

REVENGE KILLING

Race and the death penalty in a Louisiana parish.

BY RACHEL AVIV



A week after his son turned one, Rodrigus Crawford woke up a few minutes before 7 A.M. on the left side of his bed. His son was sleeping on the right side, facing the door. Crawford, who was twenty-three, reached over to wake him up, but the baby didn't move. He put his ear on his son's stomach and then began yelling for his mother. "Look at the baby!" he shouted.

Crawford was lanky, with delicate features, high cheekbones, and a patchy goatee. He lived in a small three-bedroom house with his mother, grandmother, uncle, sister, and a younger brother in Mooretown, a neighborhood in Shreveport, Louisiana, bordered by a stretch

of factories and next to the airport. His mother, Abbie, a housekeeper at the Quality Inn, rushed into the room and picked up the baby, who was named Roderius, after his father. He looked as if he were asleep, but his forehead felt cool.

Crawford's uncle called 911, and an operator instructed him to try CPR while they waited for an ambulance. Crawford's mother and sister took turns pumping the baby's chest.

"I'm doing it, Ma'am, but he ain't doing nothing!" Abbie said, out of breath.

The ambulance seemed to be taking too long, so Crawford's younger brother called 911 on another line. "The baby's

not talking, not breathing, not saying anything," he said. "Can you get an ambulance?"

They were used to waiting a long time for city services; the alarm could go off at their pastor's church and ring all night, and the fire department would never come. There was a saying in the neighborhood that the police were never there when you needed them, only when you didn't. The community was populated almost entirely by black families, many of whom had grown up together. After a few more minutes, Crawford's brother called 911 again. "We need an ambulance, Ma'am," he said. "It's been twenty minutes!"

Not long afterward, another 911 operator called a dispatcher and asked what was happening at the address. "They probably slept on the damn baby," the dispatcher said. "There's a hundred folks in that damn house."

When the ambulance arrived, moments later, Crawford ran out of the house with the baby in his arms. The paramedics put a breathing mask over Roderius's face, and Crawford thought he saw his son's eyes open. He tried to climb into the back of the ambulance, but the paramedics shut the doors and told him to stay outside. They couldn't find a pulse. Roderius's jaw was stiff and his eyes were milky, a sign that he had been dead for more than an hour. They decided to wait in the ambulance until the police arrived before telling the family.

Meanwhile, the baby's mother, Lakenra Lott, and her family had arrived. They lived on the same street, five houses away. Lott and Crawford had known each other since they were children and had been close since middle school. He was hyper, affectionate, and fondly known as a clown. She was quiet and withdrawn; she had "been to the tenth floor," a phrase used in the neighborhood to describe the psychiatric ward of the closest hospital. There had been rumors that someone else might be Roderius's father—Crawford and Lott both had daughters from other relationships—but when Crawford held Roderius at the hospital he was sure that the newborn was his. The baby usually slept at Lott's house, but Crawford visited him almost every day. He was a gifted dancer—in

The Caddo Parish D.A. recently told a reporter, "I think we need to kill more people."

high school he had been in the marching band and started a dance troupe called the Black Boys—and he liked to entertain the baby by setting his feet on the floor and making him dance like a marionette.

The families began knocking on the windows of the ambulance, asking the driver why he hadn't left for the hospital. The paramedics reported to their dispatcher that they were surrounded by a mob; they worried that there was going to be some sort of riot. "If the crowd gets bad, we don't have anything—there's no protection," one paramedic said later. "We had to leave for our safety." The ambulance drove away with its sirens and lights on, but switched them off as soon as it turned the corner.

The police arrived at the Crawfords' house shortly after. Crawford was with his cousins, who lived across the street. When an officer asked for him, his mother admitted that he was afraid of the police, because "he's got a little charge going on, and he's worried about that." He had an open warrant for marijuana possession. In the past, he'd been arrested for battery, after fights with girlfriends, and for minor infractions, like driving with his headlights off and not wearing a seat belt. Crawford came home a few seconds later and tried to hug his mother, who was standing at the foot of their driveway, but the officer told him to sit in the police car. He slid into the back seat, held his head in his hands, and began rocking back and forth and crying.

