

DEAD MAN WALKING

By

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Based on the book "Dead Man Walking"
by Sister Helen Prejean C.S.J.

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FADE IN:

CREDITS ROLL.

EXT. ST. THOMAS PROJECT: NEW ORLEANS, LOUISIANA. SUNSET

A Gregorian chant plays hauntingly mixed with the percussive sounds of a city street. A bus is letting off passengers, a quick stop in a run down neighborhood. From the bus steps SISTER HELEN PREJEAN, a Catholic nun who belies our standard image of nuns in movies. She is presently, in fact, anonymous; forgoing the traditional habit for a practical simple dress. In fact the only thing suggesting religion is the simple silver crucifix she wears around her neck. Prejean begins to walk. She carries a shopping bag. She has a strong confident walk, this is a woman with work to do. As she walks we see snatches of the neighborhood. It has seen better days. There is a desperation here; a poverty of mind and pocket, a brewing violence of souls.

Prejean has reached a building and entered it.

INT. HOPE HOUSE. SUNSET.

Prejean walks down a hall. A group of African Americans wait for her and after greeting them, she opens a door for them. They begin to file in. A man comes out of a different door and sees Prejean. This is LUIS MONTOYA.

MONTOYA

Helen. Got a second?

PREJEAN

Be right there.

INT. PRISON COALITION OFFICE. SUNSET.

MONTOYA

Listen, Helen, I know you've got your hands full, but 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 down the information.

PREJEAN

What did he do?

MONTOYA

He and a fella named Carl Vitello were convicted of raping and murdering a teenage couple.

She looks down at the name in horror.

MONTOYA

Maybe I ought to give you someone else. This guy is a loner and doesn't write. Maybe you want someone who will answer your letters.

PREJEAN

Don't change it. Give him to me.

MONTOYA

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

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

PREJEAN

I've got a class now. I'll be back.

INT. HOPE HOUSE CLASSROOM. NIGHT.

Prejean teaches a high school equivalency class. She is

alongside a student, reading, stumbling over words. The rest of the students work quietly at their desks.

INT. HOPE HOUSE HALLWAY. NIGHT.

Sister Prejean talks with one of the class. Others say goodnight as they leave.

INT. PRISON COALITION. NIGHT.

Prejean is looking through the files on Matthew Poncelet. We see inserts of various newspaper clippings, photographs, and letters. Also, overlapping voices read from newspaper articles.

THE NOVEMBER 13, 1975 FRONT PAGE HEADLINE OF - THE ABBEVILLE JOURNAL; "LEADS ARE FEW IN NOVEMBER MURDER HERE"; PHOTO OF: SMILING FACES OF A TEENAGE COUPLE.

VOICE

On Friday night, Walter LeClair, age 17, and Hope Percy, 18, had been just two happy people celebrating one of life's turning points....

VOICE

The couple had been shot twice at close range in the back of the head with a .22-caliber rifle.

THE DECEMBER 2, 1979 FRONT PAGE HEADLINE OF - THE JOURNAL; PHOTO FEATURES: SNEERING FACES OF THE MURDERERS: MATTHEW PONCELET, 26, AND CARL VITELLO, 31.

VOICE

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 state attacking several teenage couples in local lovers' lanes.

VOICE

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.

PHOTOGRAPH: Poncelet when first arrested, with wild, long tangled hair.

VOICE

...drew his hand menacingly like a knife across his throat when Brian McCain appeared in the courtroom....

VOICE

When McCain's girlfriend appeared, a young woman Poncelet had raped, he winked and blew her a kiss...

PHOTOGRAPH: Poncelet with crew cut, hands and feet cuffed, looking at Vitello and grinning as they walk into the courthouse.

VOICE

Matthew Poncelet addressed the judge as "Cap" and smirked when the jury found him guilty of murder today....

VOICE

...told his weeping mother to "dry up"

PHOTOGRAPH: Poncelet with a bandanna on his head, caught close up by the camera, sneering.

Prejean opens a folder labeled "Correspondence." She finds

a letter to Matt, written from jail.

MATT(V.O.)

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?

She 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; so you can
imagine the frantic telephone
calls we get from death-row
inmates, begging us to find
them attorneys. One of our
biggest challenges here is
recruiting lawyers to represent
death-row inmates - free of
charge, of course - and these
petitions take hours and hours
to prepare. Attorneys aren't
exactly lining up outside this
door for the job.

INT. PREJEAN APARTMENT. NIGHT.

Prejean is finishing writing a letter to Matt Poncelet. We
see her hand as she signs her name and:

THREE PHOTOS:

Prejean on a pony in woods.

A color photo of blue, shimmering water at Bay St. Louis,
Mississippi.

A picture of Christ on the cross.

EXT. LOUISIANA WOODS. DAY - FLASHBACK.

Six boys and a young girl are chasing a possum.

The kids surround the animal. It lays down and "plays

possum". One of the boys approaches the animal with a stick and hits it. We see the little girl and hear the stick hitting the possum again and again.

KID#1 (V.O.)

Is he dead?

KID#2

Playin possum, huh? You think you can trick us you dumb animal.

He hits the animal.

KID#2

Think you can fool us?

Another kid hits the animal. Then another.

KID#1

It's your turn Helen.

Eight year old Helen Prejean picks up the stick and approaches the animal, draws up the stick and brings it down on the bleeding animal. We see the face of the eight year old.

INT. PREJEAN APARTMENT. DAWN.

Prejean wakes up from this dream. She gets out of bed.

MATT (V.O.)

Dear sister Helen, Thank you for writing to me. I'm writing from my home, my six by eight 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.

INSERT: Photo of Matt Poncelet; a frightening look in his eyes.

We see Prejean, looking at the photo.

EXT. LOUISIANA HIGHWAY. DAY.

Prejean drives through a light rain. We see a billboard advertising Pete Peterson for Governor. It says: "Get tough on crime; Vote Peterson!"

MATT(V.O.)

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.

The rain picks up a bit. The car slows and approaches a sign that says: "Do not despair, you will soon be there."

She makes a sharp S-curve in the road and sees a clearing, an open sky, and the LOUISIANA STATE PENITENTIARY - ANGOLA.

Prejean drives up to the front gate. Several armed, blue-uniformed guards occupy a small, glassed-in office and one of them comes to the car and she shows him a letter. They inspect her car, trunk, glove compartment, seat; then they put a VISITOR'S SIGN on the dashboard and direct her to the administration building.

MATT(V.O.)

I had a dream once that I was about to be fried in the chair and a guard came into my cell with a chefs 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.

There are red and yellow zinnias all along the road, and the grass is neatly trimmed. Mottled black-and-white cows stand around in a green field. A column of inmates - mostly black - is marching out to the soybean and vegetable fields - their hoes over their shoulders. Behind and in front of

the marching men, guards on horseback with rifles watch their prisoners.

INT. FRONT FOYER - ADMINISTRATIVE BUILDING. DAY.

Prejean waits for the Chaplain. He comes in from one of the offices along the side wing of the building. CHAPLAIN FARLEY is an elderly man. His face is kind. His voice seems tired. Farley is a Catholic priest and the chief chaplain of the prison. He is officious and precise, a bureaucrat beaten down by years of compromise.

FARLEY

Good day sister.

PREJEAN

Good day father.

FARLEY

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

PREJEAN

I have been corresponding with him by mail. This man is alone. He has no one to come and see him.

FARLEY

Isn't this the man that shot two children in the back of the head?

PREJEAN

What he has done is despicable. But he is still a child of God. Jesus taught us that no life is beyond redemption, Father.

FARLEY

Have you ever been in a prison before?

PREJEAN

No, Father.

FARLEY

There is no romance here, sister. No Jimmy Cagney, Humphrey Bogart. I've been wrongly accused, if only I had someone who believed in me nonsense. Sister, you must remember, these people are scum of the earth; and you must be very, very careful because they are all con men and will try to take advantage of you every way they can. You just can't trust them. Do you understand?

PREJEAN

Yes, Father.

FARLEY

Your job is to help this fellow save his soul by receiving the sacraments of the church before he dies. Nothing more, nothing less. Where is your habit?

PREJEAN

Our order dresses in civilian clothes.

FARLEY

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

PREJEAN

Witness is in our actions, the dedication of our lives, not in our dress. Jesus himself wore nothing special, the clothes of his day.

FARLEY

The inmates know that the Pope has requested nuns to wear the habit, and for you to flout

authority will only encourage
them to do the same.

PREJEAN

I wasn't aware that inmates
kept up on Vatican policies.

INT. VISITOR CENTER, ANGOLA PRISON. DAY.

Prejean walks past the guard station and waits outside the
gate of the fenced-in yard surrounding the DEATH-ROW
BUILDING. A WOMAN GUARD in a nearby watchtower opens the
gate electronically from a control switch.

Sound of a LOUD CLICK.

Prejean walks through and the gate clangs shut behind her.

EXT. LOUISIANA WOODS. NIGHT - FLASHBACK.

Poncelet and Vitello creep along behind trees, bushes,
moving silently.

MATT

I'll flush him out.

Matt throws a rock at a bush. Nothing.

MATT

Little fucker split. Here
bunny, here bunny.

VITELLO

Matt, lookee here.

We see what Vitello sees. A car parked. A romantic tryst.

EXT. ANGOLA PRISON. DAY.

Prejean walks along, accompanied by a guard. There are
flowers along the sidewalk leading to the building.

EXT. LOUISIANA WOODS. NIGHT - FLASHBACK.

Poncelet and Vitello approach the parked car on either
side. The lovers continue their necking within.

INT. DEATH ROW BUILDING. DAY.

Prejean is accompanied by a GUARD through a series of gates down a hallway.

EXT. LOUISIANA WOODS. NIGHT - FLASHBACK.

Close on a rifle butt hitting glass. Pull out to see the couple, WALTER LECLAIR and HOPE PERCY, startled out of their embrace, instantly terrified.

MATT

Excuse me, what are you doing?

WALTER

Oh, my God.

VITELLO laughs.

MATT

This is private property. Y'all are trespassing.

WALTER

We didn't know.

MATT

Get out of the car.

VITELLO opens the door, pointing the gun at them, laughing. Matt puts handcuffs on the couple as they get out of the car.

INT. DEATH ROW BUILDING. DAY.

We see Prejean as a guard yells out:

GUARD

Woman on the tier!

Gate One: CLANG. Gate Two: CLANG. Gate Three: CLANG. METAL ON METAL.

EXT. LOUISIANA WOODS. NIGHT - FLASHBACK.

The car pulls to a stop in an abandoned oil field and the girl is taken forcibly out of the car.

INT. DEATH ROW. DAY.

It's all green and cement and bars. It is stifflingly hot. No circulation in the air. Prejean sees a GREEN DOOR with a barred window and above it RED BLOCK LETTERS: DEATH ROW.

EXT. LOUISIANA WOODS. NIGHT - FLASHBACK.

Hope Percy is being raped by Matt Poncelet. She weeps inconsolably. Walter LeClair is held by Vitello in the background.

WALTER

Put down that gun you faggot.
Fight me like a man you
chickenshit asshole.

INT. DEATH ROW. DAY.

Prejean and a GUARD come to a door, which he unlocks and opens.

GUARD

Wait here. They'll get your man
for you.

Prejean steps into room. The guard closes and locks the door behind her. She remains standing in front of the door for a moment, looking around at the room: There are six visiting stalls the size of telephone booths constructed of plywood painted white. A heavy mesh screen separates visitors from inmates. On the visitor side is a loud, whirring fan. There are plastic chairs stacked in a corner and several tin cans painted red which serve as trash cans.

She starts to slowly pace back and forth, trying to take deep breaths, to settle down. She stops when she hears the rattle of chains scraping across the floor, and A VOICE, laughing and teasing the guard.

EXT. LOUISIANA WOODS. NIGHT - FLASHBACK.

MATT

Kneel down.

HOPE

Please, no.

MATT

If you don't do what we say,
we're gonna shoot you. So kneel
down.

WALTER

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

VITELLO

Oooh he's a hero.

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
knees in the Louisiana mud. A beat. Then: Gunshots.

INT. DEATH ROW. DAY.

Close on the face of Matthew Poncelet.

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 Matt, I made it.

MATT (laughing softly)

Thanks for coming to see me
ma'am. Never thought I'd be
visitin' with a nun.

They sit down in one of the booths.

There is a pause. He lights a cigarette.

PREJEAN

I want you to know, Matt, that I'm here to listen and all I ask is that you be honest with me.

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.

An awkward pause.

MATT

You know when I first got your letter and I saw 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 lots of questions.

PREJEAN

I don't know you.

MATT

Star.

PREJEAN

Star?

MATT

Her name. 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 St. Martinville. I get there and 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 thinking I'm a kidnapper or something. Well finally she recognizes me and puts the gun down but it's like she's a different person, acting all cold to me, making rude remarks in front of the kid about me being a con and all. So I get out of there, go get tanked, come back, get into it with her, I heard some rumors about her and this dude, I get really angry, bust up

some furniture, cops come, bang
zoom back to jail. That's the
last I saw 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.

EXT. LOUISIANA WOODS. NIGHT - FLASHBACK.

We drift slowly along the tall brush, the sound of cicadas
hypnotizingly loud. We see a torn garment, a shoe, and then
a hand which leads us to the dead body of Hope Percy lying
grotesquely askew.

INT. DEATH ROW. DAY.

MATT

You told me in your letter you
work with poor people. You come
from money, don't you?

