

DEAD MAN WALKING

**BY
TIM ROBBINS**

Based on the book *Dead Man Walking*
by
Sister Helen Prejean

FOR THE EXCLUSIVE USE OF THE
DEAD MAN WALKING
SCHOOL THEATRE PROJECT

(revised November 2013)

**DEAD MAN
WALKING**

**BY
TIM ROBBINS**

DEAD MAN WALKING

© Copyright, 2003, by Tim Robbins

CAUTION: Professionals and amateurs are hereby warned that DEAD MAN WALKING is subject to a royalty. It is fully protected under the copyright laws of the United States of America, and of all countries covered by the International Copyright Union (including the Dominion of Canada and the rest of the British Commonwealth), and of all countries covered by the Pan-American Copyright Convention and the Universal Copyright Convention, the Berne Convention, and of all countries with which the United States has reciprocal copyright relations. All rights, including professional, amateur, stage, motion picture, recitation, lecturing, public reading, radio broadcasting, television, video or sound taping, all other forms of mechanical or electronic reproduction, such as information storage and retrieval systems and photocopying, and the rights of translation into foreign languages, are strictly reserved.

Whenever the play is produced, the following notice must appear on all programs, printing, and advertising for the play: "Produced by Special Arrangement with Tim Robbins and the DEAD MAN WALKING SCHOOL THEATRE PROJECT."

The English-language stage performance rights of DEAD MAN WALKING may be licensed through the DEAD MAN WALKING SCHOOL THEATRE PROJECT. No professional or non-professional performance of the play may be given without obtain in advance the written permission of the DEAD MAN WALKING SCHOOL THEATRE PROJECT and paying the requisite fee.

SPECIAL NOTE

All groups receiving permission to produce DEAD MAN WALKING are required to give credit to Tim Robbins as the sole and exclusive author of the Play in all programs distributed in connection with performances of the Play and in all instances in which the title of the Play appears for purposes of advertising, publicizing or otherwise exploiting the Play and/or a production thereof; the name of the author must appear on a separate line, in which no other name appears, immediately beneath the title and in size of type equal to 50% of the largest letter used for the title of the Play. No person, firm, organization, or entity may receive credit larger or more prominent than that accorded the author.

(Revised November 2013)

Dead Man Walking

The play is best performed on a bare set, easily and quickly able to shift environments. Designers should think in terms of images, not literal ideas. Images of reality that suggest truth are preferable to a literal representation of set pieces. The play must exist in a dream state at times and choices that encourage the active imagination and creative mind of the audience are encouraged. Lighting design and sound design are key components and a precision in their delivery will help immensely. In the acting of it, please beware of self pity and moral righteousness. They are the sworn enemies of effective drama. These are real people capable of mistakes and pettiness, also capable of realizing their higher selves. Their journey is a struggle and very human. Try not to judge them or glorify them. Avoid romanticizing anyone's journey. And lastly, beware of falling into the pit of the slow. There should be a frantic urgency in the piece driving it forward. This urgency will allow for the moments of silence and stillness to truly resonate.

ACT ONE

PREJEAN appears

PREJEAN: The faith of my youth would be the faith of my future. But as a young woman, I never could have imagined where my faith would take me. When I was a young nun it was simple. What counted was a personal relationship with God, inner peace, kindness to others and heaven when life is done. In 1980 my religious community, the Sisters of St. Joseph, made a commitment to "stand on the side of the poor" and I had gone along, but reluctantly. I didn't want to struggle with politics or economics.

We were nuns after all, not social workers. Even Jesus Christ himself had said: The poor you will always have with you.

Lights change.

PREJEAN: That all changed in June 1980. Some glaring injustices were pointed out to me by a sociologist, Sister Marie Augusta Neal.

NEAL: The poor aren't there magically. The poor are poor as a result of specific business decisions, specific oppression, specific greed. Poverty is no mistake. It is created by those that benefit from it.

PREJEAN: But what can I do? I'm just one sister...

NEAL: Well the problem is now you know.

PREJEAN: How's that a problem?

NEAL: Well now you've got to do something about it don't you?

PREJEAN: I'm not a political person. I don't get involved in politics.

NEAL: To be apolitical in the face of injustice is a very political position to take. To not actively fight against injustice is to actively condone it. Once you understand something's wrong you have to fight against it. Jesus preached good news to the poor that they are to be poor no longer.

PREJEAN: Which meant that the poor were not meant to accept their poverty and suffering as God's will but instead struggle to obtain the necessities of life, which were rightfully theirs. Sister Neal viewed Jesus as a social visionary, an activist, what we might call a radical today. And we, we sisters of the Catholic Church, had an obligation to carry on that activism, that advocacy for the poor.

Something inside me must have been building towards this moment because there was a flash, a revelation, an epiphany if you will and I walked out of my meeting with Sister Neal forever changed, never to look back. One year later I was living in the St. Thomas Housing development in New Orleans, Louisiana. I worked in a place called Hope House, which did lots of things, from distributing food, to running day care centers, to tutoring. We shared the space with a group that worked with prisoners. I tutored high school students.

HERBIE: How can X times Y equal Z? They're letters. No one told me you can multiply letters.

PREJEAN: They're concepts. They represent numbers.

HERBIE: Well why're they hiding?

PREJEAN: Y and X represent sides of the triangle. They're not hiding. It's a formula to find out the distance of Z.

HERBIE: Mmmmm.

LUIS MONTOYA enters and sees PREJEAN

MONTOYA: I never understood that either, Herbie. The good news is once you get past the finals for algebra you won't need it again.

PREJEAN: You never know Luis.

MONTOYA: Sister. Got a second?

PREJEAN: Yeah.

MONTOYA: Listen, Sister, we've got this fella, death row inmate. He could use a pen pal, doesn't have anyone. I was wondering if you could write to him.

PREJEAN: Sure.

MONTOYA: His name is Matthew Poncelet.

MONTOYA is writing the information down.

MONTOYA: He's in for murder.

PREJEAN looks down at the name.

MONTOYA: Maybe I ought to give you someone else. This guy is a loner, a bit of a brash one.

PREJEAN: Nab, don't change it. Give him to me.

MONTOYA: He's from Slidell, Louisiana. We have files at the office if you want to read about the case.

PREJEAN takes the piece of paper with the name on it.

PREJEAN: I didn't know much about the death penalty at this point but I did know enough to assume that anyone occupying a cell on Louisiana's death row did not come from money so I saw getting involved with this as a logical extension of our work with the poor. After my struggles with Herbie and Algebra I went by the Coalition office.

*PREJEAN sits and opens a folder marked
CORRESPONDENCE. She finds a letter from MATT,
written from jail. Lights up to reveal MATT PONCELET.*

MATT: This lawyer I have. I'm not sure what all he's doing for me because I hardly ever see him. Can you help me?

*PREJEAN turns page. MONTOYA appears behind her,
looking over her shoulder.*

MONTOYA: Of course, none of the guys on the Row can afford to hire their own attorney for their appeals: so you can imagine the frantic telephone calls we get from death-row inmates begging us to find them attorneys.

PREJEAN: Free of charge.

MONTOYA: That's right. These petitions take hours, days to prepare. Attorneys aren't exactly lining up outside this door for the job.

Lights change. PREJEAN walks to a bed in a pool of light.

PREJEAN: That evening I wrote Matthew Poncelet, Prisoner 18375 at Angola Prison's Death Row. I told him about myself, my family, the neighborhood I lived in.

We hear gunshots in the distance.

PREJEAN: As I lay in bed that evening I heard gunshots. I wondered who had gotten sucked into the violence tonight in the St. Thomas Project. Who would be missing from school tomorrow? Which mother's wail would pierce the night?

The lights change.

PREJEAN: Two weeks later a letter arrived.

*On a raised platform at the rear of the stage MATT
PONCELET, again in silhouette.*

MATT: Dear Sister Prejean. Thank you for writing to me. I'm writing from my home, my 6 by 8 foot cell. I'm in here 23 hours a day. We don't work on death row. We're special here. They keep us away from the general population of the prison. We're the elite because we're going to fry.

We see a photo of MATT PONCELET. A blurred image on the screen behind. PREJEAN, holding the letter, looks at the photo.

MATT: It's hard not to get soft in this cell. I press my footlocker, lift it, try to get my muscles in shape but it's hard not to get fat. Rice, potatoes, pancakes and beans. Sometimes I feel like a sow on a farm that's being fattened up for a Christmas slaughter.

We hear rain and the clanging of steel gates. PREJEAN walks to a light.

GUARD: Remove any metal, coins, keys.

PREJEAN feels her pockets then notices the cross on her neck. She takes it off and places it in a plastic bin. She walks forward. A female guard approaches her and pats her down. In the ensuing speech, PREJEAN walks the perimeter of the stage with a male guard and sits in a chair. A desk is nearby.

MATT: I had a dream once that I was about to be fried in the chair and a guard came into my cell with a chef's hat on and started to roll me around in breadcrumbs licking his chops and all. Maybe you think I'm a weirdo to have dreams like that but your mind does funny things when you're locked up and surrounded by people that want to kill you. Anyway. Thanks for writing. I don't get many letters. Visitors either. No one in my family seems able to make the trip out here. I understand. It's a long drive from Slidell.

PREJEAN waits. CHAPLAIN FARLEY enters. His face is kind but tired. Farley is a Catholic Priest and the chief chaplain of the prison.

FARLEY: Good morning, Sister.

PREJEAN: Good morning, Father.

PREJEAN shakes his hand, firmly. A pause.

FARLEY: Have you ever been in a prison before?

PREJEAN: No. But one time Sister Clement and I sang some songs at a Juvenile Detention Center in New Orleans.

PREJEAN laughs.

PREJEAN: We sang "Kumbaya" and the boys really liked it. They started making up their own verses, singing, "Someone's escapin' my Lord, Kumbaya ... " The guards made us sing a different song.

FARLEY laughs lightly.

FARLEY: Where is your habit?

PREJEAN: Our Sisters haven't worn the habit for twenty years.

FARLEY: You are aware of the Papal request regarding nuns' garments aren't you?

PREJEAN: The pope said "distinctive clothing" not habits.

FARLEY: I'm sure you will interpret it your own way. Whatever's convenient.

A pause. FARLEY is looking at a paper on his desk.

FARLEY: Matthew Poncelet. I remember him from the news. Him and another fella shot two children in the back of the head on Lover's Lane. Raped the girl and stabbed her several times. Do you know what you're getting into?

PREJEAN is at a loss for words.

FARLEY: So what is this, Sister? Morbid fascination? Bleeding heart sympathy?

PREJEAN: No. He wrote me and asked me to come.

FARLEY: There is no romance here, Sister. No Jimmy Cagney, “I’ve been wrongly accused if only I had someone who believed in me,” nonsense. This is a bunch of con men and they’ll take advantage of you every way they can. You must be very, very careful. Do you understand?

PREJEAN: Yes, Father.

FARLEY: These men don’t see many females. Wearing the habit would help instill respect. For you to flout authority will only encourage them to do the same.

PREJEAN stands and begins to walk. The chaplain and the desk fall away, the lights change. Sound of a LOUD CLICK. A gate clangs shut behind her. We hear a SCREAM

VOICE: Get out of the car.

We hear the sounds of a woman being raped, violent, disturbing. The guard appears next to Prejean.

GUARD: Woman on the tier!

Gate One: CLANG. Gate Two: CLANG. Gate Three: CLANG. Metal on metal. A GUNSHOT.

GUARD: Wait here. They’ll get your man for you.

Lights come up to reveal the visiting room. A heavy mesh screen separates visitors from inmates. Two other visits are taking place, an older white woman and a black woman. PREJEAN starts to slowly pace back and forth, trying to take deep breaths, to settle down.

PREJEAN: What am I getting myself into?

MATT enters. He is freshly shaven and his brown hair is combed into a wave in the front. He has a handsome face, open, smiling. Not the face she had seen in the photo. He has on a blue denim shirt and jeans. His hands are cuffed to a wide brown leather belt at his waist.

PREJEAN: Hi, Matthew. I made it.

MATT: Thanks for coming to see me, ma’am. Never thought I’d be visitin’ with no nun.

They sit down in one of the booths. There is a pause. He lights a cigarette. Another pause.

MATT: So, you’re a nun.

PREJEAN: Yep.

A pause.

PREJEAN: I want you to know, Matthew, that I’m here to listen. We can talk about whatever you want.

MATT: You’re very sincere. **PREJEAN:** What do you mean? **MATT:** You’ve never done this before.

PREJEAN: No.

MATT: Never been this close to a murderer before?

PREJEAN: Not that I know of.

MATT: Well you live in St. Thomas. Lots of niggers around there. They knock each other off like beer cans on a fence.

An awkward pause.

MATT: You know when I first got your letter and I seen Helen on it I thought it was my first ex-old lady. I almost ripped it up. She turned me in, told the sheriff where to find me. Orphaned our kid, the stupid bitch.

PREJEAN: You have a kid?

MATT: Yes. A con with a kid.