After a few minutes, he looked out the back window and saw Lott, who seemed disoriented. He motioned her over, and as soon as she opened the car door he wrapped his arms around her and buried his head in the back of her neck. When she told him that she knew the baby must have died, even though the cops wouldn't answer the family's questions, he pulled away. "What is wrong with you?" he said. "Don't do that to me. He's all right."

The police wouldn't let Lott or Crawford go to the hospital. Instead, they drove them to the police station. An officer asked Crawford why the baby had bruises on his head and his lip, and Crawford explained that the day before the baby had been standing on the bath-

room floor when he slipped and fell between the toilet and the bathtub, hitting his head and cutting his lip. "I gave him an ice cube and put it in his mouth and wiped the blood off his lip, and he was straight," Crawford said.

When detectives interviewed Lott, she was reticent and leaden. In emotional situations, she was known to retreat by staring at her phone.

"Have you ever seen him lose his cool?" they asked her, referring to Crawford.

"No, sir," she said. "Until today."

"What happened today?"

"He was just upset," she said.

She told the officers that Roderius "had a little cold," so she'd stopped by Crawford's house the day before to drop off a nasal aspirator. While she was there, Crawford had told her about the baby's fall, and she'd looked at his injuries. "There was a bruise right there," she said, pointing above her right eye. "And his mouth—he had bust his lip. But he was still happy and everything."

That morning, a forensic pathologist performed an autopsy and determined that the bruises on Roderius's lips were the marks of smothering. Later, when he reviewed slides of Roderius's lung tissue, he discovered that the baby also had pneumonia, but he decided that the illness was a coincidence.

The detectives interviewed Crawford for the second time that day, and told him that the pathologist had found bruises on the baby's bottom, indicating that he had suffered from "chronic child abuse."

"Chronic child abuse," Crawford repeated, as if testing a new phrase. "I don't know if he's ever been beaten at his mom's house, but at my house he's never been beaten by me," he said. "He's a baby. He's a one-year-old. What could he do to me to make me beat him?"

"We see it all the time," the detective said. "We can't answer that."

"I told you—he fell. That's the only thing that ever happened to him. He fell in the bathroom. But me beating him? No!"

Then the detective said, "There are certain fluids in your one-year-old son's lungs that tell us that he was suffocated before he died."

"He was suffocated?" Crawford

said. “What do you mean by suffocated? Like somebody held him down?”

“The cause of death is asphyxiation with acute suffocation.”

“No. When I woke up this morning—I’ll tell you again, sir—when I woke up this morning . . .” His voice began wavering, and he trailed off. “That’s too much,” he said.

“Did you wake up on top of your son?”

“No, sir. No, sir!”

“If that’s what happened, that’s what you need to say. It’s important.”

“I know it’s important. I’m telling you I didn’t wake up on my son. I didn’t wake up suffocating him—nothing. That’s some real talk.”

The autopsy report was sent to the office of Dale Cox, the first assistant district attorney of Caddo Parish, which includes Shreveport. After reading the police reports, he decided to seek the death penalty. Cox told me that in the past forty years he had never prosecuted a man between the ages of seventeen and twenty-six who grew up in a nuclear family. “Not one,” he said. He believes that the “destruction of the nuclear family and a tremendously high illegitimate birth rate” have brought about an “epidemic of child-killings” in the parish.

At the time that he learned of Crawford’s case, he was prosecuting another young black man accused of killing his infant. After the man was sentenced to life without parole, rather than death, Cox told a local TV station, “I take it as a failure that I was unable to convince the jury to kill him.”

The only structure on the front lawn of the Caddo Parish courthouse, in downtown Shreveport, is a monument to the Confederacy, which includes the busts of four Confederate generals. A large stone slab on the ground is inscribed with the Confederate flag and a tribute to the “deeds and valor of the men who so gallantly, nobly, and conscientiously defended the cause.”

In the decades after the Civil War, Caddo Parish—home to the last capital of the Confederacy—had more lynchings than all but one county in the South. Several men were lynched in front of the courthouse. In 1914, when some Louisiana newspapers called

for the abolition of the death penalty, an editorial in the Shreveport *Times* warned that without capital punishment the number of lynchings would rise: black criminals wouldn’t be able to reach the jail before they were overwhelmed by the “vengeance of an outraged citizenship.”