PREJEAN

Some.

MATT

And you live in a ghetto? 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

Yes. Did you ever hear that phrase. "As long as the poor have God they have everything?"

MATT

Yeah.

PREJEAN

Do you buy it?

MATT

No.

PREJEAN

Me neither. I did though. For a long time. When I took my vows, I wanted to be a nun, not a social worker. What do you know about Jesus?

MATT

What do I...

PREJEAN

You've heard of him?

MATT

Yes of course.

PREJEAN

What do you think of him?

MATT

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

PREJEAN

I think he was a rebel. He had his eyes open and when he saw something he didn't like, he spoke out. He took the side of the oppressed, the poor. I think what he was talking about was so dangerous to those in power that they had to kill him.

MATT

What's so dangerous about love
your brother?

PREJEAN

It's other things. Economic
things. "And Jesus preached
good news to the poor and part
of that good news is that the
poor would be poor no longer."
And it occurred to me that
those weren't vague words. They
were a call to arms to help the
poor in an active way by
working and fighting, agitating
and educating.

MATT

Well I like that Jesus.

Pause.

MATT

So what's your favorite prayer?

PREJEAN

My favorite prayer?

MATT

Like a favorite song.

PREJEAN

Well, I hadn't thought....

MATT

I like "Hot Legs." Been going
through my head.

Pause.

PREJEAN

Why don't we talk about why
you're here?

MATT

Good question, as I'm innocent
of the crime.

PREJEAN

Are you really? You admit to being there. A girl was raped and her boyfriend and her were killed and left to rot in the woods.

MATT

All right, I'm telling you what ma'am, I'm real real sorry that those kids got killed, but like I told the police when they were questioning me, I didn't kill them.

PREJEAN

So what happened?

MATT

Carl went crazy on me. He's the one that should be sitting here. I offered to take a lie detector test but they wouldn't let me. I told them I don't kill women. When Carl went nuts, I was scared. I just did what he said, I held the boy back, and afterwards we was runnin' around in those woods lost, goin' through brambles and mud and couldn't find the truck and I was some scared. Truth is me and Carl were loaded on Valium, acid, and booze when this happened. I hadn't slept in two nights.

PREJEAN

Drugs don't explain this. Thousands of people take drugs and don't slash and rape and kill people.

MATT

Well I was out of my head. And I didn't kill them.

EXT. SUBURBAN STREET. NIGHT - FLASHBACK.

A State Trooper is at the door of a house. It is late at night. The door opens. MARYBETH PERCY opens the door, her eyes heavy with sleep.

TROOPER

Mrs. Percy?

MRS. PERCY

Oh my god, no.

INT. DEATH ROW. DAY.

We start on Prejean.

MATT

The way I see it I have 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 two years, been reading and studying every law book I can get my hands on. Right now, I'm the plaintiff in a suit on behalf of death row cons trying to get better conditions on the row. I'm the only one on the suit. The rest of these guys were chicken. Didn't want to stick their necks out.

He laughs.

MATT

Hell, let's face it, we're all up against the ultimate,

anyway. Ain't nothin more
ultimate than death, is there?
I say, let's join forces and
make a stand. Together we
stand; divided we fall.

A clang is heard, the door opening, a guard appears.

GUARD

Time's up, Sister.

Prejean rises. Matt holds a folder.

MATT

...I have a whole lot of stuff
about my case - transcripts of
my trials and newspaper
clippings and legal papers -
and maybe they would help you
get a hold of things about me
and my case faster.

PREJEAN

I appreciate your trust.

MATT

I tell you what, ma'am, I sure
as hell don't trust nobody
around this place - and that
includes that Chaplain Farley
who get his paychecks from the
state like other employees -
but I do trust you. You didn't
come here to kiss my ass and I
respect that. And you're tough,
you're a fighter I can tell. It
takes guts to live in a
neighborhood where every nigger
has a gun.

She sees that he has tattoos: L-O-V-E on his fingers and a
string of skulls across his wrist.

PREJEAN

We're going to have to work on
this love thing.

MATT

Ma'am?

PREJEAN

All this nigger talk. These insults. They're offensive and full of hate. We'll talk about it next time.

MATT

Appreciate your visit, ma'am.

She puts her hand up to the mesh screen and he raises his handcuffed hands toward the screen but he can't quite reach.

MATT

Thanks for listening, and for taking the long trip.

PREJEAN

No trouble.

MATT

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

Prejean laughs. Poncelet is led away. CLANG. Prejean lets out a sigh of relief.

EXT. ANGOLA PRISON. DAY.

Prejean is being driven to the front gate by a guard. This is NEAL TRAPP. He is in his forties, balding, grey. As they drive we-see a flurry of activity.

TRAPP

Our relationships with the inmates are based on mistrust. In training we're told not to share anything personal with the inmates. It's good advice. You have to stay ahead of these guys, never forget who the fox is and who the hen is. Sensitivity can get you killed.

PREJEAN

Why do you do it? What do you like about the job?

TRAPP

Steady bread. It runs in the family, too. I'm third generation Angola guard.

They pass a building that seems to be the hub of activity.

PREJEAN

What is that?

TRAPP

That's the death house; where they're going to execute this guy Walker tomorrow. State hasn't done it in a while, they're kind of nervous.

INT. PRISON COALITION. DAY.

Prejean with Luis Montoya.

PREJEAN

Can someone be sentenced to death for being there, next to a murderer?

MONTOYA

With a bad lawyer anything can happen.

PREJEAN

Poncelet claims it was Vitello that did the killing. Was Vitello older?

MONTOYA

Yes, I believe so.

PREJEAN

Matt admits to holding the boy back while Vitello raped and killed the girl. He also claims that Vitello killed the boy.

MONTOYA

And Vitello accuses Poncelet.
Both say the other did the
actual killing.

PREJEAN

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

MONTOYA

Luck of the draw. State
appointed different lawyers.
Vitello's lawyer created doubt
in the jury's mind, Poncelet's
didn't. Vitello got life,
Poncelet death.

PREJEAN

Doesn't seem fair does it?.

MONTOYA

There are so many glaring legal
procedural errors in Matt's
trial, he could get a retrial.
He just needs a bear of a
lawyer. Which we can't provide.
We need help, Helen. I've got
three cases I'm working on. I'm
overloaded and understaffed. I
can't take this one on. There
is a lawyer by the name of
Hilton Barber. He's aware of
the case, told me no. I think
if other people were to plead
on Matt's behalf he might
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 on the street.

MONTOYA

He's not going to get off.
We're trying to get this man
off of death row. Whatever may
be shaky about his original
trial can only help the case.

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?

INT. CHURCH. DAY. .

Prejean sits in a pew, in meditative prayer. We see a
crucifix, and zoom in on Jesus' face, a face filled with
pain and anguish but somehow kind and forgiving. We hear a
beautiful hymn.

INT. PREJEAN CAR. DAY.

As Prejean drives we hear, on the radio, a report of the
execution of Wayne Walker.

RADIO

The execution which was
originally scheduled for
midnight was dramatically
halted as Walker approached the
chair. Walker 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. Walker
was pronounced dead at 1:15AM.

The execution was the first in Louisiana since 1961. This is Monitor News.

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

SLADE(V.O.)

Well, it's about time. This state has finally come to its' senses. Zap! Goodnight Mr. Walker. Guess you shouldn't have messed around in the state of Louisiana.

He plays a sound effect of electricity. Along the road we see a billboard advertising Pete Peterson for Governor.

INT. DEATH HOUSE. DAY.

Matt is on a roll. Prejean listens.

MATT

My Daddy took me to a bar when I was twelve and told me to pick my whiskey and there were all these bottles behind the bar and I pointed and said I'd take the one with the pretty turkey on it and the guys in the bar laughed and daddy laughed too.

He Laughs.

MATT

We got drunk as a couple of coots and there we were at one in the morning trying to make it home on our bicycles, weaving and hitting every garbage can along the road. He was a good man, a sharecropper, worked hard. That's one thing I got from him. I love to work. Got me out of trouble a lot. Took me on at his place when I

would get to be too much for ma
to handle. Wouldn't be able to
get me out of here, though.

PREJEAN

When did he die?

MATT

I was 14. Liver cancer.

There is a pause.

MATT

I just wanted to say thanks for
giving my address to all them
people. Lot's of folks writin'
I've never had so many friends.

PREJEAN

Well I hope the letters offer
you some relief.

MATT

Why are 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 get married?

PREJEAN

No. Never did. I guess I needed a wider arena for my love. I have close friends - men and women. Sexual intimacy isn't the only way to be close. When you share with someone your most secret feelings and thoughts and dreams; that's intimacy too.

MATT

Yeah? But you got to get lonely.

PREJEAN

Yeah. I do. Especially on Sunday afternoons, when I smell the smoke in the neighborhood from family barbecues. I sit there in my room and feel like a fool not to have pursued a normal life.

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 goin' 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 there 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.

He stands up. Prejean tries to adjust her view of him through the heavy mesh screen.

MATT

Look down sometimes. This screen can really do a number on your eyes.

Matt continues to talk but the words are unintelligible. Through the screen his image is distorted, then a blur.

INT. DISTRICT ATTORNEYS OFFICE. DAY.

Prejean sits with GUY GILARDI, the district attorney of New Orleans.

GILARDI

I remember. Sure. I tried Poncelet and my assistant tried Vitello. I got the death penalty and Charlie got a life term. Or...I forget...just a second. Margaret, did Charlie go for the death penalty with Vitello? It would surprise me if he did. No he did not. He did not. Charlie doesn't pursue the death penalty very often.

PREJEAN

Why?

GILARDI

Doesn't believe in it. There are some in the D.A.'s office that have mixed feelings about the death penalty. Privately we know it's incredibly expensive; costs five million to kill a

man, some have a problem with the racial inequity. It's not something we relish doing. We only go after death in 1 out of 10 cases. Personally I think it's a necessary deterrent.

PREJEAN

How do you determine what cases to go after it with?

GILARDI

Different reasons. Amount of evidence. The nature of the crime. Now tell me, what is your relationship to Poncelet? To what do I owe this visit, sister?

PREJEAN

I have been corresponding with him and I have questions about the case.

GILARDI

Such as?

PREJEAN

Matt claims he met his lawyer the day before his trial. Hardly time to prepare a defense.

GILARDI

No doubt. I remember what a cakewalk it was. He had bad representation, no doubt, no doubt, but we had the evidence.

PREJEAN

You had the evidence that Poncelet and Vitello were there but you don't know who pulled the trigger.

GILARDI

The boy's guilty; sister. Bless you for trying to help him but he's guilty. Without a shadow of a doubt. Ace of spades, open and shut.

INT. PREJEAN APARTMENT. NIGHT.

Prejean sleeps, or tries to. It is unbearably hot. The television news is on. The phone rings.

PREJEAN

Hello.

MATT(V.O.)

Sister Helen?

PREJEAN

Who's this?

MATT(V.O.)

Matt Poncelet. Sister, are you there? I didn't know who to call. I know I'm on death row but there are guys been here for years. I didn't know this was coming. I just didn't know who to call.

PREJEAN

What happened?

MATT(V.O.)

They've set a date. This morning a guard came and handed me a warrant for execution. They're gonna kill me December 18th. Little Christmas gift I guess. This is my second date. I'll be moving to the death watch any time now. I gotta do something. I didn't realize that 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. Helen is speechless.

PREJEAN

Ok, ok, Matt, calm down. I will think of something. I know a lawyer that can try to stop this Matt, I'll see what I can do. And I'll come see you in a couple of days.

MATT (V.O.)

Announced just in time for the election, huh? I'll bet they're making the most out of it on the news. Peterson's got to look tough on scumballs if he wants to get re-elected, right?

PREJEAN

I'll be down in a couple of days. Don't worry Matt, we'll figure something out.

As she hangs up the phone we see the television with a report on the scheduling of Poncelet's execution. We see Peterson and then, surprise, a photo of Matt Poncelet. CLYDE PERCY, the stepfather of Hope Percy is being interviewed. Prejean is looking for a phone number.

CLYDE

It's been four years and they haven't fried Poncelet's ass yet. It's about time they got on with it. I can't wait to see him fry, to see the smoke fly off his body.

Prejean has dialed the phone.

PREJEAN

Mr. Barber? Hilton Barber?

INT. PREJEAN CAR. DAY.

Prejean drives with HILTON BARBER. Hilton is a tall, trim, southern gentleman with a long face and grizzled gray hair. We see a crude handmade sign off the road "Have many rabbits".

PREJEAN

Have many rabbits.

She laughs.

HILTON

Imagine that poor guy. Buys two rabbits a year ago and now he's overrun.

She laughs.

HILTON

How long have you been doing this Sister?

PREJEAN

This?

HILTON

Counseling death row inmates.

PREJEAN

This is the first time.

HILTON

Hello heartbreak.

PREJEAN

What's that?

HILTON

You a football fan?

PREJEAN

Not much.

HILTON

Working with these fellas is like being a rabid fan of the world's worst team. You put

your heart and soul into each game, you yell, you scream, you cheer, but you know going in the probability of you winning is pretty low. Still you make your noise and once in a while some freak fumble goes your way and when you win it feels like heaven. Hey look at that.

He is pointing to the sign nailed high up in the tree: "Do not despair, you will soon be there."

HILTON

Somebody knows this road real, real well.

INT. DEATH ROW. DAY.

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 in prison cigarettes are about all inmates have to take the edge off.

GUARD

Hilton Barber?