PREJEAN: Boy or a girl?

MATT: Girl.

PREJEAN: What's her name?

MATT: You have a lot of questions.

PREJEAN: I don't know you.

MATT: Well, never mind.

A pause.

MATT: Do I scare you?

A long pause.

MATT: You told me in your letter you work with poor people. Your daddy was a lawyer? You come from money, don't you?

PREJEAN: Some.

MATT: And you live in the St. Thomas projects? I don't get that. I don't know who's more crazy. You or me.

PREJEAN: I live where I work.

MATT: In a slum.

PREJEAN: How about you?

MATT: I live here.

PREJEAN: You grew up poor?

MATT: Shit. Nobody from money on the Row.

A pause.

PREJEAN: Then you and I have something in common.

MATT: What's that?

PREJEAN: We both live with the poor.

A pause.

MATT: Ain't you gonna ask me what I did?

PREJEAN: The Chaplain filled me in.

MATT: Such a religious man.

A pause

MATT: I didn't kill nobody. Carl went crazy on me.

PREJEAN: Who's Carl?

MATT: Vitello. He's the one that should be sitting here. He went nuts on me. I was scared. I just did what he said, held the boy back, but he killed them. After it happened we was runnin' around in those woods lost, goin' through brambles and mud and couldn't find the truck.

PREJEAN: You watched him kill these kids?

MATT: Truth is me and Carl were loaded on downs, acid and booze when this happened. I hadn't slept in two nights. It's a blur. I was out of my head. But I didn't kill them. I didn't kill anybody. I swear to God I didn't.

MATT takes out an old tattered photograph. He holds it up to the grate. It is a photo of a two year old.

MATT: Allie.

PREJEAN: Allie?

MATT: Her name.

PREJEAN: She's cute.

MATT: She's eleven ... or twelve. I don't know. She was born when I was in prison, the first time. I seen her once.

PREJEAN: When was that?

MATT: She was three. Got out of Marion and went straight to my old lady's place in Breaux Bridge. I see this beautiful girl

playing in the front yard, grab her up into my arms and say, "I'm your daddy." and I look around and there's her mother pointing a shotgun at me. She's called the cops. Thought I was a kidnapper or something. She sees it's me, puts the gun down, starts acting all cold, making rude remarks in front of the kid about me being a con and all. I get real angry, bust up some furniture, cops come, chop, chop, back to jail. That's the last I seen of my daughter.

PREJEAN: Do you write to her?

MATT: Don't know where she is. When my dumb ass girlfriend called the sheriff on me they didn't think too much of her either, found some dope in the house, took the kid away. She's in Texas somewhere. Foster parents.

A pause.

GUARD: Wrap it up, Sister.

MATT: They about to go on a killin' spree. Zappin' this dude Tobias tonight. The guards been taking bets on who's next. I'm at even odds. Not good. The way I see it I got two chances. The pardon board and a federal appeals court. I can write the motion and all, I just need someone to file it.

PREJEAN: You a lawyer?

MATT: When your back is against the wall you learn the law fast. Let's just say you have special motivation. I've been on death row for six years, been reading and studying every law book I can get my hands on.

*A clang is heard, the door opening, a guard appears.
MATT holds a folder.*

MATT: Look, I got a whole lot of stuff about my case, transcripts of my trials and legal papers. Maybe they would help you get a hold of things about me and my case faster.

An awkward pause.

MATT: You ain't coming back are you?

PREJEAN: No, I was just... Are these your only copies?

MATT: I got my own copy. But they hard to come by so if you ain't gonna help me I don't want to waste 'em on you.

PREJEAN: I'll look them over. I appreciate your trust.

MATT: I tell you what, ma'am. I sure as hell don't trust nobody around this place. You didn't come here to kiss my ass and preach all that hellfire and brimstone crap. I respect that. You're all right. You got guts. You live in a neighborhood where every nigger has a gun. Appreciate your visit though, ma'am. Thanks for listening and for making the long trip.

PREJEAN: No trouble.

MATT: And you be careful on your drive home. People are crazy out there.

The lights change abruptly, leaving PREJEAN in a pool of light as the set disappears behind.

PREJEAN moves to a bed and sits in it covering her legs with blankets.

PREJEAN: When I was eight years old I joined a group of neighborhood kids and beat a possum to death. We held sticks and beat it until it was bloody. I remember being wracked with guilt and the image of that possum lying there dead visited my dreams

for months. I don't know what possessed us that day. Was it that we didn't want to be tricked by an animal playing possum? Were we tapping into something primitive in this violence? Did we feel so powerless as children that we needed to feel ultimate power? I hadn't thought about that possum until I dreamed about it the evening of my first meeting with Matt Poncelet.

PREJEAN lays down in bed. As soon as she lays down she gets up.

SISTER COLLEEN in a bed in the same room notices.

COLLEEN: Bad dream?

PREJEAN: Strange. Yes.

COLLEEN: You've been to another country, huh girl?

PREJEAN: Another planet, Colleen.

A pause.

PREJEAN: How is Herbie doing?

COLLEEN: Recovering. The wound is in the lower leg. It's pretty bad. Shattered the shin bone.

PREJEAN: Dear Lord.

COLLEEN: You know his shooting wasn't on the news?

PREJEAN: Really?

COLLEEN: We called all the stations, the newspapers too. No one came.

PREJEAN: I guess a teenager getting shot isn't news.

COLLEEN: Unless he's white. Then it's front page.

PREJEAN: Is he home, Herbie?

COLLEEN: We'll go see him tomorrow.

The lights change. PREJEAN with LUIS MONTOYA.

PREJEAN: Poncelet claims that Vitello killed them both. Y'all think he's lying?

MONTOYA: Vitello accuses Poncelet. Both say the other did the actual killing. Somebody's lying to somebody.

PREJEAN: Well how is it possible that one man gets life and one gets death?

MONTOYA: The State only goes after death in 1 out of 50 cases.

PREJEAN: Why's that?

MONTOYA: Too expensive. Costs two million to kill a man, half a mil to keep him in for life. State probably had a stronger case against Poncelet or Vitello had a better lawyer, was able to create doubt in the jury's mind.

PREJEAN: And Vitello gets life, Poncelet death.

MONTOYA: Yep.

PREJEAN: Bad luck.

MONTOYA: He needs help, Helen. There is a lawyer by the name of Hilton Barber. He's aware of the case, told me no. Maybe you could change his mind.

PREJEAN: With the aim of getting him a new trial? What if he gets off? I'm not sure I'd want to run into this guy at the Piggly Wiggly.

MONTOYA: There's no way he's going to get off. He was there. He was an accomplice and that's life. Life sentences in Louisiana are for real. We're just trying to keep the state from killing him. Listen, you want out. That's cool with me. You don't have to go back there.

PREJEAN: I'd like to read more about it.

MONTOYA: I've got a file. I'll give you that.

PREJEAN: Luis, do you know if Hope Percy was an only child?

MONTOYA: What?

PREJEAN: I'm just thinking of her mama and daddy. God! How do they put their heads on their pillows at night knowing what happened to their daughter?

SISTER COLLEEN and PREJEAN look through the file.

PREJEAN: Matt Poncelet's file was a grim and unimaginable trip through a terrible nightmare. The depths of the depravity stunned me. A vicious, violent act, grief-stricken parents and unbelievable arrogance on the part of the accused murderers. Colleen and I read through it stunned.

*We see, on a SCREEN behind: Headline of the murder:
"LEADS ARE FEW IN TEENAGE MURDER HERE"
Photo: Smiling faces of a teenage couple.*

Four actors appear in silhouette and begin doing 'stand up' reports on the murders, overlapping.

REPORTER #1: On Friday night, Walter Delacroix, aged 17, Hope Percy, 18, had been just two happy people celebrating one life's turning points...

REPORTER #2: ... The couple had been shot twice at closer range in the back of the head with a .22-caliber rifle.

SCREEN: Sneering faces of the murderers: Matthew Poncelet, 26 and Carl Vitello, 31.

REPORTER #3: ... In addition to murder charges, Poncelet and Vitello face six counts of aggravated kidnapping and one charge of aggravated rape. In the four weeks before the murders, the two accused men allegedly had cut a wide path of terror across the area, attacking several teenage couples in local lovers' lanes...

REPORTER #1: ...Poncelet and Vitello, posing as security guards, would handcuff the men and molest the women. Most of the couples were too ashamed to come forward. A police spokesman said today that in the wake of the killings several couples have courageously revealed what happened to them and have identified Poncelet and Vitello as the assailants...

REPORTER #2: ... Vitello drew his hand menacingly like a knife across his chest when Joseph Dunham appeared in the courtroom...

REPORTER #3: ... When Dunham's girlfriend appeared, a young woman Poncelet had allegedly raped, he winked and blew her a kiss...

REPORTER #2: ... Matthew Poncelet addressed the judge as "Cap" and smirked when the jury found him guilty of murder here today...

REPORTER #1: ... and told his weeping mother to "dry up" as he was led from the courtroom.

PREJEAN: I wondered about the parents, condemned to imagine for the rest of their lives their children's last tortured hours; perpetually startled out of their sleep by dreams of the terror that took their children from them.

The lights change, the screen and the actors disappear to reveal PREJEAN and COLLEEN, clippings from the file strewn about them. A radio plays:

PREJEAN: A voice was heard in Ramah, sobbing and lamenting: Rachel weeping for her children, refusing to be comforted because they were no more.

In contrast to the cacophony of the previous section a small, tinny voice comes from the radio in the room with PREJEAN:

RADIO: The execution, which was originally scheduled for midnight, was dramatically halted as Tobias approached the chair. Tobias returned to his cell where he waited for an hour while a legal question was being discussed. At 1:00am the convicted murderer was removed from his cell and brought once again to the electric chair where he was executed. Tobias was pronounced dead at 1:15am. Tobias will be one of the last to die in Gruesome Gertie, the state's electric chair. Two executions scheduled in the next five weeks will usher in the use of lethal injection in the state of Louisiana. Lethal injection is said to be a more humane method of execution. This is Accu-News.

*Instantly a shock jock comes on. This is PURVIS SLADE.
"Happy Days Are Here Again" plays as:*

SLADE: Zap! Goodnight, Mr. Tobias. Guess you shouldn't have messed around in the state of Louisiana.

He plays a sound effect of electricity. COLLEEN switches the station. The phone rings. MATT appears from behind, backlit but visible.

PREJEAN: The next day I got a call from Matt Poncelet. One of the unnamed inmates that would usher in the use of the more humane method of execution turned out to be him.

MATT: I didn't know who to call. I know I'm on death row but there's guys been here for years. I didn't know this was coming. They set a date. They're gonna kill me. I gotta do something. I didn't know you need a lawyer to get a pardon board hearing. Hell, I'd do it myself if they'd let me but they say "No lawyer, no hearing."

A pause. PREJEAN is speechless.

PREJEAN: OK, OK. Matthew, keep your cool. I'll think of something. I've heard of a lawyer who can maybe help you, Matthew. I'll see what I can do.

MATT: Sister, come through for me. You all I got. They got me on a greased rail to the death house. I ain't heard from you. You ain't fadin out on me are you, Sis?

PREJEAN: I'll get you that lawyer, Matthew. Try not to worry.

The lights change. PREJEAN walks the same route as she did the first time she visited the prison. She is with HILTON BARBER, a middle-aged death penalty lawyer.

HILTON: I found a ton of legal procedural errors in his trial transcript. His lawyer was bush league, an amateur, met Poncelet a day before his trial. Jury selection took four hours. Trial lasted three days. His lawyer raised one objection in the entire trial. It's not a fluke that 99% of death row inmates are poor. They get the

kind of defense they pay for. How long have you been doing this, Sister?

PREJEAN: This?

HILTON: Counseling death row inmates.

PREJEAN: I'm not counseling him. I barely know him, only met him once.

HILTON: Well, what's your impression, Sister?

PREJEAN: He's a tough one. He needs help. Best way I can figure is to bring you to him.

HILTON: Well, I'll do my best. The legal system is a series of gates that shut like one-way turnstiles and you can't go back once you've come out. If the trial attorney does not raise an issue or make an objection during the trial, the higher courts say the defendant has waived his rights to raise the issue later on. Imagine that. There are cases where defense attorneys in capital cases have been so ill-prepared they told the judge they didn't know what they were doing, and even then, the appeals courts wouldn't grant a new trial.

HILTON stops at the guard station. He pulls out a twenty-dollar bill.

HILTON: This is for Poncelet's inmate account. Let me have a receipt.

As they wait for the receipt.

HILTON: They need cigarettes and coffee. I think smoking is bad but if you're going to die prematurely why not take the edge off.

They sit, lights change. MATT is there.

MATT: And the day before Governor Fredericks says he's running for re-election: surprise! A big announcement with lots of press setting a date for my execution to show how tough he is on crime.

HILTON: Well, I agree with you, Matt. Politics did play a big part in this decision but the pardon board is not the place to bring this up.

MATT: Why not?