Juries in Caddo Parish, which has a population of two hundred and fifty thousand, now sentence more people to death per capita than juries in any other county in America. Seventy-seven per cent of those sentenced to death in the past forty years have been black, and nearly half were convicted of killing white victims. A white person has never been sentenced to death for killing a black person.

Since 2011, Dale Cox, a jowly sixty-seven-year-old man with thinning white hair, has been responsible for more than a third of the death sentences in Louisiana. When I met him at his office, which overlooks the courthouse, I asked him if he worried about the possibility that the parish’s fraught racial history and its approach to capital punishment were related, but he said that he didn’t see the connection. “People have played the race card in this country for so long, and at some point we really need to stop and say, ‘O.K., that was a long, long, long time ago. It’s different now.’” He said, “Yeah, a lot of terrible things have happened in the world everywhere. And in some



places it gets better, like here. And in some places it doesn’t, like Africa or Kosovo.” He told me, “I don’t get this discrimination business, I really don’t.”

Cox, who is Catholic and went to a Jesuit school, was opposed to the death penalty at the start of his career, and in 1983, after working in the district attorney’s office for six years, he left, because he didn’t feel comfortable pursuing capital cases. He believed that it was God’s decision when to end someone’s life. He

joined a civil firm while working part time as a special prosecutor. By 2011, when he returned to the office full time, he said that his thinking had evolved. After constant exposure to violence, he began to reinterpret the Bible. He thought about passages in which Christ was judgmental and unforgiving—Christ’s belief that it would be better if Judas Iscariot had never been born, for instance—and saw Him as retaliatory in ways that he hadn’t appreciated before. After the Church’s pedophilia scandals, Cox no longer felt obliged to follow its teachings precisely. He told me that “we just exclusively use the Old Testament over here,” and that he had ripped the New Testament out of all the Bibles. He quickly added, “That’s a joke!”

Last March, a former colleague of Cox’s published a letter in the Shreveport *Times* apologizing for causing an innocent black man to spend thirty years on death row. “We are simply incapable of devising a system that can fairly and impartially impose a sentence of death,” he wrote. When a journalist with the paper, Maya Lau, asked Cox for his response, he said that he thought courts should be imposing the death penalty more, not less. “I think we need to kill more people,” he told her. “We’re not considered a society anymore—we’re a jungle.”

Cox does not believe that the death penalty works as a deterrent, but he says that it is justified as revenge. He told me that revenge was a revitalizing force that “brings to us a visceral satisfaction.” He felt that the public’s aversion to the notion had to do with the word itself. “It’s a hard word—it’s like the word ‘hate,’ the word ‘despot,’ the word ‘blood.’” He said, “Over time, I have come to the position that revenge is important for society as a whole. We have certain rules that you are expected to abide by, and when you don’t abide by them you have forfeited your right to live among us.”

Mooretown, the neighborhood where Crawford’s family lives, was developed early in the twentieth century by Giles Moore, a black schoolteacher who intended to create a “colored town.” He owned a farm west of Shreveport that he divided into plots and sold to black people. A follower of

the black-unification leader Marcus Garvey, he wanted people to own their own property and be free of discrimination by white people. The social experiment thrived for a few decades, but the town, which didn't have its own utility infrastructure, was never self-sufficient. In 1958, it was annexed to Shreveport.

In the next three decades, many people with aspirations moved away, leaving vacant lots and discarded cars, which led to problems with stray dogs, rats, and snakes. Community leaders led campaigns to clean up the neighborhood, but its schools floundered; like nearly forty per cent of his classmates, Crawford didn't finish high school. He could find only sporadic jobs, installing air-conditioners and mowing lawns. Shortly before Roderius died, he had arranged to work at his church as a spiritual mime, using dance and gestures to share the Gospel. His pastor, John Dent, described him as "a vibrant kid who loved cracking jokes—that was his thing." The first time that Dent saw Crawford pushing a stroller, he told him, "No way. No way that you already have a kid." He said that Crawford responded, proudly, "No, man, this is my boy. This is my little one."

At a preliminary hearing a month after Roderius's death, Lott told the judge that she had never seen Crawford mistreat their son. "Why would he kill his baby, as bad as he wanted a little boy?" she said.