HILTON

Yessir.

GUARD

This way.

INT. DEATH ROW. DAY.

MATT

And a week before the election, surprise! A big announcement with lots of press setting a date for my execution to show how these guys are tough 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, and the last thing they want to hear is any truth about how corrupt their job is and this process they're involved in is.

MATT

They're a bunch of liars. My mama did six months in jail because she drove me and Vitello to Mississippi after the crime and you know I'm mad about that. They double-dealed me. Told me they wouldn't mess with her if I cooperated. I gave them the statement without a lawyer there, which my better judgement told me not to because I couldn't see my mother going to jail. She's not strong anyways. She didn't have a criminal record. They could have given her a suspended

sentence. They were mad at me and took it out on her.

HILTON

She should be at the pardon board hearing. We need people that know you to speak on your behalf.

MATT

I don't know. She's just going to bust out cryin' and won't be able to say nothin' 'cause she's gonna be so tore up. It's just not worth it to put her through all that. And she's gonna have to sit there and hear the LeClairs, the Percys and the D.A.

PREJEAN

You may want to think about your mother. I know it's bound to be upsetting for her to be part of this hearing, and you'd like to save her from it, but if you die, after you're gone, it may be bad for her if she didn't have the chance to speak for you. Maybe she will always wonder if she had been there for you, maybe it would have made a difference.

MATT

Yeah...I'll think about it, it's an angle I haven't considered. I want you to know I got my pride. I'm not grovelin' in front of those people. I don't grovel to nobody.

INT. PREJEAN APARTMENT. DAY.

On the television we see election results. Pete Peterson

has been re-elected. A big celebration.

INT. PARDON BOARD OFFICE. DAY.

Hilton and Prejean sit in the office of HOWARD MIRABEAU, chairperson of the board. Howard is an African American in his mid-fifties.

MIRABEAU

For all the rhetoric that the death penalty is supposed to be applied for the most heinous crimes we know it's really the status of the victims that fuels the death penalty. Eight out of every ten people on death row are there for killing white people even though the vast majority of homicide victims are people of color. Capital punishment is a poor man's punishment. You'll never see a rich person coming before this Board.

HILTON

You won't see a rich person not because rich people never commit terrible crimes but because the expert legal counsel they hire know how to "play the system." Matt Poncelet's lawyer couldn't play with his belly button let alone the system. This man never stood a chance.

Mirabeau' secretary interrupts.

SECRETARY

Howard, it's time.

MIRABEAU

I've got to leave for the Governors'. Forgive me.

Everyone rises.

MIRABEAU

What you have told me about this case is very compelling. I'll study the petition very carefully, and I'll see that each member of the Board does the same. Thank you for coming in.

HILTON

Thank you. We'll see you tomorrow.

EXT. PARDON BOARD BUILDING. DAY.

Prejean and Hilton can barely contain their excitement.

HILTON

I feel so go-od!

Prejean lets out a WOOP.

HILTON

We actually might have a chance.

EXT. DILAPIDATED HOUSE. SUNSET.

Prejean approaches the house. The walkway is overgrown, old tires and abandoned wagons lay strewn about. Prejean knocks on the door. No answer. Then:

VOICE (V.O.)

Yes?

PREJEAN

Mrs. Poncelet?

VOICE (V.O.)

Who is it?

PREJEAN

My name is Sister Helen Prejean. I'm a friend of your son.

A pause.

ELIZABETH (V.O.)

I didn't know he had any friends. What do you want?

PREJEAN

Just to talk. Can you open the door?

The door opens slowly, cautiously. As we see ELIZABETH PONCELET, she flinches as if expecting to be hit. She looks at Prejean suspiciously.

ELIZABETH

How do you know Matt?

PREJEAN

I'm Matt's spiritual adviser. I'm a Catholic nun and I met your son on death row.

ELIZABETH

Come in.

INT. PONCELET HOUSE. DAY.

ELIZABETH

Sorry for being so short with you. You never know who is at your front door. People are pretty mean. They talk, oh how they talk. I feel like everybody's watching me when I go into a store. Everybody knows who I am. That show, Hard Copy made a show about Matt and they told how I tried to help him and all, a regular Ma Barker or something. Now everybody talks. "That's the mother of that killer!" they say behind my back. I was in a store yesterday and saw these two ladies eyeing me and when I got closer to them I hear one of them say, "I just can't wait to hear that they have executed that monster, Matt Poncelet."

She lights a cigarette.

ELIZABETH

Who's the one that denied
Jesus? The apostle?

PREJEAN

Peter. Jesus predicted that
Peter would betray him three
times before the cock would
crow.

ELIZABETH

Sometimes I feel like Peter
with my son. I want to deny,
knowing him so people will
leave me alone, not hate me. I
don't know. Why are you here?

PREJEAN

Matt goes before the Pardon
Board tomorrow. He'd like you
to be there.

INT. PREJEAN HOME. NIGHT.

A well appointed Southern home. This family has money and
it shows. Elegant dinnerware, expensive tablecloths,
everyone seated at the table well dressed. Prejean eats
dinner with her MOTHER, BROTHER and her friend SISTER
COLLEEN BERLINGER.

PREJEAN

She was thrown out at sixteen,
pregnant, went to live with her
boyfriend and his parents. They
get married, she has the kid,
the husband goes from job to
job, husbands parents throw
them out, they live in a
trailer park, husband gets in
trouble, sent to jail, she has
to get a job, Matt moves to
live with her sister when he's
ten, dad gets out of jail,
parents divorce, mom gets him
back when he's twelve, raises

him as best she can. Dad dies of liver cancer when Matt is fourteen. Matt first gets in trouble with the law when he's fifteen. Sound familiar?

COLLEEN

Everybody gets in trouble when they are fifteen. If kids are lucky their parents get them before the police do.

PREJEAN

Mom is working two jobs, never around. And dad is dead.

COLLEEN

Absent daddy, troubled son.

BROTHER

This happens a lot, doesn't it?

PREJEAN

Every day, every town. In the St. Thomas Project eight out of ten families are single parent run.

COLLEEN

But the real problem is welfare, right. All these people living like kings off our tax dollars.

PREJEAN

Sure, you get rid of welfare, that will solve all the problems. That will make all these people self sufficient and happy. And it will increase their earning power, because they will be more motivated to get higher paying jobs.

COLLEEN

Like crack dealing.

Prejean's mother, who has been listening to all this, interrupts.

MOTHER

Helen, why are you doing this?

There is an awkward stillness at the table.

MOTHER

Aren't there people in your neighborhood that need your help? Honest people?

PREJEAN

Yes, mother, and I still do help them.

MOTHER

But why this obsession with murderers? They're the end of the line people. For all the energy and resources you're putting into them you could be preventing people from going to prison and death row.

A pause.

BROTHER

Mom's friends the Pierre's read an article where they mentioned your name as being associated with Poncelet.

MOTHER

It has nothing to do with that. I am simply curious, Helen. What has drawn you to this?

PREJEAN

I don't know Mom. Maybe because death row inmates are looked upon as the throw aways. Look at who Jesus hung out with; prostitutes, tax collectors, thieves; the refuse of his day. He said it wasn't the healthy

people who need a physician but
the sick.

INT. PARDON BOARD HEARING ROOM. DAY.

TITLE: NOVEMBER 18.

Elizabeth Poncelet comes from the gallery and to the table. She sits by her son without looking at him. He doesn't look at her either; nor does she touch him. They both look at a spot on the table in front of them. The television camera moves in. Cameras flash.

ELIZABETH

Matt's had a hard life, that...

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

ELIZABETH:

But he was a good boy...

And bursts into uncontrolled sobbing. Her head is down and Matt's head is down. HENRY, Hiltons assistant, gets up, takes her by the arm and leads her out of the room. Prejean follows them. Hilton rises.

HILTON

My name is Hilton Barber and I am representing Mr. Poncelet. Matthew Poncelet's trial attorney had never handled a death penalty trial before. He was a tax lawyer, probably never opened a criminal law book in his life. Now, if Matt had himself some money he would have gotten himself a crackerjack lawyer, who would hire top-notch investigators, a ballistics expert, a psychologist to compile profiles of "desirable" jurors, and you can be sure he wouldn't be sitting on death row today. Two men were present when Walter LeClair and Hope Percy

were killed. One sits on death row the other serves a life term. Both men blame the other for the killing. No witnesses and no evidence conclusively points to Matthew Poncelet as the guilty party but he is to die and Carl Vitello will live. Think about that. And think about how arbitrary this whole process is.

A pause.

HILTON

The death penalty. What happens when you put someone to death?

INT. HALLWAY OUTSIDE PARDON ROOM. DAY.

Prejean holds Elizabeth in her arms and lets her sob.

ELIZABETH:

I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry...

PREJEAN

Nothing to be sorry about. You just let it go.

As she does, we hold on the two women as we hear:

HILTON(V.O.)

The current had been passing through his body for fifteen seconds when the electrode at the head was removed. Suddenly the breast heaved. There was a straining at the straps which bound him. A purplish foam covered the lips and was splattered over the leather head band. The man was alive. Warden, physician, guards...everybody lost their wits, There was a startled cry for the current to be turned on

again...An odor of burning flesh and singed hair filled the room, for a moment, a blue flame played upon the base of the victim's spine.

INT. PARDON BOARD HEARING ROOM. DAY.

HILTON

The hands turn red, then white, and the cords of the neck stand out like steel bands...The prisoners limbs, fingers, toes and face are severely contorted...The force of the electric current is so powerful that the prisoner's eyeballs sometimes pop out on his cheeks...

We see Matt listening.

HILTON

The prisoner often defecates, urinates, and vomits blood and drool...Sometimes the prisoner catches fire...There is a sound like bacon frying and the sickly sweet smell of burning flesh...when the post-electrocution autopsy is performed the liver is so hot that doctors said it cannot be touched by the human hand...The body frequently is badly burned.

A pause.

HILTON

The state of Louisiana does not have to kill Matthew Poncelet to protect its citizens; this man will work hard for the rest of his days at Angola. There is no possibility of parole for

this man. The courts have said so. Let us have dignity as a society. Let us not be complicit in the butchery of another human life.

Dostkoevsky, the Russian novelist, once said that societies will be judged in the long run not by how they treat their upstanding citizens, but by how they treat their criminals.

DISSOLVE TO:

PREJEAN

I ask you to consider if your own son or daughter had received the kind of defense Matt Poncelet received, would you not protest? I would hope so. As a body whose mandate is to dispense compassion, will you simply stand behind the court's decision and approve this death? The bureaucratic mechanism is designed to distance you from the killing about to take place. But mustn't everyone on this board take a personal responsibility for the role they are playing in the killing of this man if you uphold his death sentence?

MIRABEAU

Sister Prejean, the members of this Board have not made the death-penalty law, nor do they enforce it. They only offer a recommendation to the Governor and cannot be held responsible for anyone's execution.

PREJEAN

What would happen, Mr. Mirabeau, if each time a condemned man appeared before you, the members of this board began recommending life, not death? What if you shared with the Governor that you find the death penalty so morally troubling that you cannot bring yourself any longer to give your vote of approval to these executions? What would happen then, Mr. Mirabeau?

Some members are fidgety, rustling papers.

MIRABEAU

Let us hear the State present it's case.

As Prejean gets up to go back to her place:

MATT

Thank you, ma'am, for what you said.

Guy Gilardi, the DA approaches.

GILARDI

Ladies and gentlemen, Why does the state call for the electric chair in the case of Matthew Poncelet? Well, let's take a look.

He passes out pictures of the slain teenagers for the board members to see. We see them; horrible, graphic, bloody.

GILARDI

It is four years and five months since the brutal and reprehensible murders of Hope Percy and Walter LeClair and justice is long past due. Matt Poncelet has had a lengthy, thorough court review, not only

a trial but a retrial for sentencing, 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. These murders were cool and calculated, disgusting and cruel, and now it is time, way past time, for Mr. Poncelet to pay the consequences of his deed.

We see the mangled face of Walter LeClair.

GILARDI

If we don't carry out the death penalty in this case, what case will be appropriate?

We see Howard Mirabeau.

EXT. PARDON BOARD BUILDING. DAY.

In the bright white sunshine, clutches of people stand about on sidewalk. Prejean stands with Hilton.

HILTON

It's always a good sign when you have to wait.

PREJEAN

You did real well in there, Hilton. You ought to do this for a living.

HILTON

You know I don't think anyone on this board thinks he's innocent. Our only hope is that they realize their own culpability in the death of a man.

Earl LeClair approaches.

LECLAIR

I'm Walter LeClair's father.

PREJEAN

Mr. LeClair, I'm sorry about your son.

LECLAIR

Sister, I'm a Catholic. How can you present Matt Poncelet's side like this 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

I thought I would only add to your pain. I'm sorry.

The Percys approach.

LECLAIR

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

PREJEAN

Hello. I'm very sorry about your daughter.

CLYDE

So are we. Excuse us.

They leave. Earl remains. People have started to drift back into the hearing room.

LECLAIR

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 an evil man. This is a man who hung around bars with thieves and trashy people, who spouted obscenities, who stole, and who abducted teenage kids and raped and killed them. That scum robbed me of my name. My family name dies with me. No heir. There will be no more LeClairs, Sister.

Hilton approaches. Leclair leaves abruptly.

HILTON

Excuse me for interrupting.
Helen, the Board is back.

INT. HEARING ROOM. DAY.

Voices drop and there is a subdued stillness and silence as Board members take their places.