HILTON: Because it's full of political appointees, the Governor's appointees and the last thing they want to hear is some convicted killer telling them they is bunk. What we have to do, Matt, is present you as a human being and convince them to spare your life.

MATT: What we have to do is prove I am innocent.

IDLTON: We'll get to that. We're filing appeals in Federal Court and the Supreme Court. But this is the pardon board, don't mean a thing to them if you pulled the trigger or not. They're thinking of the crime and you as the monster. It's easy to kill a monster but it's hard to kill a human being. We need people that know you to speak on your behalf. Your mama should be at this hearing.

MATT: I don't want her there. She's just going to bust out cryin' and won't be able to say nothin' 'cause she's gonna be so tore up.

HILTON: Be that as it may, your mama should still be there.

MATT: No. No. She's gonna have to sit there and hear the Delacroixs, the Percys and the D.A.

PREJEAN: Excuse me for butting in. She's your mama, Matt, your mama. It's going to be upsetting for her but I think she should have the opportunity to speak for her child if she wants to.

MATT: She's just gonna blubber her head off.

PREJEAN: Yeah, but she has the right to do that. What if you die and she didn't have the chance to speak for you? Don't you think that's going to eat at her? She's always going to wonder if she could have saved you.

MATT: Yeah. (A brief pause) I'll think about it. I want y'all to know I got my pride. I ain't kissin' ass in front of those people. I ain't kissing nobody's ass.

The lights shift. PREJEAN moves to different area of the stage.

PREJEAN: I took a drive a couple of days later on Easter Sunday to visit Matt's mother

PREJEAN stands in a rectangle of light, facing the audience. LUCILLE stands in darkness also facing the audience.

VOICE: Yes?

PREJEAN: Mrs. Poncelet?

VOICE: No.

PREJEAN: Mrs. Poncelet?

VOICE: Don't live here. Who is it?

PREJEAN: My name is Sister Prejean. I know your son.

A pause.

LUCILLE: My son don't know any Sisters. What do you want?

PREJEAN: Just to talk. Can you open the door?

LUCILLE: You really a Sister?

PREJEAN: Yes.

LUCILLE: You're not from the T.V.?

PREJEAN: No.

LUCILLE: You sure?

PREJEAN: Yes.

The lights fade up slowly to reveal LUCILLE who flinches, as if expecting to be hit. She looks at PREJEAN suspiciously.

LUCILLE: How do you know Mattie?

PREJEAN: I met your son on death row.

LUCILLE: You never know who is at your front door. I get a lot of attention, you know? Everybody knows who I am. So what do you want? Mattie send you to get money for cigarettes?

PREJEAN: No.

LUCILLE: Well, that's a first. Why you here?

PREJEAN: You know that they have set a date for Matt's execution?

LUCILLE: Yeh. Got a call from the prison. Said if it goes down do I got death insurance. What a laugh. I ain't even got food money.

PREJEAN: Matt goes before the Pardon Board this week. His lawyer thinks it would be a good idea for you to be there.

LUCILLE: What does Mattie think?

PREJEAN: He's worried. He wants to protect you.

LUCILLE: Well, it's a little late for that. Sit down.

PREJEAN and LUCILLE sit across from one another.

LUCILLE: That show, Inside Crime, made a story about Mattie and they told how I tried to help him and all, a regular Ma Barker or something. Now I'm famous. I was in a store yesterday and I seen these two ladies eyeing me and as I get closer to them I hear one of them say, "I just can't wait to hear that they have executed that monster, Matt Poncelet. That's the mother of that killer!" they say.

PREJEAN: That's cruel.

LUCILLE: Talking about me like I wasn't there. Hmm. But they're right. I don't know. They think I wasn't there for him. They think I taught him to kill.

A pause.

LUCILLE: What do you think, Sister? You think I look like the mother of a killer?

She lights a cigarette. Hands PREJEAN a picture.

LUCILLE: That's Mattie when he was six.

A pause.

LUCILLE: Sometimes I want to pretend I'm not his mother so people will leave me alone, not hate me. That's terrible, huh?

PREJEAN: It's a lot you're asking of yourself. You remember the story of Peter and the cocks crowing?

LUCILLE: He denied Jesus.

PREJEAN: That was a good friend of Jesus. Someone he trusted.

LUCILLE: The rock of the Church.

PREJEAN: He was scared. It's hard when everyone is screaming for blood.

A pause.

LUCILLE: My boys are having a hard time in school. Kids is pickin' on them, beatin' them up, callin' them names. Someone put a dead squirrel in my little Troy's locker. He came home cryin', poor boy. What did he ever do to anybody?

A pause.

LUCILLE: I keep tryin' to figure out what I done wrong.

Lights change. MATT appears for a moment with his mother. The lights fade on his mother and change to reveal PREJEAN visiting him. There is a storm. We hear rain. There is lightning. Thunder.

MATT: My Daddy took me to a bar when I was twelve and told me to choose your whiskey and there was all these bottles behind

the bar and I pointed and said I'd take the one with the pretty turkey on it. Them guys in the bar laughed they butts off.

He laughs.

MATT: We got drunk as a couple of coots that night, boy.

Matt smiles.

MATT: Daddy was a good man, a sharecropper, worked hard. That's one thing I got from him. Working hands.

PREJEAN: How old were you when he died?

MATT: Fourteen.

There is a pause.

MATT: Why's you a nun?

A pause.

PREJEAN: I was drawn to it, I guess. That's a hard question. Like asking you why you're a convict.

MATT: Bad luck.

PREJEAN: Then good luck. I had a loving family, a lot of support. I guess I felt obliged to give some of it back.

MATT: Don't you miss having a man? Don't you want to fall in love, get married? Have sex?

A pause.

MATT: What? You don't want to talk about it?

PREJEAN: I have close friends - men and women. I haven't experienced sexual intimacy with anyone. But there are other ways to be close. Sharing your feelings and thoughts... your dreams; that's intimacy too.

MATT: We got intimacy right now, you and me. Don't we, Sister? He snickers. She gives him a hard look.

PREJEAN: I went to see your mother. She's willing to go to the pardon board tomorrow if you'll have her.

MATT: I like being alone with you. You're looking real good to me.

PREJEAN: Look at you. Death is breathing down your neck and here you are, playing your lil' Matt-on-the-make games. I'm not here for your amusement, Matt, so have some respect.

MATT: Why should I respect you? Because you a nun and wear a cross around your neck?

PREJEAN: Because I'm a person, Matt and we all deserve respect. Now what's your answer? What's it going to be with your mama?

LUCILLE appears in a spot of light. Bulbs flash in cameras.

LUCILLE: Mattie's had a hard life...

She stops and her eyes fill with tears and she puts her head down into her arms and tries to continue.

LUCILLE: But he was a good boy...

She bursts into uncontrollable sobbing. PREJEAN takes her arm and sits her down. Lights reveal MATT and HILTON sitting behind a table. Adjacent on the other side of the stage is another table where GILARDI sits. Behind him the PERCYS and the DELACROIXS.

GUY GILARDI, the assistant D.A., stands.

GILARDI: Ladies and gentlemen, why does the State call for the death penalty in the case of Matthew Poncelet? Well, let's take a look. In your files you will see pictures from the murder scene, pictures that testify to the depravity and degeneracy of this most brutal and subhuman act of violence. It has been six years since the murders of Hope Percy and Walter Delacroix and justice is long past due. Matt Poncelet has had a lengthy, thorough court review, not only a trial but a retrial as well as numerous appeals to state and federal courts and successor petitions filed by Mr. Barber, quite obviously a most excellent attorney at the service of Mr. Poncelet. There has been no doubt in the court's mind at any time about who did the murder.

Hilton stands.

HILTON: The death penalty. It's nothing new. Been around for centuries. Used to nail people's hands and feet to wood, then lash their sides and bleed them. Throughout the centuries we buried people alive, lopped their heads off with an axe, a guillotine, burned them in public squares, gruesome spectacles all. In this century in the search for more humane ways to execute we have hung people from the gallows, shot them in firing squads, suffocated them in the gas chamber and cooked them alive in the electric chair. We've got something even more "humane" now. Lethal injection.

GILARDI: Matthew Poncelet was not a good boy. He was a heartless killer. These murders were calculated, disgusting and cruel. This man shot Walter Delacroix two times in the back of his

head, then raped Hope Percy and stabbed her 17 times before shooting this sweet girl two times in the back of her head. Since the murder Matthew Poncelet has shown no remorse. In the courtroom when he was sentenced he was smiling and chewing his gum. He is an unfeeling, perverse misfit and it is time, way past time for Mr. Poncelet to pay the consequences of his horrifying deed.

HILTON: Lethal injection. We strap the guy up, anaesthetize him with shot number one, then we give him shot number two that implodes the lungs, then shot number three that stops the heart. We put him to death like an old horse. His face just goes to sleep while inside his organs are going through Armageddon. His muscles would seize up and twitch and contort and pull, but shot number one relaxes all those muscles. So we don't have to see any horror show. We don't have to taste the blood of ruthlessness on our lips. While this human being's organs writhe and twist and choke we just sit there and nod our heads and say, "Justice has been done." What we have to ask ourselves is, "What kind of justice has been done?" I have already shown how inadequately prepared Matt's lawyer was. I have documented procedural errors. When he wasn't sleeping, Matt's lawyer raised only one objection this entire trial. One objection! What kind of justice are we supporting, here today, ladies and gentlemen?

GILARDI points at the PERCYS and DELACROIXS.

GILARDI: The Delacroixs and the Percys will never see their children graduate from college, they will never attend their wedding, they will never have a Christmas with them again. There will be no grandchildren. They will bear this grief for the rest of their lives. All they ask of you is simple justice for their unbearable loss. You have a responsibility to these families and you have a responsibility to society at large to show that horrible crimes have horrible consequences. It is only through deterrence that we can

prevent this happening again. I ask you to take a breath, steel your spine and proceed with the execution of Matthew Poncelet.

HILTON: The state of Louisiana does not have to kill Matthew Poncelet to protect its citizens. This man is locked away for the rest of his days at Angola Prison. He's not getting out. We can protect society without imitating the very violence we seek to eliminate. Let us have dignity. Please, let us not be complicit in the butchery of another human life.

SCREEN: We see the still, dead faces of Walter Delacroix and Hope Percy.

PREJEAN: The pardon board adjourned to discuss the case. It took over an hour and in those moments we waited I held great hope for reason and compassion to carry the day. I came to understand later that pardon boards are political appointees whose task is to deflect guilt away from the governors. Knowing what I know now I wouldn't be surprised if the pardon board spent that hour we waited playing cards.

MIRABEAU: It is the finding of this Board that clemency will be denied to Matthew Poncelet. Execution will be carried out as scheduled one week hence.

LUCILLE breaks down. MATT'S face registers no emotion. PREJEAN is distraught. HILTON'S face is ashen.

HILTON: Don't lose hope, Matt. We've still got a judge in the fifth circuit Federal Court that can stop it and beyond that there's the U.S. Supreme Court and the Governor. I'll get a private meeting with him if it's the last thing I do. Don't lose hope.

MATT: Looks like you're all I've got, Sis. They tell me I can have a spiritual adviser of my choice. How's about it? Want to ride alongside me into the sunset?

MATT is led away by guards.

HILTON: It means you are with him every day for several hours as his death nears. On the day of his execution you are there all day. This kind of deal is usually done by a priest, a chaplain, a Moslem cleric. It's a tough job. If you're up to it I say go for it.

PREJEAN: Oh boy.

HILTON: Sister, I want you to be realistic. We got a 1 in 1000 chance something might go our way. It's gonna be a tough road.

EARL DELACROIX approaches.

DELACROIX: I'm Walter Delacroix's father.

PREJEAN: Oh. Mr. Delacroix, I'm so sorry about your son.

DELACROIX: Sister, I'm a Catholic. How can you sit by Matt Poncelet's side without ever having come to visit with me and my wife or the Percys to hear our side? How can you spend all your time worrying about Poncelet and not think that maybe we needed you too?

PREJEAN is taken aback.

PREJEAN: Oh, Mr. Delacroix. I'm so sorry.

The PERCYS approach.

DELACROIX: This is Marybeth and Clyde Percy, Hope's parents.

PREJEAN: Hello. I'm very sorry about your daughter.

CLYDE: Yeah. So are we. Excuse us.

They leave. EARL remains.

DELACROIX: Listen, Sister, I'm sure you've seen a side of Matt Poncelet that none of us has seen. I'm sure he must be pretty sympathetic to you. I'm sure he's on his best behavior. But Sister, this is a man that hung out in bars with thieves. This is an evil man. That scum robbed me of my only son, my name. My family name dies with me. There will be no more Delacroixs, Sister.

PREJEAN: Listen Mr. Delacroix, I want you to know that I care about you and your family and what happened to your son.

She takes out a pen and pad.

PREJEAN: Here's my phone number. Please call if there's anything I can do to help.

DELACROIX: Me call you? Think about that Sister. Think about how arrogant and self-righteous that is. Excuse me.

