

CHAPTER

II

The best thing I can do for the Harveys is avoid them. Definitely, I decide, this seems the best course of action. Here I am, spiritual adviser to yet another man on death row,¹ giving lectures, conducting workshops, and organizing public demonstrations for the abolition of the death penalty. The Harveys, on the other hand, don't miss an execution. Each time, there they are outside the front gate of Angola, celebrating as another murderer is killed.

On what common ground could we possibly meet?

Good-bye, Harveys. Or so I think.

I have decided to avoid the Harveys, but they have not decided to avoid me.

Two years after Robert's execution, in 1986, our abolition group is sponsoring a weekend seminar on the death penalty at Loyola University. Not a big event by any means, attended by a hundred or so of those most dedicated to the cause. Proponents of the death penalty *never* attend these seminars.

Except the Harveys.

As we are about to begin the first session I look across the room and see them. I avert my eyes. All day I avoid them. Why have a confrontation over irreconcilable differences, a confrontation that can only lead to further estrangement and pain?

I make it through the whole day without meeting them. The day is ending. People are beginning to leave. Elizabeth is standing near the exit and I don't see her ahead of time and suddenly here she is and here I am and she says, "You haven't even looked at us all day. We haven't heard from you in such a long time. When are you coming to see us?"

I'm stunned. I tell her I'll be glad to come see them if they want me to come. Vernon, standing near Elizabeth, nods. Yes, they want me to come.

I realize that in their sorrow they must be lonely, but even more, I know it's rough going organizing victims' families in Louisiana. *They want me to visit.* It is an invitation for which I haven't dared to hope. I remember Vernon saying he liked apple pie. I decide to bake an apple pie. When sorrow and loss and conflict are overwhelming, bake a pie.

A few weeks later I drive up to the Harvey home in Mandeville across Lake Pontchartrain. Same tall trees near the house. Same swing on the porch. Vernon is recuperating from hip surgery. He's glad to get the pie. Elizabeth says, "For disagreeing with somebody so strongly, you sure are tearing into her pie." Vernon just smiles and eats. I sit in their kitchen and we talk and drink coffee. I am glad to be in their company again. They talk about helping victims' families — going with them to court, telling them what to expect, educating them on their rights. "Which we have had to learn on our own," Elizabeth says, "because we sure didn't have anyone to teach us," and then she says how they experienced two victimizations — one with Faith's murder and the other at the hands of the criminal justice system. "All the rights of the criminal are protected — they have lawyers appointed to them if they can't afford one and their rights are all spelled out and they are told what those rights are, but nobody told us our rights. We didn't even know we had rights. Like the right to see the autopsy report and Faith's body. They kept me from seeing Faith's body and then once the chance had passed it was too late. I know they were trying to protect me but that was my decision, not theirs, to make."

"What people don't know," Vernon says, "is that if they get stonewalled by local law-enforcement people, they can call up elected officials — politicians — and get some action."

"In dealing with the D.A. and the police," Elizabeth says, "you could probably get more information when you get your car stolen than if your child is killed because then you're the victim, but when someone's killed, they figure the one killed is the victim, not you,

and you're pushed to the sidelines. You and what your needs are don't even count and you can call them until you're blue in the face and they won't call you back. Some do. Some are understanding, but not most of them. They're too busy prosecuting the criminal to be concerned about the victim's family."

Elizabeth says that she tells victims' families to be calm and unemotional when they telephone the D.A. or the police for information. "They don't deal well with emotionally upset people, they just hang up on you, and it's real important to keep lines of communication open with them. There's one case I'm thinking of where the woman's daughter could talk to the police calmer and easier than her mother, and so the daughter was the one who always made the phone calls for information. I tell them that after they hang up the phone, then they can cry and scream all they want, but not when they're talking to law enforcement people."

Vernon says prosecutors may not even want victims' families in the courtroom. "After all their hard work they're scared some relative of a victim might lose control and blurt something out and the jury will hear it and they'll lose the case."