MIRABEAU

It is the finding of this Board that clemency be denied to Matthew Poncelet. Execution will be carried forth as scheduled four weeks hence.

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. Better yet we'll sic Sister Helen on him. Now chin up Matt, don't lose hope. This was a close one.

Matt is escorted out by guards. Guy Gilardi approaches Prejean and Hilton.

GILARDI

Even Christ didn't win' em all,
Sister.

EXT. PARDON BOARD BUILDING. DAY.

HILTON

Sister I want you to be realistic about this. We got a 1 in 20 chance something might go our way. Problem is the courts are making it very difficult to re-introduce re-try or re-anything. Matt's lawyers mistakes don't matter to the higher court. If the original trial attorney does not raise an issue or make an objection the first time around, the higher courts say the defendant has waved his/her rights to raise the issue later on.

PREJEAN

But can't you explain that it's the attorney's fault, not Matt's, that these issues weren't raised? Shouldn't the court be interested in the substance of the issues, not who raised them and when?

HILTON

All they're interested in is speeding up executions. Our clients might have the most substantial issue in the world - even new evidence of innocence - but the courts say, 'sorry, filed too late' and refuse to hear the case. We'll work our tails off on this one

and try every avenue. Don't lose hope but just know what we're up against.

Helen sees LeClair and moves towards him.

PREJEAN

Listen Mr. LeClair, I want you to know that even though I'm against the execution of Matt, I still care about you and your family and what happened to your son.

She takes out a pen and pad.

PREJEAN

This is my phone number please don't hesitate to call. Anything I can do to help you ease your pain I will do.

LECLAIR

Me call you? Think about that sister, think about how arrogant and self righteous that is. Excuse me.

He leaves. We hold on Prejean, stunned.

INT. PREJEANS MOTHERS HOUSE. NIGHT.

Prejean's mother, brother and Sister Colleen sit around a fire burning in the fireplace. Prejean is on the phone.

MOTHER

It was delightful. Margaret was sorry you couldn't come.

BROTHER

I'm sorry I couldn't be there. She must have been a beautiful bride.

MOTHER

She was. And the whole wedding was so exquisitely done. Sister

Colleen, would you care for
some more tea?

COLLEEN

No thank you.

Prejean puts the phone down on its cradle and comes into
the room.

PREJEAN

He won't answer his phone.

MOTHER

Who?

PREJEAN

Earl LeClair.

BROTHER

Who sent you the flowers, Mom?

MOTHER

They're from the garden.

COLLEEN

They're beautiful.

MOTHER

Who is Earl LeClair?

PREJEAN

The father of one of the kids
that got killed.

MOTHER

Killed by the man you are
friends with?

PREJEAN

Matt was there but he claims he
didn't kill them. Hopefully the
federal appeals court will
agree.

COLLEEN

Helen, we've got to start
thinking realistically about
funeral arrangements. If the

Federal Court turns us down, if the Governor doesn't grant a commutation, Matt will be killed in four weeks.

PREJEAN

He's asked not to be buried at the prison, says he'd like to have his name on a gravestone, not his inmate number, who can blame him?

COLLEEN

Maybe our sisters will donate one of their burial plots. I can check into that tomorrow.

PREJEAN

Thanks Colleen. And the prayer service. Matt is a Catholic. Maybe Bishop Cobb would be willing to celebrate the funeral mass. He's a kindred spirit. Someone should ask him. And clothes. What will we bury him in? We need a suit.

COLLEEN

I'll go to Goodwill. What size suit do you think he wears? How tall is he?

PREJEAN

He's a good six feet, and not thin. He's a big man.

COLLEEN

I'll take care of it.

There is a silence.

COLLEEN

Perhaps we won't need any of this.

INT. PRISON. DAY.

A press conference has been arranged for Matt. It is in full swing.

MATT

I come from a good family. My family's not to blame for nothin. I've had two families both of which 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 policies but he was on the right track about Aryans being the master race.

REPORTER

The right track? The murder of six million Jews?

INT. HOPE HOUSE. NIGHT.

Prejean and other nuns watch Matt Poncelet on the television.

MATT

That hasn't been proven.

PREJEAN

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

MATT

And don't you come on to me from no pure position neither. You're a U.S. taxpayer. Your government's been doing plenty of evil things themselves, and you're paying for it; trying to assassinate political enemies like Castro in Cuba, Allende in Chile, and the Sandinistas in Nicaragua through the Contras. I don't trust the U.S. government any further than I can throw 'em, man. They shouldn't be given power to execute nobody. They're too corrupt, man.

The phone rings. Prejean picks it up.

HILTON (V.O.)

We need you to come in for a strategy meeting.

INT. HILTON BARBER'S OFFICE. DAY.

Prejean, Hilton and his associates, Henry and NELLIE sit around a table. Everybody looks pretty ragged. Prejean has a bad cough from breathing in all the cigarette smoke. She sits by a window, distracted.

NELLIE

In an interview with the Times-Picayune, Poncelet says that if he had it to do all over again he would "do something useful like join a terrorist group and bomb government buildings." We've got to get him off this political prisoner kick.

HILTON

Henry, how close are we on the Supreme Court docket?

HENRY

A couple of days.

HILTON

We don't have a couple of days.

HENRY

Well we don't have the staff, Hilton.

HILTON

You've had it for three days. Where were you yesterday anyway?

HENRY

I had to take my kid to the dentist.

HILTON

A man is going to die on death row...

HENRY

...and my kid needed her daddy to hold her hand yes Hilton. If you don't like it find some other lawyer to pay the minimum wage to.

We see Prejean, thinking of something else, looking out the window, far away from the room.

INT. DEATH ROW. DAY.

TITLE: NOVEMBER 28.

Outside is another rainy day.

MATT

Third day in a row. Rain, rain, rain; not a good sign.

He sighs.

MATT

They've already executed one black - Walker, and tomorrow Taylor - two blacks. It was time for a white; the Governor was under pressure to get a white. And that's me.

Matt gets up and paces, looking for a sign of Taylor.

MATT

Hey nigger boy, gonna meet your maker tomorrow? Taylor, got a date with the reaper, boy. I hope they clean that chair before they put me in it.

A pause.

PREJEAN

You have to be one of the most bigoted, racist people I know.

MATT

I never have gotten on too good with niggers. Me and my cousin used to ride our bikes down the road and throw rocks at 'em and Sonny kept warnin' us that they were going to beat us up, and, sure enough, one time they waited their chance and got a hold of our bikes and tore 'em up.

PREJEAN

Can you blame them?

MATT

No, I suppose not. But listen, slavery's long over. They keep harpin' on what a bad deal they've had. I can't stand people that make themselves out to be the victims.

PREJEAN

I live in a black neighborhood
and I know a lot of decent,
hard working black people.

MATT

Well, I know a lot of lazy,
welfare taking black people,
sucking up tax dollars.

PREJEAN

Matt, have you ever been the
object of prejudice?

MATT

No.

PREJEAN

Well you are now.

MATT

How?

PREJEAN

You're a death row inmate.
People say you are monsters and
animals, lazy, good for nothing
drains on our tax dollars; bad
eggs without any socially
redeeming qualities.

MATT

I just don't like people who
act like victims. I like people
who put up a fight. And that
includes inmates, too. Some of
these sad-asses around here
won't lift a finger to stand up
for their rights or better
their conditions, so they get
what they deserve, in my
opinion. I think it was a great
moment when Martin Luther King
led his people and they marched
in the streets all the way to
the nation's capital and kicked
the white man's butt. I liked

seein' that. They didn't just lie down and moan 'racism, racism.' I wish they'd do more of that.

A pause.

PREJEAN

People are seeing these interviews and thinking that 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. I don't have any love for the U.S. government.

PREJEAN

You think violence is the solution?

MATT

It's the only language some people understand.

PREJEAN

And bombing buildings is going to change things?

MATT

It'll get the government's attention.

PREJEAN

That's a pure testosterone solution if ever I heard one.

MATT

They'll have to put a lot of money out to rebuild and money is all they understand.

PREJEAN

Well, Matt, you're giving everybody what they want. You're acting like a monster and a mad dog and all this crazy, hateful talk is going to do nothing but make it easier for people to say 'good riddance' when you're executed. "There he goes to the chair, that crazed animal that racist bigot Nazi, that terrorist. Thank God he's gonna die. He's not even human." Honestly, Matt, you're not helping yourself or anybody else on death row by saying things like that.

MATT

Well the truth hurts.

INT. CHAPEL. DAY.

Sister Prejean and the other nuns are singing a hymn. It is a liturgical meditation, not a performance. Over the hymn we see:

EXT. LOUISIANA HIGHWAY. DAY.

Prejean drives. We see Helen, in close. She is troubled. The shock radio jock, Purvis Slade rants:

SLADE (V.O.)

Oh please, don't kill him. He is a child of God, he deserves more, he is reformed, he's a poet. Blah blah blah. Bleeding heart blah blah blah.

Attention. All ye folks, ye advocates of killers and child molesters, ye opponents of the chair: ye cannot walk upon the high ground, ye do not have the moral authority to walk there.

Ye traverse with scum and scum
is where ye lay.'

The hymn continues as:

EXT. LECLAIR HOUSE. DAY.

Prejean approaches the door cautiously, waits, gathers her courage and rings the bell. She waits and as she is about to ring again, the door opens. Earl LeClair stands, disheveled, and slightly startled.

LECLAIR

What do you want?

PREJEAN

I'm sorry for coming here unannounced. I was afraid that if I called you, you wouldn't see me.

A pause as Earl sizes her up.

LECLAIR

Come in.

PREJEAN

Mr. LeClair, I've never counseled a death row inmate before and the truth is half the time I'm making it up as I go along. I realize that my behavior has been, that I've had tunnelvision on this. I got to thinking about why I haven't come to see you and I can rationalize and excuse but I guess the bottom line is that I have been afraid.

LECLAIR

Of what?

PREJEAN

I don't know. Your anger.

The house is in disarray. Picture frames lay on their face

on a mantle. There are half packed boxes around. Someone is moving.

LECLAIR

Sister, can I ask you a question? Are you a communist?

PREJEAN

(stunned)

A communist? No, Mr. LeClair, I am not a communist.

LECLAIR

I didn't think so. That's what some people are saying, with you defending this murderer, but I didn't think so. Sit down. Some coffee?

PREJEAN

No thanks.

LECLAIR

Sorry about the mess. My wife and I had a big fight last week. I got back from the pardon board hearing and she had taken 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's been through a lot.

LeClair has picked up a picture and hands it to Prejean. It is a color picture of Walter LeClair, young, smiling, full of life.

LECLAIR

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. Now she's ignoring it.

She's keeping it inside. She's been fierce, angry and I understand, you know. I grieve for Walter but I also grieve for her and us. 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.

EXT. ANGOLA PRISON. NIGHT.

We see protesters and supporters of the death penalty. People carry signs, e.g. "Teach em about Jesus and then fry em". The electronic media is there. Reporters mill about. Prejean is there with other sisters.

SUPPORTER

"Whoever doth shed blood shall have his blood shed." Read your bible. It's right there.

The supporters of the death penalty begin a countdown, as if this were New Years Eve at midnight. When they reach zero, nothing happens, a pause. The sisters begin to pray. People begin to mill about, a restless silence and then: The exterior lights of the prison dim slightly. The execution has been carried through. Applause from the supporters, cheers, hoots, catcalls.

EXT. ANGOLA PRISON. NIGHT.

Some time later, the crowd has thinned out. Clyde Percy is being interviewed.

CLYDE

It's the only way we can be sure they will never kill again. Life without parole, sure, but how many prison guards, other prisoners will they kill. These are maddogs, psychos.

The gates to the prison begin to open. A white prison van is behind it. As Prejean moves toward the van we see a

Sister getting out of it being supported by the other sisters. Also, a curious thing; Prejean passes the prison guard, Trapp, and as she passes him she sees tears in his eyes.

INT. MOVING CAR. NIGHT.

Prejean sits in the backseat next to Colleen. No one in the car says anything, the silence speaks volumes. Colleen begins to sing "Be Not Afraid." We see the faces of the other nuns in the car. Warriors with wounds that have no time to convalesce. They'll be back at it tomorrow.

INT. DEATH ROW. DAY.

TITLE: DECEMBER 11.

PREJEAN

Matt, have you thought at all about these two kids who got killed? Or their parents?

MATT

I want to take a lie detector test.

PREJEAN

What?

MATT

A lie detector test. It's not going to change any of these guys' minds, but I would like my mama to know the truth. I would like them to know that I didn't rape that girl or kill her.

PREJEAN

I'll see what I can do. I don't know if they'll let us bring a polygraph machine in here but I'll ask.

MATT

I'd sure appreciate it.

There is a pause.

PREJEAN

Are you reading your bible?

MATT

Yes ma'am.

PREJEAN

Like W.C. Fields read his Bible?

MATT

Who?

PREJEAN

W.C. Fields was a famous comedian, used to play this drunken character in the movies. He claimed he read the Bible daily. A friend, who knew him was kind of skeptical about the claim, he asked him one day: "You read the Bible every day, Bill?" And Fields replied: "Yep, looking for loopholes."

Matt smiles.

MATT

No, it's not loopholes I'm looking for. I read my Bible late at night when things settle down. I never got much religion growing up but I know this: I know Jesus died for us on the cross and will take care of me when I appear before God on judgement day.

PREJEAN

You may want to check out some words of Jesus that might have special 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.

