So, that has me very reflective and very sad. I haven't opened it yet. I think I'm going to probably wait until tomorrow.

**Ellie:** Joe leaves the box in the front hall of his apartment for three days. When he eventually does get the courage to look into it, he sees three things. Donald's bedsheets, his prayer hat and his TV. The TV is the thing that gets to him the most.

**Joe:** To have that deafening silence after years of having a TV as some type of comfort or even company, almost as like having company. You don't have visitors. This is your company. So, to not have that, I can't imagine what that must have felt like.

**Ellie:** The one thing Donald does do during these last 35 days is call Joe, a lot more.

**Joe:** I mean, a lot more.

**Joe:** Hi. Hello.

**Donald:** Hey what's happening, bro?

**Ellie:** Before this, they didn't talk much. It seemed like they had two entirely different childhoods. They grew up together in Brooklyn, but the age gap between them was really big.

**Joe:** It's like, we had two different mothers. I got to experience the best of my mother. She was always there cheering me on. And Donald didn't get that.

**Ellie:** When Joe went off to college, Donald's mom got addicted during the crack crisis of the 1980s. And Donald was essentially left on his own.

**Donald:** I've been on my own since the age of eight years old. Joe wasn't there. And Joseph never took care of me.

**Ellie:** But then when he was seven, he got his first Walkman and he started getting into rappers like Rakim. For the first time, Donald felt powerful, connected to an expansive history and lineage where his community reigns supreme.

**Donald:** *We were children of the most high, so we fell From paradise to holy hell Probably descendants of the Holy Grail Another part of history they won't reveal Times'll only tell You waiting for Judgment? It came In the form of a thug in the game.* It's these black people whose prophesied on the future dropping knowledge, dropping learning.

**Ellie:** But Joe, he didn't know any of this. He'd been away for most of Donald's childhood. So, when they started talking for real, and all Donald wanted to do was talk about hip hop.

**Donald:** X-Clan, Grand Puba, Sadat X and Lord Jamar. [hums a beat]

**Ellie:** Joe seemed confused.

**Joe:** He was like, “Did you listen to the music yet?” I'm like, "No, because [chuckles] I'm taking your calls and I got a job to do and all of that."

**Ellie:** But it didn't take him too long to get it.

**Joe:** I didn't realize I told him this. I didn't realize how much the music of that era and certain artists, not just [unintelligible 00:31:43], he actually called them prophets. And I was like, "Whoa, that's deep. That's a little profound."

**Ellie:** Just like when Donald talks to us, when Donald talks to Joe, most of the call, Donald is ordering him to play different songs into the phone.

**Donald:** Well, look, get this one song by Boogie's down production. That's the name of the group. Put in that song, *Stop the violence.* NowListen to the guard, listen to the guard, listen to the guard right here. *The crew is called BDP And if you want to go to the tip top Stop the violence in hip-hop, Y-O…*

I'm hearing this shit when I'm like seven fucking years old. When I hear music, shit like this, this shit, it takes my soul out the fucking body and takes me back home. Home is not the earth. Home, the universe, and it's like, I see this shit.

**Joe:** It was like dissecting, just like how you were doing a poetry class or a writing class and you would dissect the lyrics. Donald talked about having to fend for himself and literally eating off the ground, sleeping in park benches and taking care of his baby, our baby brother, at 9 years old, 10 years old, 11 years old.

**Donald:** I had to do what I had to do to live, because I don't have no damn food. I ate off the fucking street. Joe was like, "Man, I never knew you had it that hard. Oh, man, I never knew that."

**Joe:** I got to see my brother, the different layers of him. We talked about love and how people show love. He was saying, love is a verb. It's action to me. It's not just some word. And that's the way he lived.

**Ellie:** Donald also talks about how scared he was that his execution would be botched intentionally.

**Joe:** It would literally bring chills to me sometimes when he would describe the room where the execution would take place that it was not far from where he was housed. And he mentioned the curtain and this and that. I was like, "Ah, this is too much. It's just too much."

**Ellie:** When we talk, Donald tells me he can't get this one moment out of his head. A few months before, he was being led to the showers by two officers, and he heard one say to the other one loudly.

**Donald:** I wish they would [beep] him up on that table, so, he won't talk no more.

**Ellie:** At the time, he wasn't sure if they were referring to him or his friend. Another guy on the unit named John Grant. He just kept hearing his last name.