"Some people don't know that they can give a victim impact statement," Elizabeth says, "and most don't know about the victim assistance programs that are available. Again, it's the sheriffs and D.A.s who are supposed to let folks know about these programs, but plenty of them don't get the word out. There's no votes in it for them. They don't get elected or reelected for helping victims. We're making progress and now more people do know about the programs, but not nearly enough."

Dealing with the law enforcement officials is one thing, Vernon and Elizabeth say, and the way they were treated had surprised them, but what had surprised them even more was the way all their friends and even Faith's friends stayed away from them after the murder. Few, they say, came to visit them and very few came to the funeral.

"I think everyone was denying that this sort of violent death could hit so close to home," Elizabeth says. "They didn't want to admit it had happened to Faith because then they'd have to admit that it could happen to them, and people don't want to face that."

Vernon talks about the abolitionist seminar they had attended at Loyola University. He says he had told Elizabeth, "We better watch that nun, we better watch her. She's gonna abolish executions if we don't watch out."

He says it half joking, half serious. It's easy. The conversation is

easy—even with Vernon shingling in his favorite death-penalty arguments and my countering with my own. I tell them about Robert's last hours and his struggle to formulate his last words. I tell them that I believe he was sincere when he said that he hoped his death would relieve their suffering.

Vernon begins to cry. He just can't get over Faith's death, he says. It happened six years ago but for him it's like yesterday, and I realize that now, with Robert Willie dead, he doesn't have an object for his rage. He's been deprived of that, too. I know that he could watch Robert killed a thousand times and it could never assuage his grief. He had walked away from the execution chamber with his rage satisfied but his heart empty. No, not even his rage satisfied, because he still wants to see Robert Willie suffer and he can't reach him anymore. He tries to make a fist and strike out but the air flows through his fingers.

I reach over and put my hand on his arm. My heart aches for him. I sympathize with his rage. Reason and logic are useless here. In time, I hope Robert's final wish comes true: that Vernon and Elizabeth find peace. But I know that it will not be Robert's death which brings this peace. Only reconciliation: accepting Faith's death—can finally release them to leave the past and join the present, to venture love, to rejoin the ranks of the living.

Some months later I meet the Harveys again—on the steps of the Louisiana Supreme Court building in New Orleans. They are there with a small group of supporters holding signs—“What about the victims?”—waiting for us as we conclude a weeklong abolition campaign across the state. It has been the longest trek yet for Pilgrimage for Life, about two hundred and fifty miles. All along the way we have gotten excellent media coverage and used the opportunity to educate the public on the death penalty.

This is getting to be familiar—the Harveys and their friends waiting for us here at the end.

During the rally Elizabeth asks me if she can have the microphone to speak to the group. As an organizer I know that one thing you never do at a public demonstration is hand over the microphone to the opposition. The media just might choose to feature them on the evening news, and you lose a hard-earned opportunity to get your message across.

But this is Elizabeth Harvey.

I hand her the microphone.

The television cameras zoom in.

She says that Congress is about to cut funds for victims' assistance

and asks us to join them in writing letters to protest the cuts. Her request is met with hearty applause.

Two weeks after Elizabeth's appeal, a group of us from Pilgrimage send a signed petition to our congresspersons protesting the proposed cuts. I send the Harveys a photocopy of the petition and a personal note of support.

Our next encounter outside the prison gates, in August 1987, is more painful.

I've come with several fellow nuns to support Sister Ruth Rault, D.C., when she returns to the front gate after the execution. It's her nephew, Sterling, who will die tonight² and she will be there with him at the end. I had promised her that I would be waiting for her at the gate when she came out.

All the way there I am praying, *Please, God, please don't let the Harveys be there*. But here they are in the amber prison floodlights, with their daughter, Elizabeth, seated in folding chairs near the gates. A few friends are with them, and so are their posterboard signs, propped up on chairs.