We hold on Prejean.

INT. PERCY HOUSE. DAY.

Prejean, Clyde and Marybeth sit in comfortable chairs in the front living room. Hope's graduation picture hangs on the living room wall. The Percys seem eager to talk. Marybeth, calm, her voice without emotion as though describing someone else's tragedy, Clyde more emotional.

MARYBETH

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

CLYDE

She was hoping to be stationed overseas, wanted to study a foreign language.

MARYBETH

On June 15th a recruiting sergeant was going to meet Hope at her apartment and drive her to New Orleans 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, a case for her contact lens, medicine for menstrual cramps.

CLYDE

At about five in the evening, Hope left to go to work at Bossier's where she waitressed.

MARYBETH

As she was leaving I noticed one of her sandals was ripped, the right one, and I told her to change them and she said she was late and couldn't and she was out the door.

INT. COURT ROOM. DAY - FLASHBACK.

We are close on the sandals in a cellophane bag. On the bag it says: State's Exhibit 10. We pull out to see the bag in the hand of the prosecutor.

MARYBETH

Yes, that is them.

The bag is placed down on a table next to a purse, a blue skirt, a blue blouse, a driver's license, a ring, a medallion, a Timex watch with a blue face.

MARYBETH(V.O.)

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.

INT. PERCY HOUSE. DAY.

MARYBETH

My last words to her - the last she ever heard from me - were about sandals.

CLYDE

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

INT. HOPE'S APARTMENT. DAY - FLASHBACK.

An empty apartment, the phone ringing.

MARYBETH(V.O.)

We called her apartment, it wasn't like her to be late. We tried again and finally we went over there.

The phone stops ringing and the door opens. Clyde and Marybeth enter.

MARYBETH(V.O.)

It was empty. Her bed was still neatly made.

We are close on Marybeth and Clyde.

INT. PERCY HOUSE. DAY.

We are close on Helen.

MARYBETH

Clyde went to the police. I began calling all her friends. It was strange that she did not call me. She would always telephone me and tell me where she was. I kept telephoning her friends one by one. I just couldn't accept that I didn't know where she was. When she didn't appear by 3 o'clock I called the recruiting sergeant. He had been by her apartment twice.

CLYDE

I filed a missing persons report. Two days passed. The Sheriff's office finally formed a search party. I went with them.

EXT. LOUISIANA WOODS. DAY - FLASHBACK.

We see a search party looking through the woods, dogs sniffing. Clyde is with them.

CLYDE (V.O.)

On Sunday, June 19th - a family picnicking near Flank's Cave in a remote wilderness found a purse, clothes, and a wallet, and handed them over to police. A friend of ours called us to tell us that they had heard that some of Hope's things had been found.

INT. PERCY HOUSE. DAY.

We are close on a picture of Hope.

MARYBETH

We got that information from our own resources, not from the police. They never called up. We called them.

CLYDE

They found the body on Wednesday, eight days after her disappearance.

MARYBETH

She had been shot in the back of the head at close range and stabbed 17 times in the neck and upper chest.

EXT. FLANK'S CAVE. TWILIGHT - FLASHBACK.

Men in masks surround the pale, stiff body of Hope Percy.

INT. PERCY HOUSE. DAY.

Clyde is crying now. Marybeth, recounting the gruesome details, does not cry.

MARYBETH

My daughter's body was nude, supine, legs spread-eagled. The coroner's report said her vagina was all tore up.

Clyde can't stop crying. Prejean is now crying.

MARYBETH

At first they couldn't find the graduation medallion around her neck because it was embedded so deep from the stabbing. She had been so proud of that medallion. She wore it all the time. It said: "Class of '90, Dawn of a New Decade."

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 circumstantial evidence of the clothes nearby, they only thought it was Hope? I had to be sure. I called my brother in Richmond, 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.

CLYDE

The electric chair is too good
for Matt Poncelet. Hope didn't
know the animals she was
dealing with.

LIZABETH, the 14 yr. old daughter of Clyde and Marybeth,
dashes into living room. She leans close to her mother and
whispers something.

MARYBETH

Sue Ellen, this is Sister
Prejean.

SUE ELLEN

Hello.

PREJEAN

Nice to meet you, Sue Ellen.

SUE ELLEN

OK.

She bounds out of the room. Inside, darkness has been
slowly seeping into the room. Marybeth gets up and turns on
a lamp.

MARYBETH

Let's go to the kitchen and
.I'll make us some coffee.

INT. COURTHOUSE HALLWAY. DAY - FLASHBACK.

CLYDE (V.O.)

Matt and I met face to face in
the hallway during the trial.

We see Matt Poncelet, in handcuffs, being led by Sheriff's
deputies.

MATT

I ain't going to the chair,
daddy.

CLYDE

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

INT. PERCY KITCHEN. NIGHT.

Marybeth is pouring coffee into cups. There is a pause.

PREJEAN

As you know I am Matt
Poncelet's spiritual adviser.
I'm going to be with him when
he goes to the chair.

MARYBETH

How can you do that? How can
you sit next to that scum?

PREJEAN

I don't know. I struggle with
it. But in my faith every soul
can reach redemption, every
man, no matter what he does,
can be better than his worst
sin.

CLYDE

This is not a man. This is an
animal. No, I take that back.
Animals don't rape and kill
their own kind. Matt Poncelet
is God's mistake. Frying on the
electric chair is the least of
the frying he's about to do
when God sends him to hell
where he belongs.

He jabs his finger downward.

EXT. LOUISIANA HIGHWAY. DAY.

Prejean drives, tears in her eyes, overcome by the mixed
messages and conflicting emotions she is feeling.

INT. DEATH HOUSE ENTRANCE AREA. DAY.

GUARD

Empty your pockets.

He runs a metal detector over her body.

A GUARD sits on a metal folding chair. He has a fresh-scrubbed baby face and wears a .357 Magnum strapped to his side.

INT. DEATH HOUSE. DAY.

Prejean looks around. Straight ahead are the two small offices. One, the major's office with a desk, telephone and filing cabinet; the other, a place where there is a coffee percolator, some cabinets, a long table and chairs. To the left is a visitor room, rather large. You can see it through the glass panel which separates it from the foyer. In it are several tables and chairs and a drink machine. To the extreme left of the visitor room is a WHITE METAL DOOR with a window. This door is always locked. Behind it is the electric chair. Everything is very clean. The tile floors are highly polished. The paint on the walls looks fresh. She turns to her right, stepping out of the foyer into a small hallway. Straight ahead through the glass exit door she sees a cement walkway and the buildings of Camp F. Brown sparrows hop on the walkway outside exit door. To the right of the exit door is a WHITE METAL DOOR with a window of heavy mesh screen that leads onto the tier. Matt sits behind it with his hands and feet shackled. And beyond him, there is a row of four cells. A guard stands at the end of the row watching. There is a TV set on a metal can on the floor opposite the first cell, where Matt sits on a plastic chair watching. Everything is painted green. The floor is unpainted cement. On the wall next to Matt's cell is a telephone from which he is allowed to make collect calls.

INT. DEATH HOUSE VISITING ROOM. DAY.

TITLE: DECEMBER 16.

PREJEAN

I brought your Christmas cards.
They're checking them to make

sure I didn't smuggle you in a knife.

Matt is silent.

PREJEAN

I talked to your mother this morning. She's pretty shook up. She would like to come see you.

Matt whispers.

MATT

You know I got two days left. I've been thinking a lot about the end. I've had a pretty fulfilled life - women, drugs, travel, rock and roll, school, football - about everything there is. I'm looking death in the eyes. I'm coming to terms with it. I'm getting ready to go. But my mother, I don't know what I'll do if she starts crying and breaking down.

PREJEAN

You don't always have to be this tough Marlboro Man. Real men cry, you know.

Matt looks down.

PREJEAN

There's another mother who's suffering, Matt. Marybeth Percy. She and Hope were very close. They used to talk to each other almost every night on the phone. They used to go shopping together. She had her brother come to dig her daughter's jaw out of a body bag to do a dental check before she could accept that this daughter, whom she loved so much, was really dead. And she

will live every day of her life knowing that her daughter died a terrible death - and alone. And, Hope - have you ever really faced her pain, felt it, taken it inside yourself? Or Walter? I'm saying all this to you because I care about you and I just can't see you going to your death and not owning up to the part you played in Hope and Walter's death.

MATT

It's terrible what happened to those kids. But it's hard, ma'am, to be having much sympathy for their parents when, here, they're trying to kill me. When somebody's after your hide, it tends to occupy your mind, if you know what I mean.

PREJEAN

Look what these parents are going through. Their kids shot, stabbed and left to die in the woods. What if someone did that to your mother? What would you do to them?

MATT

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

INT. CHAPLAIN FARLEY'S OFFICE. DAY.

Prejean is waiting for Farley's arrival. Sgt. Trapp, the man she saw outside the gates the night of the last execution approaches her.

TRAPP

Sister Helen, Chaplain Farley called. He's at the gate. He'll be right here.

PREJEAN

Thanks, Mr. Trapp.

TRAPP

Neal.

Trapp delays at the door, as if he wants to say something.

PREJEAN

I saw you outside the gates the night of Taylor's execution.

TRAPP

Yes.

PREJEAN

You seemed upset.

TRAPP

Upset? No.

PREJEAN

Were you inside the chamber when they did it?

TRAPP

I'm on the strap down team. We take the prisoner from his cell into the execution chamber.

PREJEAN

Wow. That's gotta be a tough job.

TRAPP

It was.....hard. I got home that night and couldn't sleep. Just sat in the chair all night. I think this thing affects everybody that sees it, whether you're for it or against it. But, you know, it's part of the job.

Farley enters.

FARLEY

Trying to convert Sgt. Trapp to your cause? I'm sorry I'm late.

INT. FARLEY'S OFFICE. DAY.

Farley tidies his desk as he talks.

FARLEY

It's very easy for someone to come in from outside and make a rash judgement on procedure. Procedure is established by years and years of experience. What may appear on the surface to be irrational or unnecessary proves upon examination to have solid reasoning behind it.

PREJEAN

I'm just asking to play a hymn to 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 to preview the tape of music and make a judgement?

FARLEY

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

PREJEAN

Well thank you for your time, father.

Prejean stands and as she stands begins to sway and SHE FAINTS.

INT. PRISON HOSPITAL CORRIDOR. DAY.

From Prejean's point of view we see a nurse, Farley and Beliveau hovering above her.

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 just stay right there young lady.

PREJEAN

I haven't eaten anything. I'm sure I'm OK.

INT. PRISON HOSPITAL. DAY.

The nurse is monitoring an EKG.

PREJEAN

I was supposed to go back into Matt. Please tell Matt what happened, he'll be worried.

NURSE

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

The nurse looks at the EKG monitor

NURSE

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

PREJEAN

I'm just hungry. They don't let visitors eat in the death

house. They must think we're bromeliads and can feed off the air.

The nurse begins to detach the EKG.

PREJEAN

Is this machine used after an execution?

NURSE

Unfortunately the very same. We just have to be official about the whole thing, you know. You learn how to deal with it. I wear noseplugs now. I got nauseous the first time, the smell of burnt flesh. It's an ugly business. Let's get you up and get some food in your stomach.

INT. PREJEAN APARTMENT. NIGHT.

Prejean and Colleen sit in Prejean's spare apartment.

COLLEEN

You're burning the candle at both ends. I know you're doing everything you can with the attorneys and the others to save this man from dying; but as his spiritual adviser you're the one who has to help him die. Don't be so absorbed in fighting for him to live that you don't help him die.

A pause.

COLLEEN

Has he owned up to anything?

PREJEAN

No. He denies it. He wants a lie detector test.

COLLEEN

Well you got your work cut out for you.

A pause.

COLLEEN

I talked to Bishop Cobb. He said he would say the funeral mass. The leaders of the order have met and we can probably use one of our own burial plots. I also found a funeral home willing to donate their services. I haven't had time to go to Goodwill and get a suit to bury him in.

PREJEAN

It's all so surreal, planning for his death. If he had cancer or AIDS and he was fading away-but he's so fully alive.

COLLEEN

And we're picking suits to bury him in. I know. How'd we ever get involved with this stuff anyway?

PREJEAN

Remember the good ole days when you could pray for people and go teach and come back to the convent for 4 o'clock prayers?

COLLEEN

No.

INT. WARDEN HARTMAN'S OFFICE, ANGOLA PRISON. DAY.

TITLE: DECEMBER 17.

Prejean talks with WARDEN HARTMAN, a short, stocky man in his early 60's with a square face and a thick gray mustache. He is smoking a cigar. She sits in one of the

leather chairs opposite him and he behind his desk. 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

That I am too emotionally involved with Matthew Poncelet and unable to fulfill my function as spiritual adviser?

HARTMAN

That's right. And so emotionally distraught that you fainted in the death house and caused a lot of commotion for the personnel.

PREJEAN

It's because ya'll have a rule that visitors can't eat in the death house. I have to go without food all day. I fainted because of hunger not because I was emotionally distraught.

HARTMAN

Listen, sister, I take my responsibility as warden very seriously. I certainly don't relish having to carry out executions, but it comes with the job. And 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. I take pride

in the fact that when I became warden here I initiated a seminar for death-row inmates to be conducted by a top-notch Christian preacher. This man Farley is perfectly capable of administering sound spiritual counsel to these men.

PREJEAN

No doubt. But sir, the way I understand it, the Constitution provides a prisoner with the right to a spiritual adviser of his choice. Is that correct?

