

SERVING LIFE ON DEATH ROW

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

RALEIGH	Large, biracial, from the South.
WINSTON	Small, artist, good sense of humor.
BROOKLYN	A watcher, keeps his distance, from NYC.
PHILLY	A cool cat, from Philly.
SAN DIEGO	Jazz lover and NPR listener, from CA.
MAINE	Intellectual, white, from New England.

SETTING

The common area in a pod on death row. Windows everywhere. Chairs and tables are metal and bolted to the floor.

PRODUCTION NOTES

VOICEOVER sound effects are created by the MEN.

INTERCOM announcements mark the progression of a day in prison. The announcements are interruptions, jarring. MEN respond to these calls as current prisoners. MEN not involved return to their cells.

During simultaneous scenes, MEN freeze in position when they finish speaking and hold that position until they speak again.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This piece was created in collaboration with men living on death row. The characters are fictionalized but the stories they tell are true.

Upstage, six evenly-spaced chairs designate cells. Beside and under each chair loose papers, pens, photos, toilet paper, towels are scattered, stacked, or neatly stored. Downstage three round tables serve as common room, chow hall, etc. The light is harsh and fluorescent.

DEATH ROW. MORNING.

The men wear T-shirts and undershorts. They are asleep.

BULLHORN

6 am! COUNT!

VOICEOVER

(Rapping on doors.)

The MEN stir and stretch as they
prepare to speak.

RALEIGH

Raleigh. I come from the rusty tunnel in Kentwood that the creek flowed through, runny yolk eggs, and Grandma's bright orange fly swatter.

I belong to my mother's blue eyes, my brother's freckles, and "Stop crying before I give you something to cry about."

I come from writing a good song from the heart, being biracial with a heritage that bridges gaps, and "All inmates do is lie."

I know: The decisions you make today determine your tomorrow.

And I am a stone. Solid. Grounded. Covered by dirt.

RALEIGH freezes.

BROOKLYN

Brooklyn. I come from the barbershop, pizza with Parmesan, and my grandmother's curling irons.

I belong to my son's smile, the smell of Pine-sol, and "You're gonna be just like your father."

I come from the challenge of playing chess, the nobility of our struggle, and "All prisoners are ignorant."

I know: Life is a confusing experience.

And I am an owl: solitary, observant, quiet.

BROOKLYN freezes.

PHILLY

Philly. I come from the Cheesesteak Hoagie, my neighbor's camera, and Pop-pop's hair clippers.

I belong to my mom's heavy hands, Pine Sol's lemony fresh scent, city exhaust, and "Ain't nothin sweet."

I come from loving to write, the exhausted appeals of another death row prisoner, and "Everybody in prison is innocent."

I know: Thinking "rationally" isn't the same across the board.

And I am an ocean, a tidal wave, so much left undiscovered.

PHILLY freezes.

DIEGO

San Diego. I come from the cliffs over Sunset Beach, creamy Quiche Lorraine, and my mother's knitting needles.

I belong to my son's big brown eyes, the smell of Pine Sol and pot, and "variety is the spice of life."

I come from cliff diving, from slavery to the leader of the free world, from "We all talk jive."

I know: You should do good, avoid evil, and appreciate your lunacy.

And I am my prayer beads, worn, used, tried and tested.

DIEGO freezes.

MAINE

Maine. I come from Brunswick, lemon cake, and piano chains.

I belong to my father's looming presence, the smell of pines, and "Hail Holy Queen, my sweetness and my hope."

I come from Fanfare for the Common Man, Don Quixote, and paintings of knights in armor.

I know success requires perseverance, dedication, and the will to win.

And I am a coverless book, overlooked, but just as good.

MAINE freezes.

WINSTON

Winston. I come from Putnam Avenue, Sunday night spaghetti, and scary mannequin heads like dead people in the basement.

I belong to my grandma's smile, the smell of hot asphalt, and "Everything happens for a reason."

I come from finding new limits, drawing an eye exactly right, African American creativity, and "We all like chicken."

I know: Words are truly powerful.

And I am a blank sheet of paper, with infinite potential for the future.

WINSTON freezes, drawing.

CHOW--BREAKFAST

BULLHORN

CHOW! CHOW TIME!

RALEIGH

(Overlaps, loud)

Chow time! I'm starving!

WINSTON

(To himself)

Starving?! Dude, no. Starving is when you're three years old and haven't had breakfast and you're out of drawing paper, meaning unopened bills. That's starving. And I'm in there, tugging my mother's arm--

(Moves into scene)

WAKE UP! I'm starving.

(Nothing)

Guess I'm on my own.

(Pushes chair to counter,
climbs up.)

Cereal box. Check. Spoon. Check. Bowl?