DELACROIX leaves abruptly. The lights shift. PREJEAN now in a pool of light along with her MOTHER. HOPE and WALTER appear, behind, speaking softly, dully.

PREJEAN: Mama, these people've been plowed over by life. Matt gets in trouble with the law when he's fifteen.

WALTER: Every kid gets in trouble when he's fifteen.

PREJEAN: His Daddy was never around.

MOTHER: Helen, most of your kids in the projects are raised by single parents and they're not raping and killing people.

HOPE: You're getting suckered.

MOTHER: Helen, why're you doing this? Aren't there people in your neighborhood that need your help? Honest people?

PREJEAN: I'm still working with them.

HOPE: But why are you visiting with murderers?

MOTHER: They're the end of the line people. For all the energy and resources you're putting into them you could be keeping other kids from going to prison and death row.

COLLEEN appears.

COLLEEN: Some folks in the neighborhood read an article where they mentioned your name as being associated with Poncelet.

PREJEAN: My name was in the paper?

WALTER: My name was in the paper.

MOTHER: I am simply curious, Helen. What has drawn you to this?

PREJEAN: I don't know, Mama. I feel more caught than drawn. This man needs help and for some reason I'm the only one he trusts.

The lights change and PREJEAN walks very slowly, cautiously, towards a rectangular door light as...

MOTHER: I know your heart is in the right place, Helen. But a full heart shouldn't follow an empty head. When you were a child you were always bringing home strays. If we had taken all those dogs and cats in, we wouldn't have had any money to feed the children in the house. Your heart is large. Just take care that others don't take advantage of it. I would hate to see that.

She arrives, gathers her courage and rings the bell. She waits and as she is about to ring again, EARL DELACROIX appears in his own light, disheveled and slightly startled.

DELACROIX: What do you want?

PREJEAN: Mr. Delacroix, forgive me for intruding but I haven't been able to get you out of my mind. I've been calling you but there was no answer. Can I talk with you?

A pause as EARL sizes her up.

DELACROIX: Come in.

Lights change.

PREJEAN: Mr. Delacroix, look, I'm really, really sorry for not coming to see you or your wife. I've never been involved with anything like this before.

DELACROIX: Truth is you're scared.

PREJEAN: Yes.

DELACROIX: You ought to be scared. Care for some coffee?

PREJEAN: No thanks.

There are half packed boxes around. Someone is moving.

DELACROIX: Sister, can I ask you a question? Are you a Communist?

PREJEAN: A communist? No, Mr. Delacroix, I am not a communist.

DELACROIX: I didn't think so. That's what some people around here are saying, with you defending this murderer but I didn't think so. Sit down.

She sits.

DELACROIX: Sorry about the mess. My wife and I had a big fight. When we got back from the pardon board hearing she took Walter's clothes out of his closet and put them in boxes, called Goodwill. She says she wants to put the past behind her. She's not herself.

PREJEAN: She must be going through hell.

*DELACROIX has picked up a picture and hands it to
PREJEAN*

DELACROIX: This is Walter.

WALTER appears in a light, young, smiling and full of life.

DELACROIX: When it first happened she would have me bring her to Walter's grave every morning. She wept a river, poor woman, whole days, nights, for weeks, months. I wish there was some way, some key into the past to change it. It tears me up. She used to be a ball. We would have us some times, boy, laugh our heads off.

An awkward pause.

DELACROIX: Walter learned to walk on this rug here. He busted his chin on the arm of this sofa. At that kitchen table in there he sat with Hope a week before they died.

A pause.

DELACROIX: When you lose a child all the memories get sealed in a place. Sealed. Like a shrine.

WALTER puts his hand up; a still wave. Lights shift.

FARLEY appears. Back in prison.

FARLEY: So you have put in a request to be the spiritual adviser to Matthew Poncelet. Why?

PREJEAN: He asked me.

FARLEY: It's highly irregular.

PREJEAN: Why?

FARLEY: Well, you'd be the first woman to do it. This boy is to be executed in five days and is in dire need of redemption. This kind of situation needs an experienced hand.

PREJEAN: He has asked me, Father.

FARLEY: These are high stakes, Sister. If you fail, this boy's soul is damned. Are you up to this?

PREJEAN: Yes, Father.

FARLEY: You're sure?

PREJEAN: Yes.

FARLEY: You can save this boy by getting him to receive the sacraments of the church before he dies. This is your job. Nothing more, nothing less. Prison Visiting Room. Outside is another rainy day.

MATT: I don't want to be buried here. They said they was gonna call my mama and talk to her about the funeral and all the arrangements. You've gotta help me. Can you take care of it? I just don't want my mama mixed up in this. She wouldn't be able to stand it.

PREJEAN: I'll take care of it, Matt.

A pause.

PREJEAN: Do you ever read the bible?

MATT: Yes, ma'am. I ain't much of a bible reader but I pick it up and read it sometimes.

PREJEAN: Like W.C. Fields read his bible?

MATT: Who?

PREJEAN: W. C. Fields used to play this drunken character in the movies. So he's on his deathbed and a friend comes to visit him, sees him reading the bible. His friend says, "W.C., you don't believe in God. Why you reading the bible?" and Fields says, "I'm looking for a loophole."

MATT smiles.

MATT: No, it's not a loophole I'm looking for.

MATT is distracted. He looks out the window.

MATT: Rain, rain, rain; not a good sign.

He sighs.

MATT: They already executed one black, Tobias, and tonight Wayne Purcell-two blacks. It's time for a white; the Governor is under pressure to get a white. And that's me.

MATT gets up and paces.

MATT: A nigger in the gurney before me. I sure hope they clean that thing before they put me on it.

A pause.

PREJEAN: Was your Daddy a racist?

MATT: What kind of question is that?

PREJEAN: Hatred for people is taught. I was wondering who taught you.

MATT: I just don't like niggers.

PREJEAN: Have you ever known any?

MATT: Sure I did. When I was a kid they was all around.

PREJEAN: All around?

MATT: They lived around me.

PREJEAN: Did you ever play with any black children?

MATT: No, but me and my cousin got jumped pretty bad once.

PREJEAN: What happened?

MATT: We was throwin' some rocks at 'em and the next day they waited their chance and got a hold of our bikes and tore 'em up.

PREJEAN: Can you blame them?

MATT: No. But listen, slavery's long over. They keep harpin' on what a bad deal they had.

PREJEAN: Who? The kids that tore up your bikes?

MATT: Yeah, them and all of them. I can't stand people that make themselves out to be victims.

PREJEAN: Victims?

MATT: They all victims.

PREJEAN: I don't know any victims in my neighborhood. I know some pretty cool people, hardworking, decent.

MATT: Well, I know a lot of lazy, welfare-taking niggers, sucking up tax dollars.

PREJEAN: You sound like a politician.

MATT: What do you mean?

PREJEAN: Have you ever been the object of prejudice?

MATT: No.

PREJEAN: What do you think people think of death row inmates?

MATT: I don't know. Why don't you tell me?

PREJEAN: They're all monsters. Disposable human waste. Good for nothings, suckin' up tax dollars.

MATT: But I ain't a victim. They about to kill me and I'm innocent. I ain't whining. I ain't sitting on a porch saying "slavery" and all. I like rebels. Like Martin Luther King. He led his people, marched all the way to D.C. kicked the white man's butt.

PREJEAN: So you respect Martin Luther King?

MATT: He put up a fight. He wasn't lazy.

PREJEAN: What about lazy whites?

MATT: Don't like 'em.

PREJEAN: So it's lazy people you don't like?

MATT: Can we talk about something else?

Lights change. On a couch; the PERCYS. As they begin PREJEAN is drawn towards them and enters into their space.

MARYBETH: Hope had just graduated from high school in early May. She was to join the Air Force on June 15th, the day it happened. She almost got out of Slidell.

CLYDE: She was hoping to be stationed overseas. She always liked traveling, being with people of different cultures.

MARYBETH: On June 15th a recruiting sergeant was going to meet Hope at her apartment and drive her to Baton Rouge for induction. I had taken her shopping the day before to get some things she would be needing. You know, practical things, new

bras with plenty of support, dental floss, medicine for menstrual cramps, stuff like that.

CLYDE: At about five in the evening, Hope left to go to work at Corey's where she waitressed. After work she had a date with Walter.

MARYBETH: As she was leaving I noticed that part of her hem was coming out of her skirt. She was in such a hurry I pinned it for her with one of those tiny safety pins and she was gone, out the door. You don't know when you see your child leave through a door that you are never going to see her alive again. If I had known I would have told her how much I loved her. My last words to her - the last she ever heard from me - was about the hem of a skirt.

A pause.

CLYDE: The next morning we waited for Hope to come through her door; the big day! Our baby was leaving home.

MARYBETH: I called the Delacroixs. It was strange that she did not call. She would always telephone me and tell me where she was.

CLYDE: Our hearts sank when the Delacroixs said Walter didn't come home either. And for a brief moment it crossed our minds that maybe they had run off and gotten married or something.

MARYBETH: But we knew Hope was too sensible a girl to do a thing like that.

CLYDE: I went to the police, filed a missing person's report. Three days passed. The Sheriffs office finally formed a search party. I went with them.

MARYBETH: They looked all day, walked for miles. Nothing. On Thursday, June 20th - some kids walking near Frank's Cove found a purse, clothes and a wallet and handed them over to the police. A friend of ours called us to tell us that they had heard that some of Hope's things had been found. We got that information from our own resources, not from the police. They never called up. We called them.

CLYDE: They found their bodies on Friday, six days after her disappearance.

MARYBETH: My daughter's body was nude, supine, legs spread-eagled. The coroner's report said her vagina was all tore up. At first they couldn't find the class pin she was wearing because it was embedded so deep from the stabbing. She had been so proud of that pin. She wore it all the time. It said: "Class of '78, Making a difference."

A young girl enters. This is EMILY, Hope's sister, played by the same actress that plays Hope. She stands silently, unseen by her parents.

CLYDE: The police wouldn't let us come to the morgue to identify the body, said it would be too traumatic.

MARYBETH: But I couldn't bear the thought of the body being buried forever without being absolutely, positively sure without a doubt that it was Hope. What if, because of the decomposition and the clothes being nearby, they only thought it was Hope? I had to be sure. I called my brother in Metairie, a dentist, and I asked him to go to the funeral home and make an ID from dental records.

CLYDE: Marybeth's brother was pretty tore up when he came back from the funeral home. Before he reached his hand into that bag with all the lime in it and fished out Hope's jaw he said he had always been against the death penalty. But boy, after that, he was for it.

MARYBETH: I knew it had to be Hope, that's what my mind told me but I just had to be sure.

EMILY, the 16-yr-old daughter of CLYDE and MARYBETH, still stands to the side waiting to be acknowledged. When she is, she walks to her mother and whispers something.

MARYBETH: Emily, this is Sister Prejean.

EMILY: Hello.

PREJEAN: Nice to meet you, Emily.

EMILY: Okay.

EMILY turns the T.V. on. Darkness has been slowly seeping into the room. MARYBETH gets up and turns on a lamp.

MARYBETH: I'll get us some coffee.

CLYDE: Poncelet and I met face to face in the hallway during the trial.

We see MATT in spot.

MATT: I ain't going to the chair, daddy.

CLYDE: You're going to fry and I'm going to watch you sizzle.

CLYDE: A policeman was right near me. I could've taken his gun and shot him, right there. I could've killed him that day. I should have. I'd be a happier man today.

There is a pause.

MARYBETH: So what made you change your mind?

PREJEAN: Change my mind?

MARYBETH: What made you come around to our side?

PREJEAN: I'm... I... I... wanted to come to see if I could help you. But I... I haven't... Mr. Poncelet asked me to be his spiritual adviser. I'm going to be with him when he dies.

CLYDE: I thought you'd changed your mind. I thought that's why you were here.

PREJEAN: No. I... uh...

A pause.

MARYBETH: How can you...come here?

CLYDE: How can you go there? How can you sit with that scum?

PREJEAN: I try to follow the example of Jesus, that every person is worth more than his worst act.

CLYDE: This is not a person. This is an animal. No, I take that back. Animals don't rape and kill their own kind. Matt Poncelet is God's mistake. And you hold the poor murderer's hand? You're going to comfort him when he dies? No one was there to comfort Hope when those scum put her face down in the wet grass in those woods.

As this argument escalates the sound of the television gets louder, but never louder than the dialogue.

PREJEAN: I've never done this before, Mr. Percy. I'm trying to get him to take responsibility for what he did.

MARYBETH: Does he admit to what he did? Is he sorry?

PREJEAN: He says he didn't kill anybody.

CLYDE: Sister, you're in waters over your head. I'm trying to be respectful because my parents taught me to always respect the religious but I think you need to leave this house.

MARYBETH: You don't know what it is to carry a child in your womb and give birth and get up with a sick child in the middle of the night. You say your prayers and get a good night's sleep, don't you?

PREJEAN: I'm so sorry about your daughter.