On her Twitter feed that fall, she posted a picture of Crawford and wrote, "Free my hot boi," with four hearts and a smiley face with hearts in its eyes. She visited him in jail every few weeks, usually catching a ride with Crawford's family. "She was the type who would call our house every day, no matter who Rodricus was going with," Crawford's mother, Abbie, said. "She just wouldn't let Rodricus go."

Lott was the only one in her family who testified that Crawford was innocent. After an initial period of confusion, her family had accepted Cox's version of events. Investigators from the D.A.'s office told them that the medical evidence proved that the baby had been killed. "They know what happened because the autopsy came back," a family member told me.

Abbie Crawford seemed as dis-



"I think I was only invited for one reason."

tressed by the Lotts' position as she was by the charges against her son. "We went through all our lives together," she told me. "We ate together, raised our children together. We had get-togethers for Mother's Day. We were family."

Dent, who had presided over Roderius's wake, tried to get the families to reconcile, but the Lotts stopped answering their door when he knocked. "That they could go from embracing one another at the funeral and praying for each other to not even speaking was crushing," he said. "I believe the prosecution forced ideas into their heads."

From jail, Crawford urged his family to talk to Lott's mother, Sharon. One day, his aunt Latosha, who owned a hair salon and assumed the role of family matriarch, saw Sharon sitting alone at the courthouse. She sat beside her and said, "You know good and well that Rodricus would never hurt his baby." She said that Sharon responded, "Well, what do you think happened? That my daughter did something to

the baby?" The Crawfords wondered if the Lotts felt that someone would inevitably be prosecuted: if it wasn't the Crawfords' child, perhaps it would be theirs. Latosha said, "I think the prosecutor had the mind-set that 'I don't have to kill the village, because I'll just turn the villagers against each other and they'll kill themselves.'"

Crawford was represented by a Shreveport attorney named Daryl Gold, who had argued in court against Cox in the late seventies and remembered him as "one of the nicest people I had ever known." By the time Crawford was tried, Gold wondered if Cox had "a brain tumor or something." Other Shreveport lawyers were similarly confused. When Henry Walker, the former president of the state's criminal-defense bar, heard that Cox had screamed "God damn it!" in court, he e-mailed the bar's Listserv to express concern that Cox had "developed a state of mental imbalance and may need help very badly." He wrote, "I

remember a very different Dale Cox, a person of unquestioned integrity, whose demeanor was always very professional and courteous,” adding, “Of course, he may have, by always masking his true volatility, become over time so tightly wound that an explosion was inevitable.” A few lawyers guessed that Cox’s divorce and a personal bankruptcy, in 2005, had made him bitter. (Cox dismissed the idea.) Others thought that he had become too immersed in the culture of the D.A.’s office; it was the sort of institution where a longtime assistant district attorney felt comfortable hanging a large portrait of Nathan Bedford Forrest, a Confederate general and an early leader of the Ku Klux Klan, on the wall. “Nobody there is that far from turning into a savage,” Walker told me. “If somebody releases the chain, they’ll be off and running.”

The week before Crawford’s trial, in November, 2013, Gold asked Cox to dismiss the case. He had just received a report from his medical expert, Daniel Spitz, a forensic pathologist from Michigan, who co-authored a pathology textbook that is widely used in medical schools. Spitz found that Roderius’s blood had tested positive for sepsis, and he concluded that he had died of pneumonia. Spitz told me that after reviewing the case he thought that there “wasn’t enough evidence to even put this before a jury. You didn’t have anybody who thought this guy committed murder except for one pathologist who decided that it was homicide on what seemed like a whim.”

Cox told me that the new medical report “gave me pause.” But after meeting again with the first pathologist, James Traylor, he felt confident about the theory of smothering. In court, Traylor testified as cross-sections of the baby’s bruised bottom were displayed for the jury. Traylor said that the baby’s pneumonia couldn’t have been severe, because family members hadn’t reported a fever or rapid heartbeat. “I’m the guy that did the autopsy,” Traylor told the jury. “There is no one else that can speak for the victim other than myself.”

Traylor said that his finding of suffocation was based entirely on the bruises on Roderius’s lips, but he never sampled the tissue to date the injury, a basic

FOR MY BROTHER, IN BLUEGRASS

Ever since you were placed in the 99th percentile
I’ve been trying to be exceptional—

I made you the father of my dolls.