HARTMAN

Yes it is.

PREJEAN

And in some cases, as in Matt's, for whatever reasons, the inmate may not trust the chaplain employed by the prison.

HARTMAN

Is that the case with Matthew Poncelet?

PREJEAN

It appears to be.

HARTMAN

Well, according to the Constitution we can bar a spiritual adviser from the prison if we deem them a threat to prison security.

PREJEAN

I am, as you know, opposed to the death penalty, and when I leave this prison I work for its abolition, but inside this prison I abide by your rules. I never bring contraband in or

take contraband out. I am not a threat to prison security.

As she says this, he is looking at her and listening, taking long, slow puffs on his cigar. 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 with your visits. Just be sure to eat.

PREJEAN

Just be sure you feed me.

INT. DEATH HOUSE. DAY.

Entering, Prejean hears the television near Matt's cell. A basketball game is on. As she approaches the visitor door, she sees that the GUARD stationed to watch Matt has moved down closer to the TV to catch a critical play. A moment of silence, a play, the two men cheer. Then the GUARD moves back to the end of the tier and resumes his position. Matt is anxious.

MATT

Are you all right?

PREJEAN

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

MATT

I thought you had a heart attack. I thought I was going to have to go through this by myself. Please, please take care of yourself. I kept asking them here what happened but they wouldn't tell me nothin.

PREJEAN

Well, I appreciate your concern. So how you doing?

MATT

I'm holding up. Reading letters from all my pen pals. I got one here from a fella named Mark. It's a good thing we don't have hanging as a method of execution here in Louisiana, or Mark would feel bad, because look what he says in his letter: 'hang in there.'

He 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.

PREJEAN

Hilton is working real hard to prevent that from happening. We should know about the federal appeal real soon and Hilton and I have an appointment to see the Governor this evening.

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

Wow. Quick work. You're something else, sister.

PREJEAN

Now, the man that runs the polygraph test has serious doubts that they will 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 all the test does is measure stress. The test often mistakes stress for dishonesty.

MATT

Not a problem. I'm home free. This is great. I wonder what would have happened if they had let me take this test after I was arrested like I asked them to. I know they couldn't have used the results in court or nothin', but doubt, that's what I was after. If the D.A. had doubts, maybe he would have offered me a plea.

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 tomorrow 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. I don't believe in being chummy with the guards who'll be helping to kill me. Not me. I'm only talking to those people when I have to. I don't need no favors from them people. No way. Or that Chaplain either. He came by this morning started talking bad about you said maybe I'd prefer him instead to be there with me on the day in the death house, and I said to him, 'Look, man, you get your paycheck from these people, you work for these people, and you go along with the death penalty. I don't particularly need your kind of help, man'.

PREJEAN

It's hard to resist policies of an organization when you're on its payroll.

MATT

Like biting the hand that feeds you.

PREJEAN

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'm ready to go if it comes down.

PREJEAN

Matt, you don't have to put up a front with me. Be honest. I wouldn't think any less of you as a man if you told me you were scared.

MATT

Sure I'm scared. Everybody's scared of dying. But I'm not going to act like some crying baby. I'd lose control.

Matt shivers, starts.

MATT

If only I knew I'd die right away when the first jolt hits me. Will I feel it? They say the body burns. My poor mother...

PREJEAN

If you die, I will be with you.

MATT

Watching? No, I don't want you there, to see that. It could break you. It could scar you for life.

PREJEAN

I'm pretty tough, Mr. Marlboro Man. It won't break me. I have plenty of love and support in my life. God will give me the grace.

A pause.

MATT

You know, I've never known real love, never loved women or anybody all that well myself. It's a shame a man has to come to prison to find love.

He looks directly at Prejean.

MATT

Thanks for loving me.

There is a pause.

PREJEAN

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

We hold on Matt.

INT. SCHOOL AUDITORIUM. NIGHT.

Prejean sits next to Earl LeClair. They are at a victim's support group meeting. We stay on a two shot of them as we hear overlapping voices.

VOICE

My 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. Her little skiing outfit is still in the closet. I can't give it away.

The camera moves in towards Prejean.

VOICE

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.

Now we are tight on Prejean.

VOICE

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...

VOICE

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 ya'll write to Ann Landers? She helps people."

Now we see at the podium, Earl LeClair.

LECLAIR

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.

We see Prejean, in tight, moved.

LECLAIR

My wife and I are getting a separation. We just have different ways of dealing with

our son's death. She wants to get rid of all his clothes. I want to keep them. She says she has to move on in her life and I'm still grieving. "Until death do us part" has new meaning for me.

We start tight on Prejean. The camera begins to pull back. Again we hear an overlapping of voices:

VOICE.

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 is buried in the ground and dead forever. Six years is nothing. This isn't justice. My husband and I are planning to attend the parole hearing.

As we pull out we see Earl LeClair, once again next to Prejean. She has her arm around him in support. He is weeping.

VOICE

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.

EXT. AUDITORIUM. NIGHT.

The meeting over, Prejean walks with LeClair in the parking lot.

LECLAIR

We're nothing special. Most folks that lose a kid split up. About 70%. I just wish we could laugh, find something funny. I watch the TV and I hear people laughing at stuff, but I don't

get it. It's a haze. This is my car. Thanks for coming.

PREJEAN

Thanks for having me. I've learned a lot tonight. We've got work to do.

LECLAIR

Work?

PREJEAN

Help for victim's families; support groups. Victim's rights. Someone's got to do some agitating. More people have got to know what's going on.

LECLAIR

You sure you're not a Communist?

PREJEAN

Heavens no. You can't agitate in Russia. They'd lock you up. I'm just a free Christian.

LECLAIR

You take care sister.

PREJEAN

Drive safely, Mr. LeClair.

INT. GOVERNOR'S MANSION. EVENING.

Hilton, Prejean, and Bishop Cobb walk down a corridor, following a GUIDE.

HILTON

From what I know of Peterson, he's a reluctant supporter of capital punishment, and with the election over the political pressure to kill criminals is less. No doubt about it, he has

the power to save this man's life. The last vestige of the right of kings. He can commute the death sentence to life or he can grant a reprieve, which is only temporary, but it will keep Matt from dying. 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.

They are directed into A LARGE ROOM where there are TV CAMERAS, BRIGHT LIGHTS, REPORTERS, A LONG CONFERENCE TABLE.

PREJEAN

What is happening?

HILTON

I don't know. I can't imagine this is for us.

The guide shows the three to seats at the conference table. The Governor is in mid-sentence.

PETERSON

...with the Catholic Bishops clearing up a little misunderstanding about my position on the resurrection of Christ. Unfortunately I was misquoted on the subject by a member of your esteemed profession and I am happy to say that our meeting this morning has cleared up this matter of the resurrection.

The PRESS chuckles.

PETERSON

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?

HILTON

Yes well, uh... Matt Poncelet had inadequate counsel.....

DISSOLVE TO

BISHOP COBB

....the death penalty is a simplistic solution to a complex moral issue; that executions signal to society that violence is an acceptable way of dealing with human problems.....

DISSOLVE TO.

PREJEAN

.....he could be a productive prisoner in Angola, serving a life sentence. What will be accomplished by killing him?

DISSOLVE TO

PETERSON

....to encourage you to introduce legislation to abolish the death penalty. Now is a good time because there have been two executions in recent months and maybe the public could be persuaded that the death penalty does not deter crime. 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. And I'm hesitant to express my own views on the subject, because it can end up like this

resurrection controversy. 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.

He moves to collect his papers. Television lights are being shut off. Some are beginning to rise and move from the table.

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.

Peterson a deft politician, immediately looks concerned.

PETERSON

Can you do that? Can you watch that?

PREJEAN

I promised him. Governor, Matt Poncelet had terribly ineffective legal defense. Had he had money for decent representation he would not be scheduled to die tomorrow. We have two systems of justice in this state. One for the rich and one for the poor.

PETERSON

I'll give the case careful consideration.

PREJEAN

You can spare him. You can prevent this death.

PETERSON

I will look into the matter.

And he is gone.

EXT. GOVERNOR'S MANSION. DAY.

Hilton and Prejean walk in silence.

They have reached their car.

HILTON

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

Prejean sees something. It is Howard Mirabeau getting out
of his car. Prejean approaches him.

PREJEAN

Mr. Mirabeau.

MIRABEAU

Yes?

PREJEAN

Sister Prejean. We met at Matt
Poncelet's pardon board
hearing.

MIRABEAU

Yes.

PREJEAN

Matt is going to die tomorrow.
I wonder if you might come.

MIRABEAU

Come?

PREJEAN

Yes, come, to watch, to see.

MIRABEAU

Are you trying to be cruel?

PREJEAN

Not at all.

MIRABEAU

Sister, I am well aware of the brutal nature of execution. I am not at all happy that this man is going to die tomorrow. I voted for reversal, for your information, but I was outvoted.

PREJEAN

You have voted for reversal on the last three executions.

MIRABEAU

I am the requisite conscience. But the cards are stacked sister, if you haven't already guessed. The other members of the board are never going to change their votes. It was set up that way. At first I thought I could change their minds, I thought I could make a difference. But we are a puppet court, sister. We exist to make sure that executions go forward. When we convene in the back room we hardly even talk any more.

INT. PREJEAN'S MOTHER'S HOUSE. NIGHT.

Prejean lays in a bedroom. We hear sounds from the other room. Her name is being called, once, twice. She is being called to dinner. She gets up from the cot, walks down a hallway, comes into a dining room with a round table. Her mother is there as are her sister, brother, Sister Colleen, Hilton Barber and...Matt Poncelet. Matt is dressed in a red and black plaid shirt and is smiling. Prejean turns around and at the end of the long hallway she has just walked through we see an electric chair with blinking Christmas tree lights upon it. We then are close on Prejean back in the cot, waking up from this dream. Her mother is there.

MOTHER

Helen, you OK?

PREJEAN

Just dreaming.

MOTHER

This work you've been doing?

PREJEAN

Mama, a man is going to die in front of my eyes tomorrow. Am I going to have the strength to see that?

MOTHER

Well, you're a pretty tough kid.

INT. DEATH HOUSE. DAY.

TITLE: EXECUTION DAY: :9 A.M.

Matt is in the middle of a tirade.

MATT

I didn't sleep last night. I wouldn't take that nerve medicine they tried to give me. I'm angry. I'm angry at those kids for being parked out in the woods. I'm angry that their parents are coming to watch me die. I'm angry at myself for letting Vitello mess over those kids. I'll have a chance to say my last words, and I'm going to tell Percy and LeClair a thing or two. Especially Percy. I've heard he's been telling people that he wishes he could pull the switch himself.

Prejean moves close to the metal door. She puts her hands up to the mesh screen.

PREJEAN

Your choice - if you want your last words to be words of hate. I can understand why you would hate someone that was coming to watch you die. But there's another part of you too, a part of you that wants not to be shriveled up by hate, a part of you that wants to die a free and loving man. I'm not saying it's easy, but it's possible and it's up to you.

He's hunched over in his chair, his elbows on his knees, smoking and thinking.

PREJEAN

Think about how angry Walter and Hope's parents are. Never able to see their kids again, never able to hug them, love them, laugh with them. You've robbed them of that, Matt. There is no joy in their lives. Only bitter resentment and sadness. In a way, Matt, they're on a kind of death row too, for the rest of their lives.

We hold on Matt.

INT. BELIVEAU'S OFFICE. DAY.

Prejean on the phone. Matt is taking the polygraph test. We do not hear the questions and answers or see the needle on the machine.

PREJEAN

Any word from the Fifth Circuit?

HILTON (V.O.)

None yet. A good sign. They've had it a good while now and maybe that means they see

something substantive in the petition.

INT. DEATH HOUSE. DAY.

Matt's mother Elizabeth and her three sons, Matt's stepbrothers, MITCH, TROY and JIM are sitting in folding metal chairs by the white metal door. Mitch and Troy sit closest to the door. Elizabeth and Jim sit behind. They are handsome, healthy-looking kids. Mitch, 18, the oldest, is the one keeping the 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. It's 4:10.

MATT

She sounds like a great little lady.

JIM

She ain't so little.

MATT

You take care of her, Mickey. 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! That's it. She was hot.

MATT

She was a nasty one, boy.

ELIZABETH

Matthew!

MATT

Sorry, Mom. Madrigal was a fine upstanding young woman.

Mitch laughs.

MATT

So what about you, Troy. You got a lil' 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.

ELIZABETH

Troy just got a new tent.

MATT

What kind of tent you got?

TROY

Got a army canvas number. I don't like those sissy designer tents. I got it for my birthday.

JIM

Tell Matt about the other night
in the backyard.

The others laugh.

MITCH

Camping in the backyard.

ELIZABETH

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

Troy stands up near the door and moves his fingers up and
down the mesh screen.

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 and about
midnight we heard some kind of
animal prowling around and
making noises - a strange
animal. It was big and nasty.

Everyone laughs.

MATT

Which is it? Did you come
inside because of your mother
or because you were 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.

ELIZABETH

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

Another silence.

INT. DEATH ROW. DAY.

Prejean waits outside of the visiting room, taking a break, looking overwhelmed. The guard, Trapp, approaches her.

TRAPP

Sister, can I talk to you?

PREJEAN

Sure thing, Sgt. Trapp.

TRAPP

Not here.

INT. GUARDS OFFICE. DAY.

Trapp sits with Prejean. He whispers. This is a troubled man. As he talks we hear through a small speaker in the room, Matt and his family carrying on a sparse conversation.