CLYDE: If you are sorry and if you care about us, you'll want to see justice done for our murdered child. But you can't have it both ways. You can't befriend this murderer and be our friend too.

MARYBETH: You've brought the enemy into this house, Sister. You'd better go.

As she goes;

PREJEAN: I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I've only added to your pain.

The lights fade on the PERCYS but the television stays on, EMILY watching, then fades as MATT appears in another light. He sits facing the audience. An interviewer sits, back to audience. On the other side of the stage, COLLEEN watches another television as PREJEAN enters behind her.

MATT: I come from a good family. My family's not to blame for nothing. I had two families both of them I love and would die for.

REPORTER: Your other family is?

MATT: The family of man, of men in jail. My white family, the Aryan Brotherhood.

REPORTER: You are a white supremacist, a follower of Hitler?

MATT: Hitler was a leader. I admire that he got things done. Like Castro. He got things done, man. Now maybe Hitler went a little overboard with some of his killin' but he was on the right track about Aryans being the master race.

REPORTER: The right track? The murder of six million Jews?

MATT: That hasn't been proven.

PREJEAN: Man, what am I doing with this guy? I must be nuts.

On the television:

MATT: Your government's been doing plenty of evil things themselves and you're paying for it; trying to assassinate political enemies like Castro, Allende, the Sandinistas. The government shouldn't be given power to execute nobody. They're too corrupt, man.

Lights shift. PREJEAN stands, MATT paces.

PREJEAN: People are reading these interviews thinking you're some kind of nut, admiring Hitler, saying you'd like to come back as a terrorist and bomb people.

MATT: Not the people, just the buildings. I didn't say I'd bomb the people.

PREJEAN: How can you bomb a buildin' without hurting somebody?

MATT: I don't have any love for the U.S. government is all.

PREJEAN: You're a fool. Don't you see how easy you're making it for them to kill you? You're coming off as a crazed animal, a Nazi terrorist mad dog that deserves to die.

MATT: Do you think that?

PREJEAN: You're making it very difficult for us to help you.

MATT: Well, you can leave.

Pause.

PREJEAN: I'm not going to do that.

Pause.

PREJEAN: Do you ever think about those kids?

MATT: It's terrible what happened to those kids.

PREJEAN: Especially since it didn't have to happen. And the parents. Do you and Vitello ever think about what you did to those parents' lives?

MATT: It's hard, ma'am, to be having much sympathy for the parents when, here they're trying to kill me.

PREJEAN: Think about it. Their kids shot, stabbed and left to die in the woods. Alone. What if someone did that to your mama? Your little brother? What would you do to them?

MATT: Kill 'em. I sure as hell would want to kill 'em.

Pause.

MATT: I want to take a lie detector test.

PREJEAN: What?

MATT: A lie detector test. It ain't gonna change any of these guys' minds, but I would like my mama to know the truth. I want her to know I didn't kill those kids.

Lights shift. We are in PREJEAN'S apartment.

PREJEAN: I have to make funeral arrangements for Matt. If the Courts and the Governor turn us down, Matt will be dead in five days. We need a funeral home. And a place to bury him.

COLLEEN: Maybe our sisters will donate one of their burial plots.

PREJEAN: And we have to find someone to do the burial service. And clothes. He'll need a suit to be buried in.

COLLEEN: A suit. What size suit do you think he wears? How tall is he?

PREJEAN: I think he's kinda big. What size is big? What is it; big, medium and petite?

They laugh.

PREJEAN: I don't know. I've never bought a man's suit before.

COLLEEN: Won't you be a pretty sight? A nun shopping for a man's suit.

PREJEAN: I'm out of my league. This is so surreal.

COLLEEN answers the door. HERBIE is there.

HERBIE: Hello, Colleen. Sister Helen.

PREJEAN: Hello, Herbie. How's school going?

HERBIE: I brought my card.

PREJEAN: Your card?

HERBIE: Report card. You asked me to let you see it.

PREJEAN: Right, of course. Let's have a look.

HERBIE: It's not good. Couple numbers in red.

PREJEAN: There's good stuff.

Pause.

HERBIE: OK stuff.

PREJEAN: I should be here more for you. I feel like I'm letting you down.

HERBIE: Sister?

PREJEAN: What is it?

HERBIE: Why you helping that boy?

PREJEAN: Who? Matt?

HERBIE: The cracker boy. Why you helping him?

PREJEAN: Well he's in trouble, Herbie. He's...

HERBIE: Be running into him, he shoot me sooner than look at me. Whose side you on? Mama says she don't know how to trust you.

PREJEAN: I'll talk to your Mama, Herbie. Now let's look at your homework.

HERBIE: She told me no. She doesn't want you helping me no more. I gotta go sister.

HERBIE exits.

PREJEAN: That evening I attended a victim's support group with Earl Delacroix. It was a room overcome with memories. I heard the anguish of the survivors of violence.

PREJEAN sits next to EARL DELACROIX. One by one, characters stand and tell their stories. This is done stylistically, one overlapping the other until the cacophony is broken by DELACROIX

WOMAN #1: Our little 12-year-old daughter was stabbed to death in our back yard by my son's best friend. He had spent the night at our house and gone to church with us that very morning.

MAN #1: When our child was killed, it took over a week to find her body. The D.A.'s office treated us like we were the criminals. Whenever we telephoned to find out what was happening, they brushed us off. They wouldn't tell us when the trial was happening. They wouldn't tell us anything.

WOMAN #1: Her little skiing outfit is still in the closet. I can't give it away.

WOMAN #2: Our daughter was killed by her ex-husband in our front yard with her children watching. Bang! Bang! Bang! He shot her, then himself right there on the front lawn.

MAN #2: Recently, my wife and I went to the sheriff's office to apply for victim compensation funds. A deputy rifled through a few drawers and said, "Don't know nothin' about these funds. Why don't y'all write to Ann Landers? She helps people."

DELACROIX: Friends were supportive at first, at the time our son was killed but now they avoid us. They don't know what to say, what to do. If you bring up your child's death they change the subject. I keep getting the feeling that they think I should be able to put his death behind me by now and get on with my life. People have no idea what you go through when something like this happens to you. My wife and I are getting a separation. Yeah. We just have different ways of dealing with our son's death. *(he exhales)* "Until death do us part" means a different thing now.

WOMAN #3: My daughter's killer can possibly get out on parole in another year. He's only served six years. I can't bear the thought that he would be out a free man and she's buried in the ground and dead forever. Six years is nothing. This isn't justice.

*PREJEAN has her arm around DELACROIX in support.
He is weeping.*

MAN #3: I just lost my job. Just couldn't pull it together. I'd be staring out of the window and couldn't concentrate. They let me go last week.

DELACROIX *(to PREJEAN):* We're nothing special. Most folks that lose a kid split up. About 70%. I just wish I could laugh, find something funny.

COLLEEN collects PREJEAN as the entire cast except for DELACROIX and the PERCYS becomes a vigil outside of Angola State Prison - some bury their heads in prayer, others carry signs.

PREJEAN: That evening I traveled to Angola to stand with those opposed to the death penalty. A vigil was being held, prayers were said as the state of Louisiana executed a man at the stroke of midnight. I thought of Matt Poncelet alone and defiant in his cell on death row.

The pro-death penalty faction begins a countdown from 10 to 1. At 1 the lights dim.

END OF ACT ONE

ACT TWO

The Death House. The look of these scenes is different than the previous scenes. PREJEAN enters with a guard, TRAPP.

PREJEAN: This is in the middle of nowhere. **TRAPP:** Closest cellblock is a mile and a half away. **PREJEAN:** Why?

TRAPP: Don't know, Sister. Security I bet. This is Sgt. Beliveau. He is the ranking officer at the death house.

BELIVEAU: Hello, Sister. We don't get a lot of female advisors here so bear with us as we figure it out. Chaplain Farley called. He's late. You can see Poncelet until he gets here.

PREJEAN: Thanks, Sgt. Beliveau.

BELIVEAU: Trapp'll take you to your man.

As TRAPP and PREJEAN walk.

PREJEAN: I saw you outside the gates the night of Purcell's execution.

TRAPP: Yes.

PREJEAN: You seemed upset.

TRAPP: Upset? No.

PREJEAN: Were you inside the room when they did it?

TRAPP: I'm on the strap down team. I'm on the left leg. That's my job, the left leg. We take the prisoner from his cell into the execution chamber.

PREJEAN: Wow. That's gotta be tough.

TRAPP: It was hard. I got home that night and couldn't sleep. Just sat in the chair all night.

PREJEAN: I think this thing must affect everybody that sees it, whether they're for it or against it.

TRAPP: Well, it's part of the job, ma'am. These people get what's comin' to 'em. Chaplain Farley should be here shortly. Have a seat, Sister.

She does and MATT is waiting for her.

MATT: Like my new digs? I'm pretty special huh? Got this place all to myself. Got eight guys guarding me. One dude checks me every fifteen minutes to see if I've killed myself. Suicide watch. Never had so many people care about how I was doin'.

PREJEAN: When did you come out here?

MATT: Last night. Late. Didn't get a chance to say goodbye to the guys on the row. Most of them were sleeping. Did you get me that lie detector test?

PREJEAN: I made some calls. No luck yet.

MATT : So this is the end. The death house vacation. Three days of quiet. Plenty of time to read my bible, eh Sister? Look for a loophole.

PREJEAN: Did you read anything in that bible about Jesus?

MATT: Holy man, did good, in heaven, praise Jesus.

PREJEAN: There's passages in there about the suffering of Jesus when he was alone and facing death that you might find interesting.

MATT: Me and Jesus had a different way of dealing with things. He was one of those turn the other cheek guys.

PREJEAN: Takes a lot of strength to turn the other cheek, Matt. You say you like rebels. What do you think Jesus was?

MATT: He wasn't no rebel?

PREJEAN: Sure he was. He was a dangerous man.

MATT: What's so dangerous about love your brother?

PREJEAN: His love changed things, Matt. People that nobody cared about, prostitutes, beggars, the poor, finally had someone that respected them, loved them, made them part of a family, made them realize their own worth. In his eyes they had dignity and were becoming a social force, a threat to the established order and that made the guys at the top very nervous and so they went and arrested Jesus.

MATT: Kinda like me, huh?

PREJEAN: No, Matt. Not at all like you, not at all. He created a better world. He changed it with his love. You stood by and watched while two kids were killed.

Lights change. MATT disappears and FARLEY appears, tidying his desk as he talks.

FARLEY : It's very easy for someone to come in from outside and make a rash judgment on procedure. What may appear on the surface to be irrational or unnecessary proves upon examination to have solid reasoning and experience behind it.

PREJEAN: Father, I was asking to play a hymn on a cassette for Matt before his execution.

FARLEY: And experience tells us that music stirs up emotion, emotion that may produce an unexpected reaction in the inmate.

PREJEAN: Would you mind if I ask the warden for his opinion?

FARLEY: I would discourage it but you may, if you like.

PREJEAN: Well, thank you for your time Father.

She stands.

FARLEY: I understand you were protesting outside the gates during the last execution.

PREJEAN: Yes.

FARLEY: Are you familiar with the Old Testament. "Thou shalt not kill but if thou shed the blood of man by man shall your blood be shed"?

PREJEAN: Yes. But in the New Testament Jesus speaks of grace and reconciliation.

FARLEY: Reconciliation is achieved by accepting God's love. Poncelet has to understand that Jesus died for his sins if his soul is to live an eternal life. The politics of the death penalty are not

what's important here. I certainly hope you're not encouraging him to reject authority. Look at Romans: "Let every person be subordinate to the higher authorities for there is no authority except from God and those who oppose it will bring judgment upon themselves."

PREJEAN begins to sway and she faints. Black out. In the darkness we hear:

NURSE: What is it? What happened?

FARLEY: She collapsed in my office. I think it may be her heart.

BELIVEAU: She's having a heart attack.

PREJEAN: I'm OK. I think I just fainted.

BELIVEAU: You stay right there, young lady.

PREJEAN: I haven't eaten anything. I'm sure I'm OK. I told Matt I'd be back. Can you tell him what happened?

Lights fade up. PREJEAN on a bed flanked by the nurse and BELIVEAU.

NURSE: We'll do that when we're finished here.

PREJEAN: No. I gotta get word to him.

BELIVEAU: I'll take care of it, Sister.

NURSE: Well good news, this isn't a heart attack.

PREJEAN: I'm just hungry. They have this rule you're not allowed to eat in the death house. They must think we're ferns and can feed off the air.

A pause.

PREJEAN: Is this machine used after an execution?

NURSE: Yes, ma'am. We just have to be official about the whole thing. Thank god we're off the electric chair. Smell of burnt flesh and all. It's a little easier to take, the needle. Part of the job, you know. Let's get you up and get some food in your stomach.

PREJEAN: Who puts the needle in?

NURSE: That's private information.

PREJEAN: Is it you?

NURSE: We are not allowed to disclose any specifics regarding the execution procedure.