“How are y'all doing?” I say as I walk across to meet them. I nod respectfully toward the couple with them. Things are stiff.

“Hey, take a look at my new poster,” Vernon says.

It's done in two frames, the first with the words, “Murderer's Rights: You have the right to an attorney” in bold black letters, and the second showing a tombstone with “R.I.P.” on it and the words “You have a right to remain silent.”

“He'll be silent all right—forever,” Vernon chuckles. He is pleased with the poster. I admit that it makes its point very well. Propped up next to the Harveys are signs that are now familiar to me. One of them says, “Tell them about Jesus, then put them in the electric chair.”

“How's the hip?” I ask Vernon. He has recently had a hip replacement.

“Coming along,” he says.

My fellow nuns have formed a small circle about thirty feet away. They hold lighted candles and pray. Some of their words to God float over, words that the victims' families couldn't disagree with more.

The daughter of a couple seated near the Harveys was murdered several years ago. They are bitter that her murderer was given a life sentence, not death. They drive more than 100 miles to the penitentiary to join the Harveys for executions.

The woman says to me, “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?" I say, yes, I'm familiar with the quote.

"Do you know what Romans 13 says?" she asks.

"About obeying civil authority, obeying the law, is that the one you mean?" I ask.

"Yes," she says, her voice clipped. But she doesn't want to talk to me anymore, about the Bible or about anything.

"You haven't lost a child. You don't understand anything," she snaps. "You're upsetting me. Just go away and leave us alone."

"I'm sorry about your daughter," I say as I move away. I hear Elizabeth saying something to her, something about my being "all right" and that I don't try to "change" them. And I hear Vernon saying something, too, and then I'm with the Sisters, praying and looking at my watch and knowing what's going on inside the prison and I can't hear them anymore.

The killing is done.

The guards at the gate announce the time of death. The news media interview us. And everyone leaves to go home. Everyone but the Harveys and me.

I'm waiting for a British reporter to come out of the prison. She wants to interview me and I agreed to ride back to New Orleans with her. The Harveys drive up to where I'm standing. Vernon says, "Look, I'm sorry our friend said those things to you. I guess she's just upset."

I say it's okay, I know she's in a lot of pain, and I thank him and Elizabeth for coming to my defense. I lean over toward them seated in the front seat, my arm resting on the ledge of the open window, and we talk for a while. Vernon says that it looks as if I've lost another one in the chair tonight and that we'll be having executions in this state for a long time to come, if he has anything to do with it. And I say, the day will come, someday, when the electric chair will be in a museum. He says, "Don't hold your breath," and he says something teasing and everybody laughs, including Elizabeth in the back seat, who listens and chimes in and pokes Vernon affectionately on the back of the head.

"Look," Vernon says, "it's time you came with us to a Parents of Murdered Children meeting. You've been helping all these scumballs. You ought to come find out what victims go through."

I know that he and Elizabeth have helped organize a victims' group, and I had considered going to one of the meetings but backed

off. I am discovering that many victims' families, like the woman tonight, are angry at me because I oppose capital punishment. They think that compassion toward the murderer means betrayal of the victim. Why go to a meeting where I will upset people further? Already their pain is immeasurable. Why add to it? Especially since I know that there is something I cannot give them, something they may demand as a sign of loyalty and care: that I too desire the death of the one who killed their child. I know I cannot give them that. And that may only serve to upset them further.

But I also realize I'm protecting myself. I've been avoiding the victims because I'm afraid they'll turn on me and attack me. I fear their anger and rejection. Plus, I feel so helpless in face of their suffering. I don't begin to know how to help them. In all my life I have never felt such feelings and counterfeelings, such ambivalence. On one side, I oppose the death penalty; on the other, I feel sympathy for the victims. But what to do? What to do?

The Harveys break through my paralysis by inviting me to this meeting. If Vernon Harvey is inviting me, I must go. If I listen to people at the meeting and learn from them, I might discover a way to show I care.

