

**Burnt Almonds**  
*Steven King Ainsworth*

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A burst of colour and the vortex began to spin, a jumbled mass of scattered thoughts shot through my mind at incredible speed, my breathing became ragged and laboured. Then as I gained some control of the quickly tripping synapse, a picture began to emerge. The image cleared at the back of my skull.

There was no dignity in dying at the hands of a state ... any state! But it was my turn. I had exhausted all avenues of appeal. They had moved me to the death cell just hours before: the death watch took over; guards I had never seen before, none I knew; all seemed so much larger than my six-foot frame. The one outside the cell staring in intently, watching my every move. Another to the right by the death chamber door, sipping coffee from a styrofoam cup but none the less alert and glancing up to peer at me. They did not try to talk to me, as if I were a pariah.

Laying there on my last bed, my hands behind my head ... planning my last moves. Through the upper bars and across the way the deadly eye of the gunrail's weapon casually pointed my way, its deadly menace well known to me ... the man's face hidden in the shadows behind the rifle's stock ... the black eye raising and lowering minutely in mimic of the hidden gunner's respiration.

Buzzing, ringing, clangs, and muted shouts came through the thick cement walls. The sounds that bothered me the many years of delay: keys turning, food slots banging, Spanish, English, Swahili, and other dialects of many angry voices shouting out in defiance from the cell blocks. A cacophony muffled and distant now from where I lay not fifteen feet from the gas chamber door.

Acrid smells of antiseptic wash surrounded me. The death cell area was in full swing and I was just one of three who would go this week; the two before and now it was my turn, centre stage in the ritual of death.

The two before had gone quietly with little fuss. Their final statements of inane remarks, meaningless gestures to victims and families, one's heartfelt reach for God, no doubt fell on deaf ears, and with tears he precedes me to ash.

I had decided that I would not go numbly down the path. I would not make a statement nor plea for clemency from the very system that had

produced me as fodder for its now vast machine. My final moves, actions, would speak louder than words.

With my state-issue five witnesses, I had provided the executioner's act with an audience that would not let this dance of death remain surreptitious from most. They would not allow the events of this morbid week to go unnoticed in the back pages of time, where in ignorance the public could skip the account and not really think of the state that has to resort to killing its own citizens in address to its social deficiencies.

The hours, minutes, and seconds of this final day were "tick-tocking" away with speed. At some time, they brought my last meal and I wolfed down the gastronomical surprise, belching as the last remnants slid down to my stomach. When in death's grip, my sphincter relaxed and the contents of my viscera spilled out, the stench of feces would add a sinister bouquet to assault the players in this rite when they entered the chamber after the deed was done. A pungent reminder of their part in the macabre.

Already the rubber tube protruded from my shirt front, where the medico had taped to my chest the stethoscope which would reverberate the sounds and finality of my demise, the criss-cross of adhesive tape "X-ing" me out.

Pacing back and forth to the hubbub around me, the time was coming close. The studied and practiced procedures of the deathwatch were in progress. Behind the death chamber door, the executioner was preparing the elements of the final brew. Little thuds and muted sounds filtered through the steel door.

Pacing back and forth, the cold cement chilled my stockinged feet. The black eye of the gunrail's rifle muzzle following my movement, back and forth. The deathwatch eyes followed me, back and forth, back and forth. "Calm down" I told myself, albeit in these moments of absolute terror, it was hard to do.

The Catholic priest came in and said some jumbled words to me, as the thudding of my heart became louder in my ears.

"It's time, it's time," the deathwatch commander intoned. I stopped and made my move. The secreted razor blade came out and slashed my throat, blood spurted as the jugular parted. Now my wrist; red appeared. Inside my arms, the blade rode, nipping the junctions of life's road there. Slinging my arms about, I flung the juice, splashing and splattering everyone, the walls, and all.

Splotches of blood on the uniforms of the minions of death as they charged into the cell to stop my act. I smeared the blood on their skins, hair, and all over myself. Subdued, they “cuffed me up.” The medico wrapped the slashes up. They were pissed! Their nostrils flaring in anger as they rushed me through the door into the chamber itself, strapping me in quickly as I spat on each.

The blinds on the windows flew up as they retreated out the gas chamber door. Aghast, the witnesses gaped at the sight as the door shut and clamped tight. I swivelled my head to and fro to make the blood flow. It seeped through the wraps, darkening them with a moist red stain and dripping to the floor. The witnesses’ eyes were wide in horror; mine with madness.

Suddenly, my head sprang back as the gas hit my nose. I stiffened, my hands in fists, the knuckles white! I slumped forward and a shudder ran through my body. The blood stopped, my struggle had ceased. My eyes closed, I relaxed as the bitter sweet gas overtook me. Peaches? Apricots? No! Burnt almonds! This was my last sense as my breathing ceased and life left me a shattered surreal hulk; red, white, and institutional green.

The vortex stopped spinning and the voices cleared. “Brewster! Brewster!” my name was called! “What? What?!” I gruffly replied.

“Brewster, Brewster, get four! Get four!” the voice yelled. “Get four? Get four?” confusedly I queried.

“Channel Four, they’ve got you on Channel Four!” the voice screamed!

Automatically I sprang to the selector knob. The T.V. tube brightened, my mug shot appeared, the newscaster’s voice rang in my ear ... “... was given a full reversal today by the United States Supreme Court, ending a fifteen-year legal battle to execute him”.