TRAPP

I've been through two of these executions and I can't eat, I can't sleep. I'm dreaming about executions. I don't condone these guys crimes. I know they've done terrible things. I don't excuse what they've done, but hell, what are we doing? Frank Walker was a little boy. He looked like a man and he killed like a man, but inside he was just this stupid confused little boy. He shit himself when we came to get him. He whimpered like a baby. He said "Please don't. I'm sorry. I'm sorry." After he was

dead I had to pack his possessions to send to his family. He had drawn a picture of heaven to send to his niece. "Me in heaven" it said, in a third graders scrawl with a little stick figure sitting on a cloud, waving.

A pause.

TRAPP

Look, no matter what reasons you give to justify killing criminals, when you're there and you see it, when you're part of it, you feel dirty. You're killing a man who can't defend himself and that is just as wrong as what he did.

PREJEAN

You can't rationalize like the others. You've got to change your job. Can you do that?

TRAPP

I've put in for a transfer. I'm sorry to talk your ear off, I just can't really talk about this with people around here.

PREJEAN

I respect you Sgt. Trapp. You have a tremendous amount of courage to allow yourself to feel compassion in this place, in this job. I'll pray that you follow where you heart and conscience lead.

INT. DEATH HOUSE. DAY.

We are in the middle of an interminable silence. Prejean is back in the room and everyone is talked out. 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 5:45.

HARTMAN

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

Matt stands up.

MATT

Listen, I've collected my stuff in two pillow-cases and I'd feel better if you guys took my stuff home with you now. I don't want the prison sending it later.

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 bag and hands them to Captain Beliveau.

MATT

This is all my stuff here. Mitch, ya'll can see about dividin' it up. Except my boots from Marion. I'm gonna walk to the chair in them boots. No cryin' now. I don't want no cryin'. I'm not tellin' ya'll good-bye yet. I'll call you tonight.

Prejean says quietly to Hartman:

PREJEAN

Would it be possible for them
to hug him goodbye?

Hartman shakes his head "no".

HARTMAN

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 Elizabeth are moving towards the foyer. Elizabeth keeps jabbing a Kleenex to her eyes.

ELIZABETH

We love you, Matthew.

MATT

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

Prejean puts her arm around Elizabeth and walks her to the front door.

PREJEAN

He's OK, Elizabeth. He's
strong, has a lot of spunk, a
lot of inner strength.

ELIZABETH

I know. I know. He's stronger
than any of us.

Prejean watches through the front glass door as the boys and Elizabeth get into the van. As they are driving away, one of the little boys waves bye to her. Mitch has his arm around his mother's shoulders. She has her head in her hands. Prejean goes back to the white door. Matt is standing there and taking slow drags from his cigarette.

MATT

I'm goin' out with my boots on,
and if it ain't too much

trouble for you, ma'am, I'd
sure appreciate being buried in
these boots.

She folds up all the chairs but her own. It is darkening
outside. The fluorescent lights have been turned on.

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 at ease answering all the
questions. I didn't feel no
stress at all. Man! I can't
believe I failed that test.

PREJEAN

Culp didn't say you failed the
test. He said that your
responses registered stress,
which may in normal
circumstances be associated
with lying, but here, facing
death like this, who wouldn't
show stress? Matt, you'd have
to be a robot or insane not to
feel stress now. Don't let it
worry you.

A pause.

MATT

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

PREJEAN

Stop it Matt. Stop holding on
to that. Let's talk about what

happened. Let's talk about that night.

EXT. LOUISIANA WOODS. NIGHT - FLASHBACK.

We see, facing camera the kneeling bodies of Walter LeClair and Hope Percy. They are terrified. Hope's shirt is ripped her breasts exposed. She is weeping. A gun enters frame, pointed at the head of Walter. We whip pan as the shot is fired and are now tight on Hope's face, paralyzed with fear.

INT. DEATH HOUSE. NIGHT.

TITLE: 6:00 P.M.

We are tight on Prejean, disturbed.

PREJEAN

What possessed you to be there in those woods?

MATT

I told you I was stoned out of my head.

PREJEAN

Don't blame the drugs, Matt. Why were you there?

MATT

What do you mean?

PREJEAN

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 have walked away.

MATT

He was a psycho.

PREJEAN

Stop blaming him. You blame him, you blame the government, you blame the Percys, you blame the blacks. What about Matthew Poncelet? Where is he in this story? Just an innocent? A victim?

Matt gives her an intense, hard look. He is about to speak when:

Captain Beliveau, Sgt. Trapp, and Warden Hartman appear with trays of food. A guard places three trays of fried shrimp, oysters, and fish, fried potatoes, and salad on three chairs in front of him. Matt remains by the door with the handcuffs on but detached from the leather belt. Beliveau serves Prejean a tray of beef stew and corn, but the sight of it brings nausea. Instead, she takes a tiny sip of iced tea. Matt sits and begins to eat.

MATT

When we got the house my family has now, I had my own room and Sonny, that's my stepfather, said I could decorate in any way I wanted to, so I was hammering away, putting up my rebel flag on the wall, when Sonny opened the door and said, 'but no putting nails in the wall.' Sonny had a big thing about working for what you wanted and not expecting it to just be handed to you. When I was fifteen Sonny bought me a lawn mower so I could get jobs cutting lawns. He'd pay me a dollar to cut our lawn. That would give me twenty-five cents to get into the football game and seventy-five cents to spend.

He pauses momentarily to swallow. From Prejeans point of view we see the pale forms of two bodies, Walter LeClair

and Hope Percy, sitting behind Matt. They are alive yet still, emotionless, yet focused.

MATT

I could never hold a job long. I'd get a job, make some money, then stop working so I could enjoy the money I had earned. I drove trucks, worked on barges, grew marijuana and sold it. Working on that barge, that was dangerous work. Good money, but our lives didn't mean a thing to those bosses. I saw a guy cut in half once. This cable snapped, whipped around and whack, split him in two. Right at the waist, it cut him in two like a knife and his waist and legs dropped into the water, and he just looked down and died. I think the shock killed him, watching half of his body drop into the water like that....Man! I can't believe I didn't pass that lie-detector test. I wish I had been able to take the test sooner before I came in here.

Walter and Hope are no longer there. The PHONE RINGS. Through the door we see Captain Beliveau answer the phone. 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 Fifth Circuit turned you down.

MATT

Well, Warden, I won the last round, and it looks like you're winning this one.

He waves his spoon in the air and points it towards his heaping plate and laughs:

MATT

At least I got me this good meal off you, and I'm sure going to enjoy every bite of it.

Prejean looks down at her plate of food, unable to eat. She takes sips from a glass of iced tea - feeling unreal.

TELEPHONE RINGS. Beliveau appears at the door

BELIVEAU

Poncelet, phone call.

Matt gets up and walks to the phone. Prejean looks down at her food. 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, no you didn't fail, it's the justice system in this country, it stinks. It stinks bad, Mr. Hilton, no, no, no, Mr. Hilton, you didn't fail...

Beliveau approaches Prejean.

BELIVEAU

Please step into the corridor, sister.

She does so. A guard called SLICK comes through the front door. He is big, burly, with a shiny bald head and he is carrying a small canvas bag. Slick, accompanied by TWO OTHER GUARDS, goes into the cell with Matt

INT. DEATH HOUSE FOYER. NIGHT.

Prejean walks up and down foyer. Chaplain Farley approaches her. He is dressed in a bright green suit.

FARLEY

Sister, I am here. I'll be here until the execution if Poncelet should need me.

PREJEAN

He has told me he won't.

FARLEY

Well I will be administering communion to him before he makes his final walk.

PREJEAN

He has asked me to receive it for both of us. He told me he doesn't trust you.

FARLEY

Well that is a failure on your part.

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

Your question is leading and impertinent, Sister. 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. Executions are the law and Christians are supposed to obey the law. My personal feelings may be different from the law but that is something I reconcile privately with God.

Captain Beliveau approaches.

BELIVEAU

Sister, you can go back to the cell now.

PREJEAN

Father.

She turns and walks with Beliveau.

INT. DEATH HOUSE. NIGHT.

TITLE: 10:30 PM

Slick comes through door on tier. One guard carries a towel and small broom; another, a brown paper bag with Matt's curly black hair in it. Slick is zipping up his canvas shaving kit. He moves quickly. Matt comes back to the metal chair. His head looks whitish gray and shiny. His hair is gone now, eyebrows too. His left pant leg has been cut off at the knee.

MATT

Never been without eyebrows before. wow, they shaved everything. Ain't been bald since I was a baby. They shaved the calf of my leg.

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

PREJEAN

What's that number?

MATT

That's when I was at Angola before. Truck robbery. In case anybody killed me, I wanted them 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, and says:

MATT

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

I don't think you're a bad person, you just have more color on you than I thought.

Matt lights a cigarette. Everything is ready now. Inside the tier, TWO GUARDS stand on stepladders and hang black curtains over the windows along the top.

MATT

They don't want other inmates to see the lights dim when the switch is pulled.

A guard brings in a telephone and sets it next to Matt.

MATT

Time to call home.

PREJEAN

Matt, tears are a sign of humanity and strength, not weakness. Marlboro men are only on cardboard.

Prejean gets up to leave.

MATT

When I talk to Mom I'm gonna let it flow. Will you stay?

PREJEAN

I'll stay, but I'll leave you alone.

She stands by the door.

As Matt makes his phone call we intercut between Matt and what Prejean sees outside the cell. The last-minute preparations for the execution have begun. The building is buzzing now. 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 whispers to Beliveau.

PREJEAN

What's she typing?

BELIVEAU

Forms for the witnesses to sign.

A large aluminum coffee pot is percolating fresh coffee. A white tablecloth has been put on a table and ball-point pens have been placed in the center of the table. Matt is crying, sobbing. He hangs up the phone. He blows his nose and quickly regains his composure.

MATT

I just let it flow. I told my mother and Sonny that I loved them. I talked to each of the boys.

PREJEAN

You're a real man now, Matthew.

MATT

I hated to say good-bye. I told them that 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. You were right. I could have walked away. But I didn't. I let myself listen to him. I was a victim, a spineless shit. He was older, tough as nails. I was all boozed up trying to be as tough as him. I didn't have the courage to stand up to him. I told my mother I was a coward, I went 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. Prejean cries. Long beat.

PREJEAN

Matt, look me in the eyes.

He does.

PREJEAN

Did you kill Walter LeClair?

A pause.

MATT

Yes ma'am.

PREJEAN

Do you accept the
responsibility for both of
their deaths?

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
those kids. I never done that
before. Nobody was supposed to
get killed.

The silence is heavy.

PREJEAN

You know, Matt, despite your
crime, despite the terrible
pain you have caused, you are a
human being and you have a
dignity that no one can take
from you. You are a son of God.

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 hope my
death gives their parents some
relief. I really do. Maybe my
death will help them get some
peace, I don't know.

PREJEAN

Your last words can be words
either of hate or of love and
maybe that's the best thing you

can offer the LeClairs and the Percys, a wish for their peace.

A pause.

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 her watch.

MATT

Look at the time, it's flying.

His moment of weakness passed, he sits in the metal chair and calls to Beliveau for a cup of coffee. 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.

The guard gets a blue denim shirt and puts it around Matt's shoulders.

MATT

What happened to that song you were going to play me? You said you had a song.

PREJEAN

A hymn.

MATT

Yeah, that.

PREJEAN

They have rules forbidding music.

MATT

I've noticed.

PREJEAN

They won't let me play it for you.

MATT

So sing it. You know the words?

PREJEAN

Yes. I'm not much of a singer.

MATT

I don't care.

There is a pause and then, Prejean begins singing "Be Not Afraid" softly at first. Matt listens, at first amused and then gradually more and more moved.

PREJEAN

If you cross the barren desert
you shall not die of thirst
be not afraid,
I go before you always
if you stand before the fires
of hell
and death is at your side
be not afraid .

As she finishes Matt has a tear in his eye.

MATT

Thank you.

MATT

I have to make a confession to you. When I first met you I thought you'd be doin' nothin' but preachin' repentance at me, but after our first visit, I saw I could just talk to you like a friend, and I told my mother that I met this real nice lady.

PREJEAN

When I was first told about your crime I thought you were some kind of mentally deranged sociopath.

MATT

And now that you've met me, you're sure of it.

He laughs softly.

A team of GUARDS comes into the cell. They take him to a bathroom and shut the door behind him. She hears the murmur of voices. She hears the toilet flush. Beliveau stands near Prejean.

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 did was evil, I don't condone it. I just don't see much sense in doing the same to him.

BELIVEAU

You know how the Bible says 'eye for an eye'...

PREJEAN

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

BELIVEAU

I ain't gonna get into all this Bible quotin' with a nun, 'cuz I'm gonna lose.

They share a laugh.

PREJEAN

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

BELIVEAU

Got me on two of those.

The bathroom door opens and the guards and Matt re-enter the room. Anger flickers in Matt's eyes.

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.

He shakes his handcuffs defiantly.

MATT

I'll be free from all this. No more cells, no more bars, no more life in a cage.

INT. DEATH HOUSE. NIGHT

TITLE: 11:45 PM

Prejean stands outside the cell. The GUARDS inside are putting the shackles on Matt's hands and feet inside the cell. Warden Hartman approaches them, flanked by six or seven large guards, the "Strap-down Team":

HARTMAN

Time to go, Poncelet.