BELIVEAU: C'mon Sister, we'll get you a tray of food and then send you home.

PREJEAN: No, I've got to get back to Matt.

BELIVEAU: Sorry Sister, Warden's orders. You're through for the day.

Lights shift.

COLLEEN holds a man's suit.

COLLEEN: Got this at Goodwill. I talked to Bishop Norwich. He said he would say the funeral mass. The leaders of the congregation have met and we can use one of our own burial plots. I also found a funeral home willing to donate their services.

PREJEAN holds the suit.

COLLEEN: Guess who Matt Poncelet's going to be buried next to?

PREJEAN: Who was the last to die?

COLLEEN: Sister Celestine.

PREJEAN bursts out laughing.

PREJEAN: Oh, Lord.

COLLEEN: Remember when that sweet little girl came to the convent after her wedding to introduce her husband to us?

PREJEAN: And Celestine says, "I'm glad I don't have to share my bed with any man."

COLLEEN: She loved her celibacy so much.

PREJEAN: Now she'll have a man next to her forever.

They laugh. Then:

COLLEEN: How'd we ever get involved with this stuff anyway?

Lights change. A hymn plays.

PREJEAN: Because of the length of the drive from Angola to New Orleans I packed a bag and drove to stay with my mother in Baton Rouge. Laying in my bed that night, staring at the ceiling I had stared at as a child. I thought of the folks in my neighborhood that I had been neglecting. I thought of that fourteen-year-old boy that was shot and wondered if that bullet wound would be a change in his life or the badge of machismo that would lead to worse trouble. I wondered what the badge was with Matt.

*From behind PREJEAN we see the parents of the slain.
They read from a bible.*

CLYDE: Against the day of vengeance and requital, against the time they lose their footing? Close at hand is the day of their disaster and their doom is rushing upon them.

MARYBETH: Whoever strikes a man a mortal blow must be put to death.

The lights change.

PREJEAN: Hilton called early in the morning.

HILTON: We've got ourselves a private meeting with the Governor. Now listen, from what I know of Governor Fredericks, he's a reluctant supporter of capital punishment. He has the power to save this man's life by commuting the sentence or granting a reprieve, the last vestige of the right of Kings. The trick on this is to appeal to him on a personal level without a lot of fanfare.

That's why I've requested a private meeting. Meet me tonight at the State House in Baton Rouge, 7pm.

PREJEAN: It's a lost cause, Mama. I'm wasting my time.

MOTHER: With your criminal?

PREJEAN: There's so many people grieving. He's caused so much pain.

Pause.

MOTHER: Maybe you're looking for a way to love Judas, for a love so big that it takes in the evil.

PREJEAN : I don't know if I can do it, Mama.

MOTHER: Annunciations are common. Incarnations are rare. You do your best, Helen, that's all God asks.

We hear the sounds of a hymn through a small speaker. Lights change. PREJEAN talks with WARDEN HARTMAN, a short stocky man in his early 60s with a square face and a thick gray mustache. Conspicuously present on his desk is a small cassette player that plays the hymn PREJEAN wants to play for MATT.

HARTMAN: It's nice enough.

He turns the volume down. It continues to play softly.

HARTMAN: I've been hearing some disturbing things about you.

PREJEAN: Such as?

HARTMAN: That you're too emotionally involved with Matthew Poncelet and unable to fulfill your function as spiritual advisor.

PREJEAN: What gives you that idea?

HARTMAN: You fainted in the death house and caused a lot of commotion for my personnel.

PREJEAN: I fainted out of hunger not emotion.

HARTMAN: As warden one of my major responsibilities in this execution process is seeing to it that condemned inmates get good spiritual counsel and a chance to get straight with God before they die. This man Farley is perfectly capable of doing that.

PREJEAN: Matt doesn't trust Chaplain Farley and he has the right to choose his own spiritual counsel, doesn't he?

HARTMAN: Yes.

PREJEAN: It's guaranteed in the Constitution isn't it?

HARTMAN: Yes it is. But according to the Constitution we can bar a spiritual adviser from the death house if they are a threat to prison security.

PREJEAN: A threat?

HARTMAN: You were with some protestors outside the prison during the last execution.

PREJEAN: C'mon now, I was singing Kumbaya. You may not like having me around but you know I'm not a threat to prison security.

A pause.

PREJEAN: Warden, this man is going to die tomorrow. Doesn't he have a right to some solace?

The hymn ends. There is a pause.

HARTMAN: The hymn is nice but it'll stir up emotion. I can't let you play it for Mr. Poncelet. As far as the other thing I don't want to get into a debate about the Constitution. You can continue to see him.

PREJEAN: Thank you.

HARTMAN: Is his family gonna be there tomorrow?

PREJEAN: Yes sir.

HARTMAN: It's important that they are there for him.

PREJEAN: And you, Warden, you'll be there too?

HARTMAN: Yes, ma'am, all day and all night.

A pause.

HARTMAN: Sister, no one is doing handstands about this execution. It comes with the job.

Lights shift.

PREJEAN: Comes with the job. A consigned power to oblige the law, the will of the people. How one feels about what the job results in is irrelevant. The warden is absolved of personal responsibility because he is doing his job.

Lights change. The death house.

MATT: Where'd you go yesterday?

PREJEAN: They wouldn't let me come back in.

MATT: Are you all right?

PREJEAN: I'm fine. Just a lot of commotion for nothing.

MATT: I kept asking them here what happened but they wouldn't tell me nothing. I thought you had a heart attack. I thought I was gonna have to go through this by myself.

PREJEAN: I'm sorry, Matt. I tried to get back. They wouldn't let me.

A pause.

PREJEAN: So the Marlboro man doesn't want to ride into the sunset all tough and alone.

No response

MATT: When they took me away yesterday they wouldn't tell me why. Took me into a room. Started measuring me. Weighed me. I think they were trying to see how big a coffin I needed. When I got back you were gone. Spent all day alone.

A pause.

MATT: You ever get lonely?

PREJEAN: Yeah. I do. Sometimes on Sunday afternoons when I smell the smoke in the neighborhood from family barbecues, hear those kids laughing, I sit there in my room and feel like a fool.

MATT: What I miss most being here are the women and just bein' in the bars and listenin' to music and dancin' till three or four in the morning. And I'm not going to lie to you, ma'am. I believed in doing it. Me and my lady friends we'd get us a blanket and a bottle or a little weed and go into the woods and do it.

PREJEAN: Well Matt. Let's face it. If I had a husband and a family, chances are I'd be with them this afternoon instead of visiting with you.

MATT: True. Glad you're here, ma'am.

MATT lights a cigarette.

PREJEAN: Those things'll kill you, you know.

MATT laughs. Then suddenly.

MATT: They're not going to break me. I just pray God holds up my legs tomorrow to make that last walk. It's the waiting, it's the countdown that gets you.

PREJEAN: We should know about the federal appeal real soon and Hilton and I have an appointment to see the Governor this evening.

MATT: The Governor. Fat chance in hell he'll do anything. Risk his political butt for me?

Pause.

MATT: I shouldn't have said all those things about Hitler and being a terrorist, all that stuff. It was stupid.

PREJEAN: Hartman told me there would be no more media interviews.

MATT: Just as well. Shut my stupid mouth up.

PREJEAN: I was able to arrange a polygraph for tomorrow morning.

MATT: Alright. Good news.

PREJEAN: Now the man that runs the polygraph test has serious doubts that they'll get an accurate reading of the truth.

MATT: Why?

PREJEAN: Because tomorrow is the day of your execution and you're bound to be under stress and the test often mistakes stress for dishonesty.

MATT: Not a problem. I'm home free.

PREJEAN: Have you been reading your bible?

MATT: I tried last night but reading makes me want to sleep. I'm trying to stay conscious as much as possible. Look, I appreciate all

the efforts to save me but me and God have squared things away. I know Jesus died for us on the cross and will take care of me when I appear before God on judgment day.

PREJEAN: You know Matt. Redemption isn't some kind of free ticket admission that you get because Jesus paid the price. You need to participate in your own redemption. You've got some work to do. You may want to check out some words of Jesus that might have some meaning for you: "You shall know the truth and the truth will make you free." It's in the Gospel of John, chapter 8.

MATT: I'll do that. I'll check it out. The truth will set you free. I like that. I pass that lie detector test and I'm home free.

PREJEAN: Matt, if you die, as your friend I want to help you to die with dignity and you can't do that, the way I see it, until you own up to the part you played in Walter and Hope's death.

As the lights change, PREJEAN walks to a table and sits next to HILTON BARBER. Lights flash.

PREJEAN: Later that evening as we walked into our private meeting with Governor Fredericks we were bombarded with flash bulbs and a coterie of press. The Governor had set up a dog and pony show and we were the stars.

A bright flash.

FREDERICKS: Now tomorrow, as you know, the State of Louisiana will put to death Matthew Poncelet and today I have invited a couple of people here to talk to us about this case. Who will go first?

Flash.

HILTON: Yes, well...uh...Matt Poncelet had inadequate counsel, a court appointed lawyer with limited experience in trial law and no experience in defending a capital defendant.

Flash.

PREJEAN: Try as Hilton might I don't think we were there to change anyone's minds but simply to show the press that this politician was listening to both sides and in a reasoned and measured way would remain tough on crime and uphold the law of Louisiana.

Flash.

FREDERICKS: But you must understand, I'm the Governor and represent the state and must carry out the laws and must submerge my own personal views to carry out the expressed will of the people. Yes, I'll look carefully at the case but unless there's some clear, striking evidence for innocence and gross miscarriage of justice I will not interfere in the process.

Many flashes. He moves to collect his paper.

PREJEAN: Governor.

He looks up at her.

PREJEAN: I am Matt Poncelet's spiritual adviser. If he dies, I will be with him. Please don't let this man die.

FREDERICKS, a deft politician, immediately looks concerned.

FREDERICKS: Can you do that? Can you watch that?

PREJEAN: I promised him, Governor.

FREDERICKS: I'll give the case careful consideration.

PREJEAN: You can spare him. You have the power to prevent this death.

FREDERICKS: I will look into the matter.

And he is gone. Amid the commotion:

HILTON: Let's not give up on the courts. We still might hit pay dirt with one of the legal issues.

PREJEAN: I realize the governor, like other politicians, has found a moral niche in this process, a position from which he can make decisions and still lay his head on the pillow at night and go to sleep. He subordinates his conscience to the will of the people. If it is the law it must be right. The governor is not personally responsible if he simply "does his job" within the law.

PREJEAN walks to her bed in her mother's house and lies down. MOTHER, FARLEY, WALTER, HOPE and MATT appear behind her as she lies down.

WALTER: What song is number one? What is the popular song now?

MATT: I am contemptible, loathsome to my neighbors.

HOPE: Do our friends remember us?

MATT: To my friends a thing of fear.

HOPE: Does anyone cry?

MATT: I am forgotten.

HOPE: Are we forgotten?

MATT: As good as dead in their hearts, something discarded.

WALTER: Is he sorry?

MATT: As they combine against me, plotting to take my life.

HOPE: Deliver us from evil.

MATT: But I put my trust in you, Yahweh.

MOTHER: Helen, you're looking for a way to love Judas.

FARLEY: A man is going to die in front of you tomorrow.

MOTHER: Follow your heart and your faith. Annunciations are common. Incarnations are rare.

PREJEAN: I didn't sleep that night.

PREJEAN stands and walks to the death house set. A digital clock reads 8am.

MATT: I didn't sleep last night. I wouldn't take that nerve medicine they tried to give me. I'm looking death in the eyes. I'm getting ready to go.

MATT looks down.

PREJEAN: Listen, Matt. I want you to know that I respect your need for privacy. If you prefer to be alone or just with your family today I won't be offended.

MATT: You should be here ma'am, if it won't put you out too much. I'm gonna want someone to talk to and be with right up to the end.

MATT shivers, starts.

MATT: If only I knew I'd die right away when I get the first shot. Will I feel it? The lungs go first. Like a fast choke. That's gotta hurt. They say the body doesn't move, doesn't shake. My poor mama...

PREJEAN: A couple of hours passed. Vast expanses of silence. Each quiet moment I felt I was failing him. I talked about trivial things, anything to keep the silence away. The polygraph operator arrived at 10:30.

MATT moves upstage and sits at a table with the polygraph operator.

COLLEEN: Some, driven frantic by their sins, made miserable by their own guilt and finding all food repugnant, were nearly at death's door. Then they called to Yahweh in their trouble and he rescued them from their suffering, he snatched them from the pit.

PREJEAN on the phone. MATT is taking the polygraph test. We do not hear the questions and answers.

PREJEAN: Any word from the fifth circuit?

HILTON appears, phone in hand.

HILTON: None yet. A good sign. They've had it a good while now and maybe that means they see something substantive in the petition. I gotta go.

PREJEAN: Alright Hilton.

BELIVEAU sits at his desk.

BELIVEAU: Tell me something, Sister. What's a nun doing in a place like this? Shouldn't you be teaching children? Do you know what this man has done, the kids he killed?