The Harveys drive off and I am standing here alone waiting for the reporter. I notice one of the guards at the gate looking intently in my direction. He knows the Harveys and what they stand for and me and what I stand for. Seeing us together like this, laughing and talking, must be puzzling to him, the way we're acting — like friends.

I am standing outside the door and looking down at the doorknob. I take a deep breath and ask God's special help before I turn the knob and enter the room where the Parents of Murdered Children's group is meeting. I immediately search out the Harveys across the room and make my way over to them. "She's coming around, she's beginning to see the light," Vernon says as he introduces me to friends. I look around. It's an all-white group — middle-income, working folks. This doesn't surprise me. All of the counterdemonstrators we've encountered in our public campaigns have been white.

I'm nervous. When the meeting begins I sit between Vernon and Elizabeth and feel safer. I feel guilty. It has taken me four years to attend one of these meetings.

The motto of the group is "Give sorrow words," and, oh God, they do.

He was going out to be with the guys. I told him to take his jacket. Those were my last words to him.

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.

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.

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 . . .

Friends were supportive at first, at the time our son was killed, but now they avoid us. They don't know what to say, what to do. If you bring up your child's death, they change the subject. I keep getting the feeling that they think I should be able to put his death behind me by now and get on with my life. People have no idea what you go through when something like this happens to you.

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

My husband and I are getting a separation. We just have different ways of dealing with our son's death. He wanted to get rid of all his clothes right away. I wanted to keep them. He said he had to move on in his life and I'm still grieving. "Until death do us part" has new meaning for me.

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.

I 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.

Vernon starts to talk about Faith. His voice breaks and he can't speak. The room is silent.

Afterward, in the parking lot Elizabeth and Vernon walk with me over to my car. I thank them for inviting me to the meeting. They don't say much. They don't have to. *Late have I loved thee*—the words of St. Augustine in his *Confessions* well up within me. I put the key into the door of the car to unlock it and decide that, whatever it takes, I am going to help murder victims' families—as many as I can. I don't yet know how, but I'll find out.

The leader had said that the group was small tonight, just a dozen people. Thank God. So much tragedy seated around one table. But courage too, and, at times, ironic humor. People talked and cried and offered encouragement and validation: "No, you're not crazy. I've been through the mood swings you're talking about . . . Don't let that minister pressure you into forgiveness that you do not feel . . . You're not alone in feeling guilt. I felt a lot of guilt too, I still do sometimes, but I know better how to handle it . . ."

I am surprised that so many feel victimized by the criminal justice system. Insensitivity by the D.A.'s office and the police seems to be almost everyone's experience. I am also surprised by people's frequent experience of abandonment by relatives and friends. I notice that most victims mentioned tonight were killed by someone they knew. I am startled to find out that the divorce rate of couples who have lost a child is 70 percent. I see that some favor the death penalty and some do not. I find out that four to seven months after the murder is a critical time for survivors because by then the shock and numbness wear off and the loss and rage set in. I discover new meaning for the word "anniversary." I learn that survivors may recount over and over again the terrible details of the murder because they are trying to take it in, trying to overcome their own disbelief.

Mourning and weeping in this valley of tears . . . a snatch of words from a prayer comes to me as I drive home. I know that for the twelve or so grieving people who have found their way to this group tonight, there are thousands of others who are traumatized and

alone. The valley of the victimized in this country is wide and deep and growing.³ In such a sea of pain what can one person do? Better, I decide, to try to help ten real hurting people — or nine, or one — than to be overwhelmed and withdraw and do nothing — or write an academic paper on *The Problem of Evil*.

At the next Pilgrimage board meeting I propose that we inaugurate an assistance program for murder victims' families in New Orleans. Everyone agrees. We decide to locate the program where the homicide rate is highest — in the inner city.

