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Death Notification

At Northeast State Prison, one-third of the inmates are in prison for life. Many others are in for a long stretch--two decades or more. Felix Chacon was one of those inmates: in prison for a long time, but possibly not forever. Like most inmates, I didn't know much about him other than his crime report: a second degree murder, gang-related, requiring at least twenty years in prison. Chacon got his yard name, "Casper," from his gang associates, his fellow soldiers. The 30-year-old inmate was influential on the tier. Almost everyone in the unit had a *yard name* reflecting each inmate's personality or physical characteristics. Like the cartoon character, Casper was friendly, yet almost ghost-like. He had been a porter, mopping floors, cleaning tables, rarely needing supervision. On a few occasions he came by my office and quickly discussed problems in the unit. Knowing he had respect on the tier, I listened to him. When he talked to me, Casper always addressed me as "sir" or "Mr. Salomon." I heard Chacon's eight-year-old son had been ill. Perhaps he had told me himself, in one of our short conversations. So it didn't surprise me, then, when the prison chaplain told me he had to do a death notification.

Chaplain Fortier, Chappy, was a Baptist minister with a master's degree in religion. He rode a Harley to work, even in the winter, could quote equally from Shakespeare, Nietzsche, and Saturday Night Live. Sometimes his Mississippi accent and poor grammar seemed more like an affectation. "Doing death notices ain't fun, the chaplain said, even worse when it's a child.

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Most inmates figure they'll never be out to see their parents again; shoot, sometimes they hate their parents, so it ain't no big deal there. But with a kid, a child, it ain't never easy." The chaplain called the unit and told the officer to get inmate Chacon to the admin building. A few minutes later, the inmate entered the office. "Mr. Chacon," the chaplain said, "I need you to sit down." Chacon shook his head, as if the chaplain had already given him the terrible news. "I'm sorry...." It seemed like an eternity before the Chappy continued. "Your son, Felix Chacon Junior, passed away, today."

Chacon turned his head, put a hand to his head. His eyes were red when he turned his head back to the chaplain. Because he was in max, he wouldn't be able to go to the funeral. He may have also realized that he may never get to see his mother and father, outside of a prison visit, ever again, or get to their funerals either. In a moment of compassion, not weakness, the chaplain placed his hand on the inmate's shoulder, and said nothing. A minute later, the chaplain said "I can let you call your brother. He can tell you about all the arrangements." Although it was now *count time*, and all inmates in the unit were supposed to be in their cells, Chacon was allowed to complete the call.

A year or so later, I heard that "Casper" Chacon was involved in a violent incident between Brown Raza inmates, his gang, and a rival gang, the North Siders. I hear he was working on the tier at the time. Somehow, inmates from a rival gang got out of their cells, onto the tier. Don't know whether Chacon was a perpetrator looking for an opening,

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a victim defending himself, or something in between.