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Flippant Joke Reveals Callous Mindset

Luke DeKoster

“Where’s the switch?”

Fiona and I ate dinner Friday night at a pub on the riverbank in downtown Minneapolis. Fish and chips, ketchup and malt vinegar, sodas and ice water. We chatted with the bartender about his employers’ recent decision: buying the eight-story ramp across the street as both an investment and an incentive (free parking) for prospective diners.

Eventually, we excused ourselves, explaining that we were seeing one of the shows at the ongoing international film festival next door. The bartender waved and wished us well.

At the Death House Door is a 2007 documentary about Carroll Pickett, the chaplain who counseled dozens of death-row inmates (including Karla Faye Tucker) in their last hours before execution at the prison in Huntsville, Texas.

After each lethal injection – 95 of them, spanning 15 years – Pickett would return home and sit down to record his thoughts on cassette tape.

His wife had left him, unhappy over the long hours he’d spent at the prison even before taking the death-row job. The recordings became his way of debriefing; not only did he avoid discussing the executions, he kept even the tapes’ existence secret until the making of the documentary.

Pickett began, not surprisingly, as a death-penalty supporter. He knew the crimes, the victims, the violence, and he had no reason to oppose something that bolstered his town’s economy and seemed to make penal and biblical sense.

Carlos DeLuna, however, was different.

The young Hispanic man from Corpus Christi was on death row for a murder/robbery at a convenience store. Someone had struggled with and then stabbed the clerk, who bled to death as she staggered out the door in a dramatic plea for help. The police had found DeLuna near the scene, cowering shirtless under a parked car, and he had a criminal record.

Never mind the fact that he had not one spot of blood on his body, or that the murder weapon (a distinctively designed switchblade) was known on the streets as belonging to one Carlos *Hernandez*, or that Hernandez bragged about getting away with the crime while someone else took the fall.

Even DeLuna's lawyers distrusted his story – just another dirty Mexican.

And so he died, agonizingly. In a botched procedure that made a mockery of lethal injection's hygienically efficient image, the three-drug cocktail took minutes rather than seconds to kill DeLuna.

“Death House Door” weaves this single prisoner's story into Pickett's career, touching on issues of race and faith and policy without straying into preachiness.

I was moved—not to *opinion* but to *emotion*. How could convicted killers sing so sweetly in a gospel choir (another of Pickett's prison responsibilities)? How could DeLuna be so violated? How could Pickett continue, year after year, to talk and pray with these hardened felons, one of whom had gunned down two of Pickett's church members at close range during a hostage standoff?

We had tickets for a second film, but it was delayed in starting, so we went back to the bar for more ice water.

“Hey, how was the movie?” asked the bartender, breaking off his conversation with the night-duty police officer.

“Really, really good,” I said. “Very powerful...it was about the death penalty, and a pastor in Texas.”

“Hmm,” he said, thinking a little before filling the cups.

The officer had been listening. Visions of electric chairs dancing in his head, he turned to me in that way a man does when he thinks he's got a real knee-slapper, and the toothy-grin remark left me speechless.

“Where's the switch?”

Editor's Note: This article was published in the *Sioux County Index-Reporter*, April 23, 2008, in Luke DeKoster's series “Not Yet Home.”