PREJEAN: What he was involved in was evil. I don't condone it. I just don't see much sense in doing the same to him. Killing people who kill people to show that killing is wrong...

BELIVEAU: You know the bible says an eye for an eye...

PREJEAN: And you know that Jesus called for us to go beyond that kind of vengeance, not to pay back an eye for an eye, not to return hate for hate.

BELIVEAU holds up his hands.

BELIVEAU: I ain't gonna get into all this bible quotin' with a nun cuz I'm gonna lose.

They laugh.

PREJEAN: You know something, the bible also calls for death as a punishment for adultery, prostitution, homosexuality, profaning the Sabbath, trespass upon sacred ground and contempt of parents.

BELIVEAU: Really?

PREJEAN: Yes.

A pause.

BELIVEAU: Prostitution, you sure?

PREJEAN: Sure.

Lights shift.

PREJEAN: Another hour passed and Matt's family arrived. The welcome sound of laughter fell on the death house.

MATT is seated at a distance from his mother LUCILLE and her three sons. MITCH, TROY and JIM are sitting in folding metal chairs by the white metal door. MITCH and TROY sit closest to the door. LUCILLE and JIM sit behind. They are handsome, healthy-looking kids. MITCH, 18, the oldest, is the one keeping conversation going.

MITCH: She was only on the phone a few minutes and there she was falling for the ole Matt charm. I had to take back that phone. Trying to steal my gal, you dog.

MATT laughs. PREJEAN pulls up a chair and looks at her watch. Clock reads 2:15.

MATT: She sounds like a great little lady.

JIM: She ain't so little.

MATT: You take care of her, Mitch. Don't do nothing stupid.

MITCH: She looks a little like, what was that girlfriend you had in high school?

MATT: I had a lot of girls in high school.

MITCH: The one with the funny name.

MATT: Funny name?

MITCH: Maddie or Maldy or...

MATT: Madrigal.

MITCH: Madrigal Parmelee! That's it ... She was hot.

MATT: She was a nasty one, boy.

LUCILLE: Matthew!

MATT: Sorry, Mama. Madrigal was a fine upstanding young woman.

MITCH laughs.

MATT: So what about you, Troy. You got a girlfriend?

*TROY is 10 years old. His ears and the sides of his cheeks
and neck turn pink.*

TROY: I don't have time for girls, too much fishing and camping to do.

LUCILLE: Troy just got a new tent.

MATT: What kind of tent you got?

TROY: Army tent. I don't like those sissy tents with all them colors.

JIM: Tell Matt about the other night in the backyard.

The others laugh.

MITCH: Camping in the backyard.

LUCILLE: I made him come in. I was worried. I went out there and made him come into the house.

JIM: Tell him.

TROY: Me and my buddy Paul put up the tent and cooked our own dinner. We roasted these potatoes in tin foil on the fire and cooked us some weenies.

JIM: Then what happened?

TROY: Shut up.

JIM: Tell him.

TROY: About midnight we hear some kind of animal walkin' around and makin' noises – a strange animal. It was big and nasty.

Everyone laughs.

MATT: Which is it? Did you come inside because of mama or because you was wiggled out?

MITCH taps TROY on the shoulder.

MITCH: Tell the truth now, tell the truth.

*TROY is shifting from foot to foot. He finally smiles.
Everyone laughs. After the laugh a silence, a long,
interminable silence.*

LUCILLE: Some people been asking me about your funeral. I get real angry and tell them "He's not dead."

Another silence.

PREJEAN: Another hour passed. Interminable silence followed by recollections, family snapshots from a time of less trouble and heartache. Memories that momentarily lifted the dark cloud that hung over this room.

Suddenly a clang and WARDEN HARTMAN appears at the door.

HARTMAN: I'm sorry, folks. We're going to have to wrap this up.

MATT: Already? Isn't it kind of early? Rules say they can stay until 6:45.

HARTMAN: It's time for you folks. to be leaving now.

MATT stands up.

MATT: Listen, I put my stuff in two pillowcases and I'd feel better if you guys took it home with you now. I don't want the prison sending it.

The GUARD on watch at the end of the tier moves to get the white bags.

GUARD: Step back to the wall.

MATT does as he is told as the GUARD opens the door. He gathers the bags and hands them to CAPTAIN BELIVEAU.

MATT: Mitch, you all can see about dividin' it up. Except my boots from Marion. I'm gonna walk to the execution in these here boots. No cryin' now. I don't want no cryin'. I'm not telling ya'll good-bye yet. I'll call you tonight.

LUCILLE moves to hug MATT but the guards flanking him cut her off.

PREJEAN: Can't she hug him?

WARDEN: I'm sorry ma'am, security.

MITCH: See ya, man. Stay strong.

There is a crack in his voice when he says "strong." "JIM and TROY are beginning to walk out. TROY'S face is beginning to crumble into tears. MITCH and LUCILLE are moving towards the foyer. LUCILLE keeps jabbing a Kleenex to her eyes.

LUCILLE: We love you, Mattie.

MATT: No cryin'. I'll call you tonight. I'll call you.

PREJEAN puts her arm around LUCILLE and walks her to the front door.

LUCILLE: If I had put my arms around my boy no guard could have got me to let go.

Lights fade on LUCILLE and the boys as LUCILLE collapses in grief MATT not seeing this calls out:

MATT: Is my mama doin' ok?

PREJEAN: Yes, Matt.

MUSIC: On the SCREEN: Faces of executed men. Victims of violence.

PREJEAN: The next hour was the longest hour I've ever experienced. Not a word was said, the silence making each moment linger. Every second was a second less for Matt, and I wanted desperately to talk but nothing came until the meal, the last meal.

MATT eats his food. PREJEAN looks down at her food. It is darkening outside.

MATT: These shrimp pretty good.

A pause.

MATT: So what's the word on the lie detector test?

PREJEAN: Culp said your answers showed stress, just as he had predicted. He said the results were inconclusive.

MATT: Man! Is the dude sure? Is he absolutely positively sure? I felt cool answering all them questions. Man! I can't believe I failed that test.

PREJEAN: Matt, you'd have to be a robot or insane not to feel stress now.

A pause.

MATT: Man! I just can't believe that test didn't come out right.

PREJEAN: Let's talk about what happened. Let's talk about that night.

MATT: I don't want to talk about that. I'm pissed off. I'm pissed at those kids for being parked out in the woods. I'm pissed that their parents are coming to watch me die. I'm pissed at myself for letting Vitello get over on them kids. But I got my last words coming. And I got a thing or two to say to the Percys and Delacroixs.

PREJEAN: Do you want your last words to be words of hatred?

MATT: Clyde Percy said he wants to inject me himself.

PREJEAN: Well think about how angry he must be. He's never gonna see his daughter again. He's never gonna love her, laugh

with her. You've robbed these parents of so much, Matt. They've got nothing in their lives but sorrow, no joy. That's what you have v, 11 I hm11. What possessed you to be in the woods that night?

MATT: I told ya, I was stoned outta my head.

PREJEAN: Now don't blame the drugs, Matt. You'd been harassing couples for weeks before this happened. Months! What was it?

MATT: What do you mean?

PREJEAN: What was it? Did you look up to Vitello? Did you think he was cool? Did you want to impress him?

MATT: I don't know.

PREJEAN: You could've just walked away.

MATT: He went psycho on me.

PREJEAN: Stop blaming him. You blame him. You blame the government. You blame the drugs. You blame blacks. You blame the Percys. You blame the kids for being there. What about Matt hew Poncelet? Where is he in this story? Just an innocent? Just a victim?

MATT: I ain't no victim.

MATT gives her an intense, hard look. The phone rings. CAPTAIN BEL/VEAU answers it. His conversation is brief. He says something to WARDEN HARTMAN. HARTMAN nods his head and walks out of the room. BELIVEAU looks through the grate at PREJEAN and shakes his head, no. WARDEN HARTMAN appears and says, matter-of-factly:

HARTMAN: Poncelet, the Federal Appeals Court turned you down. I'm sorry.

BELIVEAU appears at the door.

BELIVEAU: Sister, please step into the corridor.

PREJEAN: I'll be right outside.

MATT gets up and walks to the phone. MATT answers the phone, listens, then:

MATT: Thank you, Mr. Hilton. Thank you for what you and all the others done for me. I got you too late. If I had had you sooner... *(silence)*... no, Mr. Hilton. I appreciate everything you and the others have done for me. I shoulda got you sooner. No, you didn't fail. The justice system in this country failed. It stinks. It stinks bad.

PREJEAN stands to the side. CHAPLAIN FARLEY approaches her.

FARLEY: Sister, I will be administering communion to Poncelet before he makes his final walk.

PREJEAN: He has asked me to receive it for the both of us.

FARLEY: Well, that's unfortunate.

PREJEAN: Pardon?

FARLEY: You have been unable to provide enough spiritual guidance to this man as is evidenced in the fact that he will leave this earth without receiving the sacred sacrament of communion.

PREJEAN: Chaplain Farley, how are you at peace with what you do?

FARLEY : Excuse me?

PREJEAN: You take a salary from an institution that takes human life. How can you reconcile that with the teachings of Jesus Christ?

FARLEY: I take a small salary to provide spiritual counsel to people who need it. I try to draw them closer to God in their final days. I do not encourage them, as I assume you do, to reject the authority that leads them to this fate.

CAPTAIN BELIVEAU approaches.

BELIVEAU: Sister, you can go back to the cell now.

PREJEAN: Father.

She turns and walks with BELIVEAU

CLOCK reads 10:30pm. MATT comes back to the metal chair. His left pant leg has been cut off at the knee.

MATT: They shaved the calf of my leg.

He holds out his leg/or her to see. There is a tattooed number.

PREJEAN: Why?

MATT: I guess they was worried they won't find a vein in my arm.

PREJEAN: What's that number?

MATT: That's when I was at Marion. In case anybody killed me. I wanted to be able to identify my body.

He is wearing a clean white t-shirt. He is no longer wearing his long-sleeved denim shirt. She sees for the first time that his arms are covered in tattoos. He lowers his eyes, not wanting to look at her.

PREJEAN: Did it hurt when you did all those?

MATT: No. You're gonna think I'm a bad person, seeing all these tattoos.

He is very embarrassed. There is a swastika and a skull, women's names and on one arm a naked woman.

PREJEAN: Nah. You just have more color on you than I thought.

A pause.

MATT: They tried to give me two shots. I wouldn't let 'em. Tried to give me a sedative and an antihistamine.

PREJEAN: An antihistamine?

MATT: Said in case I have an allergic reaction to the first shot that knocks me out. Could get messy.

A GUARD brings in a telephone and sets it next to MATT.

MATT: Time to call home.

PREJEAN gets up to leave.

MATT: Will you stay?

PREJEAN: I'll stay. I'll just give you some privacy.

She stands by the door. As MATT makes his phone call the lights fade up to reveal the last-minute preparations for the execution. The building is buzzing now. A white tablecloth has been put on a table and ballpoint pens have been placed in the center of the table. Guards are everywhere and men in three-piece suits. A secretary has arrived and has begun typing. You can hear the click, click, click of the typewriter. It sounds like a business office.

PREJEAN: "Be a man my son." The line from Hemingway's, Big Two-Hearted River wells up in my mind, the words of the priest to Sam Cardinella who loses control of his anal sphincter muscle on the way to the gallows. As if one could be brave by simply willing it. I wonder what kind of dignity I could muster if I were facing my execution.

PREJEAN whispers to BELIVEAU.

PREJEAN: What's she typing?

BELIVEAU: Forms for the witnesses to sign.

The cold, preordained cruelty of it all hits her. PREJEAN puts both hands against the tiled wall, puts her head down and prays.

PREJEAN: Oh, Jesus. God help me. I'm so scared. This is a terrifying place, God. So cold, so calculated, this death. Just don't let him fall apart, God. Please help him. Help me, Jesus.

MATT is crying, sobbing. He hangs up the phone, blows his nose and regains his composure. PREJEAN moves to him. There is a pause before he can speak.

MATT: I just let it flow. I told my mama that I loved her. I talked to each of the boys. I hated to say good-bye. I told them if I get a chance I'll call 'em back right before I go.

There is a pause. MATT breaks down. He begins to sob.

PREJEAN: What is it, Matt?

MATT: My mother said, “It was that Vitello. I’ll always regret that you got involved with him.” And I didn’t want her to think that. Something you said. I could have walked away. But I didn’t. I let myself listen to him. I was a victim, a fuckin’ chicken. He was older, tough as hell. I was all boozed up, trying to be as tough as him. I didn’t have the guts to stand up to him. I told my mother I was yellow goin’ along with him. I didn’t stand up to him. My mother kept saying, “No, Matt. It wasn’t you. It wasn’t you.”

He sobs. Long beat.

PREJEAN: Your mama loves you, Matt.

MATT: That boy, Walter...

PREJEAN: Yeah, what Matt?

MATT: I killed him.

PREJEAN: And Hope?