I made you my in case of emergency.

When we walked down the street I was the stranger.
You were whatever moved you.

Either you were a thoroughbred glistening through clay
or you spoke a language you made up by the minute.

Then you drove away to join the normal.

O Lawyer, let me compose you.

Let me leave you in the prodigal field,
back between boyhood and the prematurely old.

You gave me up for the word *lovely*.

Listen, the North is kicking out at the door
for you to be familiar.

—Elizabeth Metzger

test that would have revealed whether the bruises came from the earlier fall in the bathroom, an explanation that he ignored. He misstated medical science, telling the jury that Roderius’s brain had swelled as a result of suffocation. Swelling does not occur in cases of smothering, because the person dies rapidly, and the brain can’t swell if blood has stopped circulating. The brain can swell, though, in cases of pneumonia with sepsis.

When Spitz testified, he explained that sepsis in young children can be fatal within a few hours, with early symptoms passing unnoticed. But his testimony was eclipsed by a cross-examination that lasted twice as long as the direct testimony. Cox interrogated him about a mistake he’d made in an autopsy in Michigan, where he had overlooked a bullet wound in a decomposed body. “You are overextended,” Cox told him. “You are overworked.” The judge later wrote of Spitz that “any veracity that he had was destroyed.”

Crawford’s mother, Abbie, felt uneasy as soon as the jury, composed of nine white people and three black ones, returned to the courtroom. “All I remember hearing is ‘Guilty, guilty, guilty,’” she told me. “Rodricus looked at me, and I looked at him, and I just tried to hold it all in.”

The defense team hadn’t prepared for the penalty phase of the trial, which began the next morning. “We were too attached to ‘not guilty,’” J. Antonio Florence, a lawyer who worked on the case, told me. He described Cox as “probably the greatest trial lawyer I’ve gone up against,” adding that by “great” he meant that “he is very effective, like Darth Vader.”

Florence, who is black, said that he fantasizes about all the defense lawyers in the country banding together and refusing to work on capital cases, so that no trials can proceed. After the Supreme Court effectively suspended the death penalty in 1972, arguing that the punishment was unconstitutional

in part because it was disproportionately imposed on “minorities whose numbers are few, who are outcasts of society, and who are unpopular,” Louisiana, like thirty-four other states, rewrote its statute. As Florence saw it, little had changed. Proof of the penalty’s arbitrariness, he said, was the fact that “you have people like Dale Cox making the decisions about who should face death.”

The next morning, Jessica Williams, the mother of Crawford’s first child, Khasiah, who was six years old, told the jury that if he was executed it would “kill” her daughter, too. “She talks about him, asks about him, cries about him, dreams about him, everything,” she said. “She asks when her daddy is coming home. ‘Mama, where’s my daddy at?’ ‘Call my daddy.’ ‘Can you call him?’”

When Jessica told a story about shopping for diapers with Crawford, Cox asked her where he got the money.

“I’m not sure,” she said.

“Was he working at the time?”

“No.”

“During the one year of Rodericus’s life, did Rodricus Crawford ever work?”

“No.”

Cox continued, “Did you know that he was a habitual user of marijuana?”

“Yes.”

“Did it bother you that Khasiah would be around someone who used marijuana all the time?”

“No, because even with him being a habitual user, it didn’t take upon his character and how he would be around his child,” she said.

When Ramone, one of Crawford’s younger brothers, took the witness stand, Cox asked if he thought that smoking marijuana was wrong.

“No,” Ramone responded.

“Did they tell in your classes at school that you could go to jail for using marijuana?”

“Yes, sir.”

“So then you did know it was a crime.”

Ramone, who was crying, didn’t answer.

“But even though you knew it was a crime, you didn’t think it was wrong for your brother to do it?”

“No, sir.”

“And why didn’t you think it was

wrong for your brother to do it even though you knew it to be a crime?”

“I don’t know,” he said.

He asked Ramone to estimate how many weeks of the year Crawford worked. After determining that there was “no real pattern to how often he worked,” Cox asked if Crawford had a physical disability. “Or a mental disability, something wrong with his mind?”

“No, sir,” Ramone said.

“What would he do all day?” he asked. “On the days that he didn’t work.”