(Looks, shrugs)

Nope.

(Climbs down)

Milk!

(Opens refrigerator, attempts
to lift gallon jug, topples
backward.)

VOICEOVER

Sound of milk jug hitting floor. SPLAT!

exits cell.

WINSTON

Thank God for screw tops. No bowl?

Shrugs, pours cereal on floor, tilts
milk jug.

BROOKLYN

What the heck you doing, Winston?!

RALEIGH joins.

WINSTON

Oh, Brooklyn, dude, uh, nothing. Thinking about kid stuff.
Eating cereal.

RALEIGH

Off the floor?!

WINSTON

Hey, I was little!

RALEIGH

Yeah. Still are.

BROOKLYN

What kind?

WINSTON

(Considers the floor)

Looks like Cocoa Puffs to me.

BROOKLYN

In our crib, it was Frosted Flakes.

MAINE joins. Chow line.

RALEIGH

Of corn. That's what the box actually said, real big: Frosted
Flakes and then this tiny "of corn." Man, I knew something
wasn't right about that.

BROOKLYN

Ghetto cereal.

PHILLY joins chow line.

PHILLY

Yeah, I loved me some Fruit Hoops. How about you, Maine? What
kind of cereal Yankees eat?

MAINE

Um, oatmeal?

RALEIGH

Seriously?

MAINE

It was cold.

WINSTON

I thought oatmeal was hot.

BROOKLYN

No, Maine is cold.

WINSTON

Dude, go get your long johns.

BROOKLYN

The place.

MAINE

(Overlaps)

I'm not -- Never mind. Sure, Frosted Flakes.

BROOKLYN

That's what I'm talking about. If we'd wake up and moms wasn't home from the club, I'd pour my baby brother and me a bowl full, I mean way more than we were allowed. Then I'd drag the TV to the closet, kick out the dirty clothes, and climb inside. We'd sit there, two preschoolers, hunched over our cereal, staring at the TV. Know what we called it? "Playing solitary."

MAINE

Whoa. I got put in solitary a few times, but it was definitely not something I played on purpose.

DIEGO joins chow line.

BROOKLYN

Yeah, well, this wasn't intentional. More like inevitable. First time I went to prison I was only three months old. My moms took me to visit my father. Shoot, it wasn't just my father -- grandmas, aunts, uncles -- everybody did time.

PHILLY

I feel you. I remember the old heads sitting around, talking about "the box."

BROOKLYN

I'd soak it up like a new sponge. First time my mom came to visit me in prison, she just stood, looking around, like "ain't nothing change." It was the same prison where she'd brought me to see my father.

DIEGO

(Shakes head)

I did time in a closet. And a box. But it was certainly not recreational.

RICHMOND

What'd you say, Diego?

DIEGO

Me? Not a thing.

BROOKLYN

Man, four years old and I'm already putting myself in solitary confinement. You can't tell me that isn't messed up. That is a train wreck waiting to happen.

VOICEOVER

(Long screeching tires.)

MEN react: flip, duck, cover.

WORK CALL. LICENSE.

BULLHORN

TAG SHOP! LICENSE WORKERS REPORT TO TAG SHOP!

MEN work on tags or return to rooms.

BROOKLYN enters the street.

BROOKLYN

It was the most exciting night of my three-year-old life. I was standing at the edge of a crowd, watching two young women fight. One was my mother.

My little brother'd just been born and his father didn't want the baby to come home with us. Somehow his sister got involved.

(Jumps back.)

That's who my mom was fighting.

VOICEOVER

(Doors slam.)

BROOKLYN

My Grandmoms--

(GRANDMOMS appears.)

And her boyfriend jumped out of the white Continental. Now, my Grandmoms' a tiny woman but she looked like a giant to me, wielding that Saturday Night Special. Her boyfriend had a long switchblade just like Daddy Cool. I was in awe.

(GRANDMOMS approaches crowd.)

The crowd backed away. She stared at the father.

GRANDMOMS

(To father.)

You better go get my grandson right now.

BROOKLYN

Then she turned to my mom.

GRANDMOMS

And you better beat that bitch ass. Brooklyn, baby, come here.

BROOKLYN

She scooped me into the car. I stood looking out the window while my mom did exactly that.

(Pause. GRANDMOMS exits.)

No one explained, but I understood. You back up family without question and by any means necessary. My Grandmoms was ready to kill if she had to. No questions asked.

RALEIGH enters bedroom.

RALEIGH

First time I ever saw a gun, my Grandma was holding it. I heard a ruckus in the hallway and opened my door. The pistol was so tiny, it was almost hidden in her hand. She'd been drinking, but I was too young to understand. All I knew was Grandma had a gun.

