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Free at Last

James A. Weschler

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Throughout the long years of his imprisonment William Anthony Maynard had made countless courtroom appearances. Each time he had walked in with firm step and impassive countenance, and departed the same way. Each proud entrance and exit seemed his way of saying that neither his dignity nor his spirit had been destroyed.

But yesterday, when Justice Irving Lang released him on bail after setting aside his manslaughter conviction last Friday, Maynard emerged clasping the arms of his devoted sister, Valerie, and his dedicated lawyer, Lewis Steel. There was an instant when he faltered, almost as if his legs were failing him just as freedom beckoned, and his eyes seemed closer to tears than jubilation.

They went down to the press room where photographers awaited him, and microphones were pressed in his face. But this usually articulate man said haltingly that he would prefer not to say anything at once. It was as if he wanted to get outside fast and convince himself that the release was real.

Then they walked into the wet, cloudy street with TV cameras following them. It was not a day most citizens would have chosen for walking. But that is what Maynard wanted most to do. As Kitty Steel said later:

"He just seemed to want to walk and look at the sky and talk about new buildings he had never seen, and ask what happened to a park he remembered—and breathe."

To a man who had spent nearly seven years in prison reaffirming his innocence, rejecting any deals for liberation and enduring special prison discomforts because of his refusal to acknowledge the legitimacy of his conviction, the air-pollution count at that moment of the day could hardly have mattered. He was "free at last"—and suddenly one wryly remembered that the day marked the sixth anniversary of the death of Martin Luther King, with whom Maynard had marched for civil rights.

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For those who had long been persuaded of Maynard's innocence, many moments of the day will remain unforgettable. Once Justice Lang had handed down his long, strong opinion, there was ample reason to hope that bail would be swiftly granted, and District Attorney Kuh privately told Steel on Wednesday afternoon that he would not raise any objection. But Maynard's fight had so often seemed doomed that one continued to dread some last-minute disaster. Instead it was all over swiftly.

Technically the case is not ended. The District Attorney's office has 30 days in which to appeal Lang's decision or initiate a new trial. But with its key witness totally discredited by new evidence produced at the hearings before Lang and with massive, cumulative disclosure that the Maynard prosecution was tainted from the start, any minimal rules of reason would argue against further harassment. Surely Kuh has no obligation to try to vindicate a blundering inquisition for which he bears no responsibility.

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There can be no genuine restitution for the years of his life that Anthony Maynard has lost. It is some comfort, however, that at 39, he bears no resemblance to a shattered man. The resources of courage and strength that enabled him to survive this interminable nightmare cannot be easily defined. But in his long horror story, he was more fortunate than some other innocent men still languishing in our prisons.

He had the continuous, indestructible loyalty of his sister, a sculptress of distinction, who staunchly refused to admit defeat in the worst of times.

It was Valerie who took his case to lawyers Steel and Dan Meyers, after she had lost all confidence in the court-appointed attorneys who had previously represented her brother (and one of whom kept urging him to make a deal with the DA's office). Steel and Meyers, serving without compensation, exhibited a fidelity to the worthiest traditions of their profession that should inspire any young lawyers who care about justice.

It was Valerie who brought the Maynard story to me and gave me the chance to participate in the kind of battle that makes journalism a meaningful way of life.

There were others in that often lonely journey, many of whom gathered at Steel's office yesterday afternoon for a celebration too long delayed. One was Ralph Addonizio, who worked as Steel's investigator during crucial phases of the case. He is a man with the outward toughness of a hardened private-eye. But when Maynard arrived at the gathering and warmly greeted him, it was Addonizio who wept. Investigators who feel that deeply about a mission are a rare breed.

It is perhaps an affront to a judge to salute him for courage when he renders an opinion he believes to be right. But it would be unfair to conclude this retrospect without adequate tribute to Justice Lang, himself a former assistant DA. Other jurists had managed to avoid the Maynard case through one device or another. He didn't. He conducted the hearings with infinite patience and gravity, and his thoughtful opinion will achieve recognition in legal history.

"Tony" Maynard, one must add, had earned the right to have his case heard by such a judge.