“I don’t know, just live a normal life,” Ramone said.

When Abbie Crawford took the witness stand, Cox asked again if Crawford was disabled. “Why didn’t he work?” he pressed.

“He looked for work,” his mother responded, crying.

“What did he do to ‘look’ for it?”

“He asked around for work.”

Later, Cox returned to the subject: “But he never worked on a regular basis.”

“Not on a regular basis.”

“Did you ever ask him to go to work?”

“He looked for work all the time.”

Cox turned again to Crawford’s marijuana use, asking her how much Rodricus smoked each day. When she said she didn’t know, he asked, “Have you ever smelled marijuana before?”

When the cross-examination was over, Florence approached the witness stand and said, “Ms. Abbie, was this just another black boy, worth nothing, at your house?”

Cox objected, and the judge accused Florence of inserting race into the proceedings. “It was something that welled up in me,” Florence told me later. “If we’re going to talk about it, let’s talk about it, because that’s what you’re doing. You’re just leaving out the word ‘nigger.’ But the jury can see past the code.”

In Cox’s closing statements, he said that Jesus Christ commanded the death penalty for those who killed a child, a point he had made the month before, in a trial where he won a death verdict against another young black man. “Now, this is Jesus Christ of the New Testament,” he said: “It would be better if you were never born. You shall have a millstone cast around your

neck, and you will be thrown into the sea.” Crawford was sentenced to death that evening.

A month after Crawford was formally sentenced, Dale Cox wrote a memo to the state’s probation department, which compiles reports on defendants sentenced to death. “I am sorry that Louisiana has adopted lethal injection as the form of implementing the death penalty,” he wrote. “Mr. Crawford deserves as much physical suffering as it is humanly possible to endure before he dies.”

The Lott family refused to speak with the probation officers who came to their house for a victim statement. A year later, when I knocked on their door, Lakendra’s mother, Sharon, spoke to me from behind the screen door; the interior of the house was so dark that I couldn’t see her. When I explained that I had talked with many people and wanted to include her voice, she told me, “I don’t have a voice. You can say whatever you feel. I don’t have a voice.”

I asked if she was satisfied with the way that the trial unfolded. “No,” she said. “I don’t know what happened.” She said that she knew that Crawford’s lawyer had told him not to testify, but she still felt it was wrong not to defend himself. “Just say *something*,” she said.

Lott had moved out of her mother’s house and now lived a little more than a mile away, in a government-subsidized housing complex. The first time I knocked on her door, at noon, she said that she was still sleeping. The next three times, a relative answered the door and said that she couldn’t talk. Sharon told me that my visit had upset Lakendra, and she urged me to walk down the street and speak with the Crawfords instead. “I’m not saying nothing bad about Rodricus,” she said. “If he didn’t do it and he gets out, that’s fine.” She pointed to the Crawfords’ house and said, “They shouldn’t be mad at us. The jury did it, not us.”

Crawford is the second-youngest man on death row at the Louisiana State Penitentiary in Angola. He said that half of the people on his tier are from Caddo Parish; he has started calling two of them his

“uncles.” When he first arrived, he would sleep all day, but they convinced him that sleeping wouldn’t make life any better.

Prisoners on death row are not allowed to speak with anyone who isn’t family, unless they are days away from execution. When the prison’s warden, Burl Cain, told me that the policy was made “out of respect to the victims’ family,” I said that the victim’s next-of-kin, Lott, had testified to Crawford’s innocence. “We trust the Louisiana Criminal Justice System,” he wrote in an e-mail. “Rodricus Crawford has been found guilty.”

Crawford filed a motion for a new trial, arguing that the medical testimony presented at his trial had been insufficient and misleading, but in March his request was denied, without explanation. The brief filed by his lawyers included the opinions of three doctors who had concluded independently that the original autopsy was deeply flawed. Robert Bux, the coroner of El Paso County, in Colorado, told me that “there was no scientific evidence to support the diagnosis. They called it a homicide before they knew what was going on. I was amazed—amazed in the sense that I was horrified.” Janice Ophoven, a pediatric forensic pathologist from Minnesota, told me, “To be really honest, the pathologist did not seem willing to consider the actual facts of this case.”