(Shocked.)

The same Grandma who was the sweetest woman in the whole wide world.

GRANDMA stoops to kiss and pinch young Raleigh's cheeks.

GRANDMA

Raleigh, baby, come give your Grandma some sugar!

RALEIGH

The same Grandma who, whenever Mama said--

MAMA

Absolutely not!

RALEIGH

Always said--

GRANDMA

(To young Raleigh.)

Of course you can.

GRANDMA turns, drunk, points gun toward MAMA'S door.

RALEIGH

(Peeks out.)

She was cussing at my Mama's bedroom door.

GRANDMA

I'm gonna shoot that goddamn nigger.

RALEIGH

I'd never heard her say such awful words.

MAMA opens door.

MAMA

Give me the gun, Mama.

(Pause.)

If you're gonna shoot anybody in this house, you gonna have to shoot me first.

RALEIGH

Grandma started waving the gun around and I was so afraid she was gonna shoot Mama I didn't know what to do.

GRANDMA

(Lowers gun.)

Nigger-lover.

MAMA AND GRANDMA exit.

RALEIGH

Tears just spilled down my cheeks. I was part black. I'd been called nigger before. I knew what it meant. I didn't understand that Grandma was drunk and talking about my white mother and another man. I thought she was saying my mother was wrong for loving me.

(Pause.)

For a long time, I sat on my bed and wondered about what I'd learned, how black people were called niggers and weren't supposed to be loved.

PHILLY enters neighborhood.

PHILLY

I loved my Dad. Last time I saw him, he was in a bambulance. I was four and he'd been stabbed. For years, I was led to believe it was an accident. Pops fell on a knife. Later I found out my entire neighborhood knew the truth.

(NEIGHBORHOOD KIDS enter.)

That's how come kids would be like--

NEIGHBORHOOD KIDS

Yo, Philly, stay in front of us.

KIDS exit, laughing.

PHILLY

In our neighborhood, it wasn't uncommon someone pulling a gun, someone getting stabbed or whatever, but these stories was different. It was that my Dad got stabbed and my Moms had something to do with it. That it wasn't an accident.

BROOKLYN

Hood life is basically boot camp for prison.

RALEIGH

If you ain't lived it--

PHILLY

You don't understand what it's like always living on edge.

VOICEOVER

(Books dropping.)

MEN react.

RALEIGH

When not paying attention could get you killed.

BROOKLYN

When any and everybody can turn on you like

(Snaps fingers.)

that.

MED CALL

BULLHORN

MEDS! MEDICATION CART!

MEN line up for meds or return to rooms.

MAINE

The shrink turned to me in front of my parents and said--

SHRINK

(Patronizing.)

Young Maine, can you explain what prompts you to "pluck your hair"?

MAINE

I felt so ashamed. It wasn't something I could control. Then one day I was in my room playing with a pocketknife and I started carving on my arm.

(Exhales.)

It was the same feeling of relief.

(Pause.)

When puberty hit, that whole onslaught of emotions and hormones made me really anxious. So I started smoking pot. But sometimes the frenzy in my mind got to be too much and I'd blast through it by huffing aerosols. Or harming myself.

(Fires lighter.)

One time I was firing a Bic lighter to where the metal was glowing and the plastic sides caught fire. And this older kid said--

OLDER KID

If you're such a badass, hold that lighter to your arm.

MAINE presses lighter against the inside of his forearm.

MAINE

There was a sizzle and pop. Then the smell of burning flesh.

(Studies burns on both arms.)

I felt completely helpless to break out of the self-destruction. The depression was like being coated with tar. The only thing that helped was getting high or harming myself. One day when I was home alone, I loaded my dad's rifle and propped it between my feet.

BRAIN CHATTER

(Several MEN whisper harshly.)

Do you have the balls to pull the trigger? Do you? Do you?

MAINE

I was not the kind of kid to turn down a dare, even one from my own mind. I put the barrel in my mouth.

(Pause.)

Maybe it should've occurred to me then that I was mentally ill. But it didn't.

CANTEEN CALL.

BULLHORN

CANTEEN! CANTEEN!

MEN head for canteen or return to rooms. LITTLE KIDS enter with paper bags for trick or treating.

LITTLE KID 1

Dude, stop! It's only five thirty. Why we got to go out so early?

LITTLE KID 2

Trust me, you want to hit a house while they still got lots of candy. They think they bought too much and give you a big fistfuls.

BIG KIDS stand to one side, holding paper bags.

BIG KID 1

My mom didn't want me to go out trick or treatin'. She worried about my safety after dark. But after a little pleading and a whole lot of whining, she relented.

(Looks at bag.)

I loved my mask. Loved my breath hot against the cheap plastic.