**Donald:** Grant, Grant, Grant. You know, his name is John Grant. My name is Donald Grant.

**Ellie:** Then in October of 2021, John Grant was executed, and it was botched. After the second drug was injected, John vomited and convulsed on the table for 21 minutes before dying. Throughout these 21 minutes, his autopsy report suggests that his lungs filled with fluid, and he likely felt like he was drowning. And the thing is, this isn't a one off.

Oklahoma is notorious for botching executions. In 2015, the courts actually stepped in and banned the state from executing people altogether after they not only used the wrong drugs on one man, but injected them into the wrong body part of another. So, now, less than 20 days away from his own execution, Donald is pretty convinced about what that officer meant.

**Donald:** He was talking about me. He was referring to me. They were going to [beep] up on that table and make me suffer.

**Ellie:** On January 14th, 13 days before Donald is set to be executed, Joe receives a letter from the prison.

**Joe:** “Dear Mr. Robinson, it is with empathy that I must inform you that inmate, Donald Grant, is scheduled to die by lethal injection at the Oklahoma State Penitentiary on January 27th, 2022. Inmate, Grant, has requested you as a witness to the execution.” And it's just horrendous. So clinical and cold.

**Ellie:** Joe decides to go. He flies out to Oklahoma with his siblings. And we come with him. The day we arrive, Joe drives to the prison to visit his brother for the last time. They stay for four hours. By the time we meet back up with him at the hotel, it's 10:00 PM.

**Joe:** This is fucking exhausting. I've been trying to keep it together the best way I can, but tomorrow, I will be going to witness my brother, Donald Grant, be executed. Plain and simple. It's crazy. I think I needed to say that because that's how crazy it is.

**Ellie:** When Joe arrived to the visiting room and saw his brother behind the glass, he tells us that all he wanted to do was reach through it and hug him, feel his flesh. It'd been 31 years since he'd had the chance to do that. But like all other visits on the unit, it was against the rules.

**Joe:** We touched hands on a glass, and he touched hands with one hand with one sibling with me and another with my brother, the same thing with my sister. That was it. It is beyond dehumanizing.

**Ellie:** When we ask him what they talked about, he says that what stood out to him the most was what they didn't talk about.

**Joe:** It's weird, but he didn't talk too much about it being boxed. I don't know, if it's false bravado or if it's like really him. I don't know. Because under these circumstances, I would be scared shitless.

**Ellie:** He says the only time Donald dropped this tough guy persona was when his younger brother, Sean, came into the room.

**Donald:** He joked. He said something. And he made Donald smile and laugh like he was being goofy. "Oh, you silly." I was like, "Oh, I can't do that. There's nothing to laugh at, but he's able to do it." And Donald smiled, just like, this guy's crazy. So, that was good. That was priceless.

**Ellie:** As they were getting up to leave--

**Joe:** He said, I'm going to call you later. You should be home, about 2.5 to 3 hours he called. We were in the parking lot in front of the hotel.

**Ellie:** Joe put the call on mute and told his siblings--

**Joe:** So, I said, “Listen, say your piece. This is the last time we're going to hear his voice.” And they caught their attention. They was like, "Oh, shit. I didn't think this is the last time we're going to hear his voice, like that close.” Next time we see him, he's going to be on a gurney.

**Ellie:** The next morning, we meet up with Joe and his family. It's 05:00 AM. To get to the prison, they can't drive themselves. It's against the rules. So, instead, they board a van driven by prison staff with no windows on either side.

**Joe:** Visitors are made to feel like they've committed some crime, like they buy association and that they're guilty.

**Ellie:** And outside the prison walls, Gaby and I wait along with some other local reporters for any news from the inside.

**Male News Reporter:** In less than an hour, Donald Grant set to become Oklahoma's 195th death row inmate to be executed. Now, right now, he's in an isolated cell adjacent to the execution chamber, waiting for the process to begin. Now, Donald Grant was--

**Ellie:** Joe is then taken to a waiting room, like a staging area.

**Joe:** There was coffee, there was water. I don't know, snacks. Just laid out as if it was almost like a banquet or something like that. In my mind, I'm thinking, you got to be kidding me. You got to be kidding me. I’m like, “My brother's about to be executed, and I'm going to drink your water, eat your cookies or snacks,” or whatever, as if it was any other day. That was what bothered me though. This was not any other day. This was the day that my brother was going to take his last breath at the hands of Oklahoma State.

**Ellie:** And finally, they're taken to the witness room and told to sit in the front row, facing these two big glass windows. The curtains are drawn down.