A month after the court’s denial, the district attorney of Caddo Parish died suddenly, and Cox filled the vacancy. In October, he will ask voters to elect him as district attorney. When I met with him to talk about Crawford’s case, he seemed to struggle to remember the details. He said that Lott was “yukking it up with Samuel Jordan,” a defendant in a different case. When I asked if it troubled him that there was no motive, he responded, “In baby-killing cases, almost always the defense is that the baby was crying and it got on my nerves. So I started to hit him, and I kept hitting him, and he kept screaming. So I hit him harder. And then I decided to bash his head against the wall, and then he wasn’t screaming anymore, so I could sleep again.”

I mentioned that Roderius had

slept through the night without crying. “Am I confusing that with another one?” he said. “Well, no, the lack of motive didn’t bother me. It was more of a reason to seek the death penalty than it was not.”

Like all inmates on Louisiana’s death row, Crawford is confined to his cell twenty-three hours a day. He spends most of his free hour waiting in line for the phone. Earlier this month, I went to his house and waited for his daily phone call to his family, expected at about 10 P.M. It never came. Crawford wasn’t released from his cell that day. When he asked his classification officer what had happened, she smiled and said, “You know what’s going on.” Crawford interpreted it as an effort to prevent him from speaking with me. (His calls are monitored, and his mother had arranged the call in advance.)

Abbie Crawford and I waited for her phone to ring while sitting at a card table in her driveway. Rodricus’s uncle barbecued, and his twenty-one-year-old brother, Fostravz, ate a bowl of Trix. Abbie seemed to get comfort from analyzing the case—it made her feel as if she were actively doing something for her son—and she asked Fostravz to recount the last night of the baby’s life. “This ain’t no play,” Fostravz told her. “I’m not going to keep practicing this over and over.”

He and his family had recently posted flyers around Shreveport with a picture of Crawford and a note that said, “There is an injustice taking place in a city near you right now. It may seem unreal but believe it is all so real. . . . Rodricus C. Crawford could be YOU!” They hoped to get some media attention—the Shreveport papers had written only a few brief summaries of the trial—but no one responded.

Fostravz had his own theory of why his brother was in prison. A few months before the baby’s death, the police had arrested Crawford for marijuana possession and then released him on the condition that he inform on people who lived five blocks away. After they let him go, he refused to follow through.

“I knew they were going to do something to get Rodricus in jail, because he wasn’t snitching like they told him to,” Fostravz said.

“It was revenge,” his uncle, who had served time for drugs, said. “He didn’t do what they said, so they charged him with the other thing.”

“And that’s why they kept saying, ‘You don’t do anything but smoke marijuana all day,’” Abbie said, though she didn’t seem entirely convinced by the theory.

She appeared to have internalized Cox’s criticisms of her son; she now talked about his unemployment as if it were the actual crime. She was eighteen and single when she first became a mother, and now she felt that she hadn’t been strategic enough in raising her children, three boys and two girls. “I figured I could raise the boys just like the girls, but I’m not a man—maybe he needed a man,” she said. “Now I know that you have to have your child get into something positive in the daytime. You’ve got to work and get a paycheck and go to church every Sunday, or every other Sunday. On Saturdays, you can socialize or whatever, but that’s all.”

Cox’s judgments had become so central to her thinking that she worried about the D.A.’s age and his health and the fact that he could die before her son’s innocence was proved. “Since the day that Cox sentenced my child, I’ve been praying. ‘Father, please don’t let Mr. Cox die until he knows that Rodricus is going to be all right,’” she said.

In April, Crawford’s lawyers filed their first appeal with the Louisiana Supreme Court, which almost never overturns a verdict in capital cases. The brief described the “racial and geographic arbitrariness of the death penalty in Louisiana—confined predominantly to African-American men prosecuted in Caddo Parish”—and said that “Crawford’s fate depended far more on where he was prosecuted than his ultimate moral culpability.”

The Crawfords are so upbeat about each brief submitted to the court that their lawyers have to discourage them from unrealistic expectations. Crawford says that when he is free he intends to get married and to move away from Mooretown. “Rodricus doesn’t want to be part of the same old world that he was in,” Abbie Crawford said. “He tells me, ‘Keep praying, Mama, because the Father is dealing with us. The Father is getting us ready. I know he’s getting me ready to be a young man.’” ♦