A GUARD opens the cell door and Matt comes over to the metal folding chair by the door. As he approaches the chair his 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

You have learned the truth and the truth will make you free.

MATT

I know God knows the truth about me. I know I'm gonna be okay, and look, when I get in the chair, I'm gonna let you know I'm okay.

PREJEAN

Look at me. Look at my face.

MATT

I'm going to a better place. I'm not worried at all.

But he is shivering and the Guard comes and puts his denim jacket around his shoulders. People are chatting nervously in the foyer. The witnesses are inside, the press, prison officials. You can hear the hum of talk and the sound of coins being inserted into the drink machines and the clunk of cans.

MATT

Sister, please look in on my mama from time to time, see if she's doing all right.

PREJEAN

I'll do that Matt. You've got my word.

A pause.

PREJEAN

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.

MATT

Warden, can I ask one favor?
Can Sister Helen touch my arm?

The Warden nods his head. She stands behind him. She puts her hand on his shoulder - this is the first time she has ever touched him. They walk. The chains scrape across the floor. A guard shouts:

BELIVEAU

Dead Man Walkin!

Prejean, carrying her bible, reads from Isaiah 43:2. As she reads the words she looks up and sees that Matt is walking with the same little jaunty 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.

As they pass through the lobby Chaplain Farley raises his hand in blessing. They stop. Prejean leans towards Matt and kisses him on the back. Farley begins to say last rites. The guards guide Prejean away into the execution room to a chair with the other witnesses.

INT. EXECUTION ROOM. NIGHT.

There is the oak chair, dark and gleaming in the bright fluorescent lights. There are the witnesses all seated behind a plexiglass window. There is a big clock on the wall behind the chair. There is an exhaust fan which has already been turned on and will serve to get rid of the

scent of burnt flesh. Hilton Barber is there. She sits in a chair beside Hilton. He reaches over and takes her hand. Hilton does not look into her eyes. Mr. LeClair and the Percy's are seated in the first row over to the right, their faces expressionless. There is a small podium with a microphone on it and Matt is standing behind it. Behind him: a wall of green painted plywood with a slit of a window behind which the executioner waits. The Warden is standing over in the right-hand corner next to the telephone.

HARTMAN

Have any last words, Poncelet?

MATT

Yes, sir, I do.

He looks at the two fathers; but then addresses himself only to LeClair:

MATT

Mr. LeClair, I don't want to leave this world with any hatred in my heart. I want to ask your forgiveness for what I did. I have done a terrible thing in taking your son from you.

LeClair nods his head. Clyde turns to LeClair and asks:

CLYDE

What about us?

MATT

I would just like to say, Mr. and Mrs. Percy, that I hope you get some relief from my death. Killing people is wrong. That's why you're putting me to death. It makes no difference whether it's citizens, countries, or governments. Killing is wrong.

Matt is in the chair now and the guards are moving quickly, removing the leg irons and handcuffs and replacing them with leather straps. One guard removes his left slipper.

They strap his trunk, his legs, his arms. Matt finds Prejean's face.

MATT

I love you.

She stretches her hand toward him.

PREJEAN

I love you, too.

He attempts a smile but manages only a twitch. A metal cup is placed on his head and an electrode is screwed in at the top and connected to a wire that comes from a box behind the chair. An electrode is fastened to his leg. A strap placed around his chin holds his head tightly against the back of the chair. He grimaces. He cannot speak anymore. A greenish cloth is placed over his face.

HILTON

Father forgive them, for they
know not what they do.

Only the Warden remains in the room now. Warden nods his head - the signal to the executioner to do his work.

THREE CLANKS are heard as the switch is pulled.

EXT. PRISON PARKING LOT. NIGHT.

There are lights blazing everywhere and a SWAT TEAM lined up along the front fence. Prejean is with Colleen and the other nuns from her order. They all hug and kiss and cry. Prejean turns to see Earl LeClair. He looks shaken and the rims of his eyes are red. He walks past.

EXT. PRISON PARKING LOT. NIGHT.

Hilton is being interviewed by a television reporter.

HILTON

Look how shamefully secret this
whole thing is. A few select
witnesses brought deep inside
this prison in the dead of
night to watch a man be killed.
If most people in Louisiana

could see what the state did
tonight, they would throw up.

The camera moves off of Hilton to see Clyde Percy, cameras
all around him as he pops a bottle of champagne and pours
himself a drink. He smiles..

CLYDE

I'm just sorry every victim
doesn't have the satisfaction
of watching a murderer die. But
you know what? He died too
quick. I wish he had the same
kind of painful death that my
daughter had. I hope he fries
in hell for all eternity.

REPORTER

Are you happy, Mr. Percy?

CLYDE

Do you want to dance?

REPORTER

How about you, Mrs. Percy?

MARYBETH

I'm glad he's dead and won't be
able to kill any other people.

Sue Ellen is there and pipes in:

SUE ELLEN

This is the best Christmas I've
had in a long time, knowing the
man who killed my sister has
finally been executed. That
ought to tell murderers that if
they kill somebody, they're
going to face the electric
chair.

EXT. PARKING LOT. NIGHT.

Prejean and the Sisters head to the car waiting in the
parking lot. Hilton walks with them.

HILTON

You've got to keep at this. This is a long fight. We've just got to have faith that sooner or later people will know the truth. That someday the only place you'll be able to see an electric chair will be in a museum. Remember there was a time in this country when over 70% of the people favored slavery.

PREJEAN

Thank you Hilton.

They hug and Hilton walks away. A woman approaches Prejean.

WOMAN

Have you read the Bible, the part where God says, 'An eye for an eye,' and 'Whosoever doth shed blood shall have his blood shed?' Have you read that?

PREJEAN

Yes, I'm familiar with the quote.

WOMAN

Do you know what Romans 13 says?

PREJEAN

About obeying civil authority, obeying the law, is that the one you mean?

WOMAN

Yes. You haven't lost a child. I have. A scumbag killed my beautiful sixteen year old daughter. You don't understand anything. You make me furious. Just go away and leave us alone.

PREJEAN

I'm sorry about your daughter.

But the woman abruptly leaves.

INT. PREJEAN'S APARTMENT. NIGHT.

It is very late. Prejean sits in front of a typewriter and writes.

PREJEAN(V.O.)

Jesus Christ, in his lifetime called for an end to retributive force. Following his example, for the first three centuries after his death no Christian was permitted to join armies or be part of any force that killed. I wonder what he would feel hearing himself quoted by people wanting vengeance. I personally think he would have grounds to sue for defamation of character.

A knock on the door. Prejean answers it. Her Mother comes in.

MOTHER

How are you sweetie?

PREJEAN

I'm doing OK.

MOTHER

So how do I sign up?

PREJEAN

Sign up?

MOTHER

Well, I'm tired of hearing second hand about all the nasty things people say about you. I figure if I get involved then maybe they will say something

to my face. Something I did in raising you gave you a lot of courage so I must have it in myself somewhere.

INT. BROWN-MCGEEHEE FUNERAL HOME - COVINGTON, LA. DAY.

A handful of friends and relatives have gathered to bury Matt. We see Elizabeth and her sons, Prejean, Hilton, others. Matt's brothers hover close to their mother. Little Troy keeps taking her hand and holding it. Prejean is there. Mitch reads a letter from Matt.

MITCH

"Dear my brothers, Don't worry about me, I'll be okay. You keep your cool, it's the only way to stay out of places like this. I been pretty stupid and I've done some bad things. When you think of me, remember times I made you laugh, times we wrestled, fun times. You can remember this bad guy, this rebel, if you want, but don't think that's cool or true. The bottom line is I was a chickenshit coward being there when those kids died. And the truth is I killed a man.

As the letter continues we see a small procession of people file past the coffin of Matthew Poncelet.

MATT(V.O.)

"Take care of mama. Remember the promise you made to me. I love you all. Your big brother. And P.S. to Troy: It's all right to be afraid. Sometimes there really are big animals outside your tent."

Elizabeth approaches the casket. She is weeping.

ELIZABETH

Oh, Matthew, Matthew, my boy,
Oh God, help me. Oh, Matthew,
how much I loved you.

As she weeps we see for a moment Mrs. Percy in her place. Elizabeth then bends down and kisses the cold, still lips of Hope Percy.

EXT. CEMETERY. DAY.

Bishop Cobb says a short prayer. Over this we hear Matt's voice. We see Prejean.

MATT(V.O.)

Don't get all sullen and mourn
me, OK. But do me a favor will
ya? Maybe now and then go and
pour a beer on my grave.

Earl LeClair appears. He approaches slowly, looking nervous and out of place. The service ends. The family is hugging, consoling each other. Prejean walks to LeClair.

PREJEAN

Mr. LeClair.

LECLAIR

Sister.

PREJEAN

Thank you for coming.

LECLAIR

I don't know why I'm here. I
should go.

PREJEAN

Maybe you're looking for a way
out from under that rock. Maybe
you need to overcome the
bitterness and hatred you feel.

LECLAIR

It's a struggle. I feel it
every day.

There is a restless pause.

PREJEAN

Maybe we can try and find it;
the two of us.

LECLAIR

I don't know. I don't think so.

LeClair leaves.

EXT. PERCY HOUSE BACKYARD. DAY.

Prejean and Clyde and Marybeth sit in the backyard. They have drinks.

CLYDE

I almost died in WW II. My ship was torpedoed. I was fished out of the sea unconscious, they thought I was dead, almost dumped me into a body bag. Then someone noticed that I was breathing. "Hey lookee here..."

We can tell that Clyde has told this story before in better times. He can't seem to do it now. He starts to cry.

CLYDE

I'm sorry. I just can't get over her death. I still want to see him suffer.

He tries to make a fist and strikes out but the air flows through his fingers.

CLYDE

What we really oughta do...
...we oughta do to them exactly what they did to their victim. Poncelet should have been stabbed seventeen times then shot in the back of the head, that's what we oughta do to him.

We see Prejean. She puts her arm around Clyde, hugs him as

he weeps.

We hear the THREE CLANKS we heard when we cut away from the execution.

INT. EXECUTION ROOM. NIGHT.

The first jolt of electricity hits Matt. His body arches grotesquely.

WOMAN (V.O.)

I keep wanting to stay in bed and sleep and not get up. If I can just get through my boy's birthday, then Christmas...I've lost three children: the first was a crib death, my three-year-old dies of hepatitis, and now my twenty-four-year-old son was shot dead.

Matt's left hand has gripped the arm of the chair evenly, but the fingers of his right hand are curled upwards.

The jolt subsides and the body relaxes. We see the hand move slightly. We hear a soft moan and...another Click.

The body arches, less violent this time.

WOMAN (V.O.)

I keep waitin' for my boy to knock on the door. Seven times, that was his little knock and I'd say, "Who's there?" and he'd say, "Me, Baby," and the newspaper told it wrong. They talked about my boy's murder like it was just another drug-related murder. They don't know who shot my boy. The killer's still out there somewhere.

The jolt subsides. The body relaxes. Smoke is starting to come off of the body. We hear a Click and...a huge jolt of electricity hits, sending the body into a violent spasm.

WOMAN (V.O.)

How do I introduce myself - as the mother of six or the mother of four? I guess I'll say six even though two of my sons were killed, both of them shot, five months apart. I've been angry at God and confused because I have really tried to do right, go to church every Sunday, and give a good home to my kids and I thought that would protect us.

The thrashing subsided, Hartman motions to the doctor to approach the body. The doctor who has been sitting with the witnesses, goes to the body in the chair and lifts the mask and raises the eyelids, shines the light of a small flashlight into his eyes, raises up the clean white shirt; puts his stethoscope against the heart, listens; then turns to the warden and nods his head. Chaplain Farley's eyes happen to look into Prejean's. He lowers his eyes.

INT. HOPE HOUSE. NIGHT.

Prejean and the sisters run a victim's meeting with neighborhood residents, mostly black. An African-American woman addresses the others.

WOMAN

I lost two sons in the St. Thomas Project. Both murdered, but the D.A. hasn't come close to prosecuting the case. They don't care much when black boys get killed. Everyday I see the boys that killed my sons. Everyday. And they know I know. And they laugh and leer.

Angle on Prejean, her expression grim but focused.

INT. PREJEAN APARTMENT. NIGHT.

Prejean types as we hear:

PREJEAN (V.O.)

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

EXT. THE CHURCH OF ST. MARTIN OF TOURS - MANDEVILLE - DAWN

Prejean walks in the early morning mist along a wooded path. A hymn plays, redemptive, uplifting. We see a small chapel come into view.

PREJEAN (V.O.)

....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 forgiveness. Only time will tell.

Prejean walks up the steps and lightly taps on the door of the chapel and a young woman with long dark hair lets her in with a quiet smile.

INT. THE CHURCH OF ST. MARTIN OF TOURS. DAWN.

Inside the chapel she sees a sign hand-printed in black letters on white paper, a quotation from the Gospel of John: "Because you have seen me, you believe. Blessed are those who do not see and yet believe." The round wafer of bread consecrated at Mass is elevated in a gold vessel with clear glass at the center so the host can be seen. Gold rays, emanating outward, draw the eye to the center. Prejean sits in a pew. Behind her the doors open and in walks Earl LeClair. He approaches slowly and sits next to Helen.

LECLAIR

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

PREJEAN

It's good to see you, Mr.
LeClair.

LECLAIR

Earl.

Prejean smiles.

PREJEAN

Shall we get to work?

LECLAIR

Yes. Yes, let's do that.

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