Mandated by the board to pursue funding and resources, I approach churches for start-up funds, Hope House for office space, and the Mennonites for a volunteer.⁴ I discover that a victim assistance program such as ours — a nonprofit, community-based group — can get federal funds. In 1984 Congress passed the Victims of Crime Act, which set up the Crime Victims' Fund, and these funds are partially dedicated to community-based victim assistance programs such as ours.⁵ State law-enforcement agencies administer these funds, and victim assistance groups must apply through state agencies for grants. Federal funds are not available to individuals, but state victim compensation funds are. In 1975 only ten states offered such help to victims. Now almost all of the states offer some form of compensation to victims of violent crime for expenses such as medical care, counseling, lost wages, and funeral expenses.

But, as Elizabeth and Vernon Harvey learned, often the local law-enforcement officials, entrusted with administering state funds and educating the public about them, put little energy or enthusiasm into the task. The sheriff's deputy who advised the victim's family to write to Ann Landers exemplifies the problem. Most sheriffs' departments direct their energies toward punishing offenders, not helping victims.⁶

Maybe one day we'll integrate some of the principles of civil law into criminal justice, as Howard Zehr advises in his book *Changing Lenses: A New Focus for Crime and Justice*. Zehr points out that civil law defines wrongs as injuries and focuses on settlement and restitution to the victims.⁷ This is not to suggest that retribution or punishment of the offender does not have a place in the administration of justice, but the question for our future is whether retribution should be the *only* emphasis. According to the Amnesty International polls taken in four states* mentioned earlier, the American

*Georgia, New Mexico, New York, and Virginia. For New Mexico, the option offered was thirty years before the possibility of parole instead of twenty-five. See note 21 to chapter 5.

people seem to prefer a system of criminal justice which combines punishment for offenders with restitution for victims. These polls show that support for the death penalty as punishment for felony murder drops to about 50 percent when people are offered the alternative of mandatory twenty-five years' imprisonment without possibility of parole coupled with restitution to the victim's family from the labor of the offenders.

But given the present system, where prisoners in state institutions make only pennies for their labors, there is no practical way for offenders to make financial restitution to their victims.

Not yet. But that is not to say that a way cannot be found in the future. The truth is that we need to reform our system of criminal justice, and the first step toward that reform is the honest admission that the course we are now pursuing is counterproductive. Even though we execute criminals — at staggering costs — violent crime continues to rise. Between 1988 and 1992 murders nationwide increased 14 percent.⁸ The death penalty, although it sounds tough on crime, is actually a diversion of resources away from crime-fighting programs that truly make our streets and neighborhoods safer. Texas, for example, has more than three hundred persons on death row and executes more of its citizens each year than any other state, yet its murder rate remains one of the highest in the country. The state spends approximately \$2.3 million on each capital case, a grossly disproportionate outlay of resources which forces cut-backs in other crucial areas of crime control. It is estimated for example, that prisoners in Texas, because of economic cut-backs in the criminal justice system, serve only 20 percent of their sentence and rearrests are common.

In contrast, New York City, in a state with no death penalty, reduced its crime rate dramatically in the first four months of 1992 — murders declined by 11 percent — which many attribute to increased community policing. In 1990 the city had 750 foot officers on the streets. Today there are 3,000.⁹

Similarly, in New Orleans in 1992, the year ended with a 21 percent decrease in the murder rate, halting a three-year stretch of record-breaking murder rates, a decline which police readily attribute to two federal drug-fighting programs and beefed-up police patrols in high-crime areas. Said police spokesperson Sergeant Marlon Defillo: "We are taking more guns off the street before they can be used in more crimes."¹⁰

The question arises: how many laid-off police officers is one execution worth?

As I go about setting up the victim assistance group in New Orleans, I know I have everything to learn. I send off for packets of information from victim assistance programs around the country¹¹ and telephone people who seem to have effective programs.

How do human beings who have been devastated by the murder of a loved one recover from such a loss and pick up their lives again? What helps? What hinders?

