

Life or Death

A death-penalty opponent remembers the trial of her brother's murderer.

BY CHARISSE COLEMAN

At 1 a.m. on Aug. 12, 1995, three men walked into the Thrifty Liquor Store in Shreveport, La., where my older brother Russell worked as a stock clerk. One of the men asked about the price of beer. One bought a bag of chips. The third looked too young even to be in a liquor store. Then there were three gunshots, and Russell lay bleeding to death on the rug.

No one knows why Bobby Lee Hampton decided to launch the robbery that night with a murder. Maybe not even Bobby knows that. After cleaning out the cash drawers and the manager's office, he walked out the door and said to his accomplices, "Take care of the other two." If those men had followed Bobby's command, there would have been three dead bodies on the floor of Thrifty Liquor, no arrests

all about anything of real importance. Every one of them had to have known when they left the jury box how they would vote. They must have taken a poll, I thought, discovered themselves to be in unanimous accord, and then spent the next 40 minutes or so, not deciding between a life sentence or death, but determining and recording mitigating and aggravating circumstances.

A few minutes later, there we sat: Hugo and Bruce at the prosecution table. Me, Mama, Cameron, JoAnn, my mother's friends, two of Bobby's sisters, one of his brothers, several folks from the prosecutor's office and Hugo's daddy, all in the spectators' pews. At the other table

was the defense team and Bobby Lee Hampton, convicted murderer. For the last time, we had taken our places in the frigidly cold courtroom: the dapper clerk, the kind-faced blond bailiff who'd slipped us the skinny on where the jury was having dinner (so that we could avoid that restaurant), the plump, pleasant court reporter, the 12 jurors in their established seats.

When the clerk read aloud that Bobby Lee Hampton was to be executed, I felt a muffling sense of anticlimax, the way sounds reach your ears underwater, discernible but also removed. I sat there, unable to feel much. More than at any other point in the trial, this was the

moment I was most completely a spectator. My fundamental opposition to the death penalty mingled with my awed respect for the jury's extreme decision and short-circuited any clear response. The emotion that flickered through the fissures in the jury's composure, my scrutiny of Bobby Hampton, my glancing sidelong at Cameron and Mama to gauge their responses, perhaps even the heavy, simple incomprehension that it was all over, stalled the engine of my own feelings.

I looked at Cameron's and Mama's grave, controlled faces. No gleam of satisfaction played across their features or lit their eyes, though I knew this sentence was what they ▶