MATT: No, ma’am.

PREJEAN: Did you rape her?

MATT: Yes, ma’am.

A pause.

MATT: Last night when they dimmed the lights on the tier I kneeled down by my bunk and prayed for them kids. I never done that before.

The silence is heavy. PREJEAN stands up and puts her hands against the metal screen door, getting as close to him as possible.

PREJEAN: Oh, Matt. There are spaces of sorrow that only God can touch. You did a terrible thing, Matt, a terrible thing. But you have a dignity now and no one can take that from you. You are a son of God, Matthew Poncelet.

MATT: Ain’t nobody never called me no son of God before. *(smiling)* I’ve been called a son-of-a-you-know-what lots of times but never no son of God. I just hope my death gives their parents some relief. I really do.

PREJEAN: Maybe that’s the best thing you can offer the Delacroixs and the Percys, a wish for their peace.

A pause.

MATT: You know I’ve never known real love, never loved women or anybody all that well myself. Figures I’d have to go to my death to find love.

He looks directly at PREJEAN

MATT: Thank you for loving me.

They can hear the front door opening and closing over and over. The witnesses and press are arriving.

MATT: Getting busy around here.

PREJEAN looks at the clock: 11:30pm.

MATT: Look at the time, it's flying.

PREJEAN is terrified. She puts her trembling fingers to her mouth and grabs hold of the crucifix around her neck. He pulls a cigarette from the pack in his shirt pocket and notices that there are just a few left.

MATT: Ought to just about make it.

He shivers.

MATT: It's cold in here.

PREJEAN: Can somebody get him a shirt? He's cold.

No one moves to help.

MATT: What happened to that song you were going to play me?

PREJEAN: The hymn.

MATT: Yeah, that.

PREJEAN: They have rules forbidding music in the prison.

MATT: Yeah.

PREJEAN: They won't let me play it.

MATT: You can sing it. You know the words?

PREJEAN: I can't sing.

MATT: That's okay. C'mon on.

There is a pause and then, reluctantly, PREJEAN begins singing the hymn "Be Not Afraid". MATT listens, at first amused, and then gradually more and more moved.

PREJEAN: You shall cross the barren desert, but you shall not die of thirst. You shall wander far in safety, though you do not know the way. You shall speak your words in foreign lands, and all will understand. You shall see the face of God and live. Be not afraid. I go before you always. Come follow me, and I will give you rest. If you stand before the fires of hell and death is at your side, be not afraid.

As she finishes MATT brushes away a tear in his eye.

MATT: Thank you.

A team of GUARDS comes into the cell.

BELIVEAU: Sister, please step outside.

PREJEAN: Why?

BELIVEAU: Sister, please.

Lights out. A silence. Then commotion. In the darkness:

MATT: Give me back my boots. I want my boots. A grown man and I have to leave this world with a diaper on, walking in slippers. I'll be free from all this. No more cells, no more bars, no more life in a cage.

Lights up. PREJEAN stands outside the cell.

HARTMAN: Time to go, Poncelet.

As he begins to walk, MATT'S legs sag and he drops to one knee beside the chair. He looks up at PREJEAN

MATT: Sister Helen, I'm going to die.

PREJEAN: But you know the truth now, Matt, and the truth has set you free.

MATT: God knows the truth about me. I'm going to a better place. I'm not worried at all.

But he is shivering and the guard comes and puts Matt's denim jacket around his shoulders. The witnesses, the press, prison official each take a metal chair and form two rows, facing the audience. We see EARL DELACROIX and the PERCYS.

MATT: Are you okay?

PREJEAN: Yeah, Matt. I'm OK. Christ is here. Look, I want the last thing you see in this world to be a face of love. Look at me. When they do this, look at me. I will be the face of Christ for you.

MATT: Yes, ma'am.

HARTMAN: Let's go.

PREJEAN puts her hand on his shoulder. They walk. The chains scrape across the floor. BELIVEAU announces:

BELIVEAU: Dead Man Walking.

PREJEAN carrying her bible reads Isaiah 43:2. As she reads the words she looks up and sees that MATT is walking with the same jaunty little walk, up on the balls of his feet.

PREJEAN: Do not be afraid, I have called you by your name, you are mine. Should you pass through the sea I will be with you. Should you walk through the fire you will not be scorched and the flames will not burn you.

CHAPLAIN FARLEY raises his hand in blessing. They stop.

HARTMAN: That's as far as you go, Sister.

MATT: Sister, will you look in on my mama from time to time?

PREJEAN: You have my word on that.

PREJEAN leans toward MATT and kisses him on the back. The guards guide PREJEAN to a chair with the other witnesses. There is a gurney, gleaming in the bright, fluorescent lights. MATT is strapped in the gurney. We see Matt's mother, LUCILLE, in the distance weeping, her boys watching television. HOPE and WALTER appear. The ensuing dialogue should be simply done, with states of honest emotion but no bombast.

HOPE: If someone lies in wait for his neighbor out of hatred for him and rising up against him, strikes him mortally and then takes refuge in one of the cities...

WALTER: ... the elders of his own city shall send for him and have him taken from there and shall hand him over to be slain by the avenger of blood.

LUCILLE: Have mercy on me, Oh God, in your goodness; in the greatness of your compassion wipe out my offense. Thoroughly wash from my guilt and of sin cleanse me.

MATT: For I acknowledge my offense and my sin is before me always.

CLYDE: Do not look on him with pity but purge from Israel the stain of shedding innocent blood that you may prosper.

LUCILLE: Cleanse me of my sin with Hyssop, that I may be purified. Wash me and I shall be whiter than snow.

WARDEN: Any last words, Poncelet?

MATT: Yes Sir, I do. Mr. Delacroix, I don't want to leave this world with any hate in my heart. I ask your forgiveness for what I've done. It was a terrible thing I done in taking your son away from you.

CLYDE: How about us?

MATT: Mr. and Mrs. Percy. I hope my death gives you some relief. I just want to say I think killing is wrong, no matter who does it. Whether it's me or y'all or your government.

The gurney adjusts. The NURSE checks the needles. The WARDEN nods to the executioner. A switch is flipped.

MATT (to Helen): I love you.

HELEN (to Matt): I love you.

A click is heard. There will be three clicks, each starting a needle. Each taking about 45 seconds. The process is slow and anesthetized but for half of it MATT is in terror but speaks in a monotone reliving the scenes of the murder.

MATT: Excuse me, what are you doing?

WALTER: Oh my God.

MATT: This is private property. Y'all are trespassing.

WALTER: We didn't know.

MATT: Get out of the car.

CLYDE: The next morning we waited for Hope to come through her bedroom door. The big day. Our baby was leaving home.

LUCILLE: It's happening. The execution. They're doing it. Boys, come to me.

MARYBETH: I called the Delacroixs. It was strange she didn't call. She would always telephone and tell me where she was.

WALTER: Put down that gun and fight me like a man, you chickenshit asshole.

MATT: Kneel down.

HOPE: Please no.

MATT: If you don't do what we say we're going to shoot you. So kneel down.

WALTER: Put down your gun. I'll take you both on.

MATT: If you don't kneel down we're gonna shoot you.

HOPE : Walter, kneel down, please, kneel down. Do it now! I don't want to die.

After a moment WALTER complies, joining his girlfriend. A beat. Then: gunshots.

PREJEAN: A clean heart create for me, O God, and a steadfast spirit renew within me.

MARYBETH: Against the day of vengeance and requital, against the time they lose their footing, close at hand is the day of their disaster and their doom is rushing upon them.

TROY: Blessed are the merciful for they shall obtain mercy.

PREJEAN: And Peter came up to him and said “Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?” And Jesus said to him, “I do not say to thee seven times, but seventy times seven.”

DELACROIX: Whoever strikes a man a mortal blow must be put to death.

HOPE: You shall give life for life, eye for eye and tooth for tooth.

MOTHER: You have heard that it was said: “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. But I say to you to resist the evilness, on the contrary, if someone strikes thee on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.

WALTER: foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.

PREJEAN: Take no revenge and cherish no grudge against your fellow countrymen. You shall love your neighbor as yourself I am the lord.

MATT is not moving now. The lights shift to feature his mother surrounded by her sons who say the Our Father.

LUCILLE AND BOYS: Our father who art in heaven hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven...

DELACROIX: When you lose a child all the memories get sealed like a shrine.

LUCILLE AND BOYS: ... and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those that trespass against us for thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, Oh Lord.

Silence.

The body is basically still, a slight reflex in the leg, then the eyes open. MAIT is dead. HARTMAN motions to the DOCTOR to approach the body. The DOCTOR who has been sitting with the witnesses goes to the body in the gurney and puts his hand over MAIT'S eyes, closing them. The DOCTOR puts his stethoscope against the heart, listens; then turns to the WARDEN and nods his head. As PREJEAN talks the people move off stage. COLLEEN comes to PREJEAN and leads her stage left.

PREJEAN: Very few people see the dying man in the execution chamber. We are kept from the face of our retribution. It is a concept, a violent act, carried out at midnight, far away, unseen. Can any of us look at the death of another human being with cold detachment, with indifference? Or is execution removed from our view because it is too difficult to look at? And yet Matt's crime, his violent act revisits the Percys and the Delacroix nightly. And on this night, in a dream, I come back to his face, wild, torn and without reason or compassion or any of the calming signs we seek day to day in our companions. I come back to his face and in this dream, his face is unrepentant, his eyes violent and dead, his hand holding a bloody knife. I hear the moaning of a dying person. Matt has just attacked someone I know, someone I love, the fireplace of my childhood home is stained with blood and in my hand I hold a weapon. Will I raise the weapon up to him? Before I decide, I wake up.

A knock on the door. HERBIE is there.

HERBIE: Sister Helen. There was a box for you at Hope House. *(Pause)* Some of the kids made you a card to feel better soon. *(Pause)* That's all.

PREJEAN: Thanks, Herbie.

HERBIE: Could I... can you help tutor me? You know, get rid of some of the red marks?

PREJEAN: Oh yes, it would be my honor. Your mother OK with that?

HERBIE: Yeah. She'll get over it.

He leaves.

PREJEAN: Mahatma Gandhi once said: "If we were all to take an eye for an eye, the world would be blind." Jesus Christ showed us that the only way to stop the mad circle of violence and retribution was through love and reconciliation.

PREJEAN opens the box. It is MATT'S personal effects. She takes the boots out and sets them on the floor. Then, a bible. A hymn plays, redemptive, uplifting.

PREJEAN: Love for everyone, even those that inflict pain. For the family of a victim this is an emotion that seems unattainable, impossible. But perhaps there is redemption in reconciliation. Perhaps there is some peace in not letting the hatred overtake you, in not letting those that have hurt you continue to after they're gone. If we reconcile, do our memories of our loved ones fade or do we honor our loved ones with a wish for everlasting peace, a holy place without violence, hatred or revenge? Only time will tell. A week after we buried Matt, Mr. Delacroix asked me to meet him at a chapel near where the murders happened.

PREJEAN sits. Behind her, in walks EARL DELACROIX. He approaches slowly and sits next to PREJEAN.

DELACROIX: You made it. I'm glad you're safe. You know these highways.

PREJEAN: It's good to see you, Mr. Delacroix.

DELACROIX: Earl.

PREJEAN smiles.

PREJEAN: Shall we get to work?

DELACROIX: Yes. Ma'am, let's do that.

They both kneel and begin to pray. The hymn ends.

Silence.

THE END

NOTES ON SET

Desks and beds should be simple surfaces. Chairs - stools. Utilitarian furniture forms and shapes, rather than realistic representation.

If anything approaches realism, it should be the gurney on which Poncelet dies and the machines associated with it - with working lights.

CAST OF CHARACTERS
(In order of Appearance)

ACT ONE

Sr. Helen Prejean
 Sr. Marie Augusta Neal
 Herbie
 Luis Montoya
 Matt Poncelet
 Guard #1
 Female Guard
 Chaplain Farley, Guard #2 (or #1), Sr. Colleen, Reporter #1
 Reporter #2
 Reporter #3
 Purvis Slade (radio announcer)
 Hilton Barber (death penalty lawyer)
 Lucill Poncelet (Matt's mother)
 Guy Gilardi (assistant DA)
 Clyde Percy (Hope's father)
 Marybeth Percy (Hope's mother)
 Earl Delacroix (Walter's father)
 Mrs. Delacroix (Walter's mother)
 Walter Delacroix (son)
 Hope Percy (daughter)
 Mother of Sr. Helen
 Emily Percy (Hope's sister)
 Reporter (#4) on pg. 48
 Woman #1 (Victim's family)
 Man #1 (Victim's family)
 Woman #2 (Victim's family)
 Man #2 (Victim's family)
 Woman #3 (Victim's family)
 Man #3 (Victim's family)

ACT TWO

Guard – Trapp
 Sgt. Beliveau
 Nurse
 Warden Hartman
 Governor Fredericks
 Mitch (brother of Matt)
 Troy (brother of Matt)
 Jim (brother of Matt)