**Joe:** We could see shadows, bodies like people on the other side setting up.

**Ellie:** And then another officer comes into the room. He looks straight ahead and tells them on no uncertain terms--

**Joe:** “it's to be no talking at all. Don't talk to the person behind you, in front of you. There's to be no talking, there's to be no standing, no getting up. If you do, you will be escorted out, probably.” And then he left the room. The curtains came up, and Donald was lying with an IV in his left-- So, a long tear down his left side of his face.

**Ellie:** Donald is strapped down from head to toe, and he's told that he has two minutes.

**Joe:** He lifted his shoulders. And at some point, he said-- I would say tearfully, tearfully broke my heart. He said, "I'm about to die."

**Ellie:** They administered the first drug and then the second, midazolam. This was the one Donald was most concerned about.

**Joe:** Throughout this time, I held my wife's hand and held my brother's hand. We just held tightly, held each other because we couldn't utter a word or we would have been extracted from the room. We watched him faint into unconsciousness. And then the curtains came down, it was as if it was just all part of a performance. It was all theatre, only it was real. It wasn't a play.

**Ellie:** Outside the prison, the same group of people that prayed for Bigler, pray for Donald.

[people reciting prayer]

Lord, God, loving father, have mercy on Your son, Donald Grant, who's about to return to You. May this, our prayer, made in faith, assist him, relieve his struggle in body and spirit, forgive all his sins, and strengthen him with Your loving embrace. Holy Mary, mother of God, pray for him. Holy angels of God, pray for him. Abraham, our father in faith, pray for him. David, leader of God's people, pray for him. All holy patriarchs and prophets, pray for him. Pause and wait till we receive news of the executions taking place.

[somber music]

**Glynn:** Gaby Caplan and Ellie Lightfoot reported this story while participating in the USC Annenberg Center for Health Journalism's national fellowship and The Kristy Hammam Fund for Health Journalism.Thanks so much to the loved ones on the outside for allowing us inside their lives. And huge, enormous thank you to Bigler Stouffer, Wade Lay and Donald Grant for sharing your stories. Reporters, Gaby and Ellie, recently followed up with some of the folk mentioned in the story.

**Ellie:** Joe still lives in his apartment in Manhattan and thinks about his brother anytime hears Grand Puba.

**Joe:** I can't really think of a time in the last several decades, I'll say, where I was so depended on and Donald depended on me. There's something about that to not have that. There's an emptiness. There's a real emptiness.

**Gaby:** And Wade is still awaiting his competency trial in June. His daughter, April, can't bring herself to leave Oklahoma without knowing what's going to happen to her dad.

**April:** Yeah, I don't have much hope in the competency trial. All it means to me is more time. If this can just go long enough to where we can prove that death sentencing is wrong in general, then they can't kill my dad, whether he's crazy or not.

**Gaby:** Do you think about Wade often, or is it kind of--?

**April:** Every day.

**Gaby:** Every day.

**April:** Every day. I look at him in the mirror every day. I am Wade, or at least, that's how it feels.

**Ellie:** Suzanne, Bigler's daughter, for the most part, she stopped talking to us. She said it was too hard for her. But a few months ago, she sent us over tape of her last conversation with her dad with a message that said, she'd spent the summer searching for butterflies.

**Suzanne:** Okay. It's being recorded, dad.

**Bigler:** One of these days, you're going to see my spirit come down to you as a butterfly.

**Suzanne:** Dad.

**Bigler:** And you'll know it's me, and we can communicate, even though I will be in heaven.

**Suzanne:** Right.

**Bigler:** I'll be able to communicate through the butterfly to you. So, you keep that in your mind and keep looking for the butterfly.

[somber music]

**Glynn**: Thispiece was produced by Ellie Lightfoot and Gaby Caplan.

Stories, stories, stories. Stories are not just stories. Stories are life, distilled. And if you missed even a moment of this story, you know that you can hear it, share it, play it for the people you care about because the Snap Judgment storytelling podcast is available right now for free. Wherever you get your podcast, let them know you Snap.

That was brought to you by the team that goes there each and every week. And when they return, the uber producer, Mark Ristich insists they go right back out there again. There's Nancy López, Pat Mesiti-Miller, Anna Sussman, Renzo Gorrio, John Fecile, Shaina Shealy, Teo Ducot, Florene Wiley, Bo Walsh, Marisa Dodge, David Exumé and Regina Bediako.

And this is not the news. No way is this the news. In fact, someone could offer you some snacks, and you could let them know in no uncertain terms that you are not here for their little snacks. And even then, you would still not be as far away from the news as this is. But this is PRX.

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