Janet Yassen, crisis services coordinator of the Victims of Violence Program in Cambridge, Massachusetts,¹² tells me that people who come seeking help most often need at least a year for the rage, grief, and loss to settle so that they can begin to integrate what happened to them. The feelings of rage never entirely go away, she says, but gradually, over time, the "volume" goes down, and victims can accept other emotions — appreciation of beauty, ambition, friendship, trust. She emphasizes how gradual the healing is and how the steps can't be short-circuited. Even after many years, she says, certain situations — the anniversary of the crime or reading about a similar event in the newspaper — can cause the rage and hurt to resurface.

In August 1988, we succeed in establishing the New Orleans victim assistance group. We've gotten start-up funds from a few church groups, a small office at Hope House, and the Mennonite Volunteers send Dianne Kidner to launch the organization. Four years earlier I had worked to set up legal assistance for death-row inmates. Now, at last, I have done something to help victims.

The first thing I do is take Dianne to visit the Harveys. She is eager to get their ideas about needs of victims and possible programs. When I call to arrange the visit, Elizabeth suggests a potluck meal, so I bring baked beans and Dianne brings a pie. Elizabeth has made potato salad, and Vernon barbecues hamburgers.

Outside by the barbecue pit Vernon and I sip bourbon highballs and he tells me about different jobs he's had in construction and how he almost died in World War II when his ship was torpedoed. He tells how he was fished out of the sea unconscious, presumed dead, and almost dumped into a body bag when someone happened to notice that he was alive.

This only emphasizes the randomness of Faith's death. I don't know what to say and we're both quiet for a while. The only sound comes from the hamburgers sizzling on the grill, and I remember what Robert had said about the electric chair: "I know it fries your ass."

During the meal, the talk mostly centers on Dianne's work with victims. Dianne says she hopes the program will empower people, so she's thinking of not using the word "victim" in the name of the program. She tries out the name "Survive."¹³ The Harveys like it.

One day in July 1989, I get a telephone call from Elizabeth Harvey. She is worried about Vernon, who is recuperating from open-heart surgery. She says he's been talking about giving up. "That's just not Vern," she says, and she wonders if I can pay him a visit. "If anybody can get him fighting, you can," she says.

That very afternoon I go to visit him in New Orleans Veterans' Hospital. He and Elizabeth both looked washed out. Elizabeth has been driving back and forth across the Lake Pontchartrain Causeway to see him each day while working as a cashier in a department store.

"The damn doctors lied to me," Vernon says to me as soon as I walk in. "They didn't tell me I was going to hurt like this. If I had known, I would never have let them cut me," and he shows me the red gash down the middle of his chest. He's lying on a stretcher in the hall near his room waiting to go to X ray.

Elizabeth tells how she and Vern have recently spent three days in court with a murder victim's relatives from Ohio. "Their daughter was killed near the state park in Mandeville," Elizabeth says, "and here they come for the trial all alone, not knowing the court procedures or anything. Vern and I explained to them what was going to happen in court."

Vernon fidgets on the stretcher. "You wait forever in this damn place," he says.

"Know what they should've done with Willie?" he says. "They should've strapped him in that chair, counted to ten, then at the count of nine taken him out of the chair and let him sit in his cell for a day or two and then strapped him in the chair again. It was too easy for him. He went too quick."

He says he's been thinking of a much more effective way to prevent murders. "What we do is fry the bastards on prime-time TV, that's what we oughta do. Show them dying in the electric chair, say, at eight at night, and see if that doesn't give second thoughts to anybody thinking of murder."

I say that maybe what an execution does is show that the state can kill as well as anyone else, and that what people learn from such

an example is that when you have a really bad problem with someone, what you do is kill him.

Vernon says I have *got* to be kidding, and here we go again, Vernon and I playing our familiar roles, jousting with each other about the death penalty.

I tell him that the people doing the thinking and the people doing the killing are not the same people.

"That's because we're not executing *enough* of 'em," Vernon retorts. "We have to make executions more frequent and more consistent. No exceptions."

"But money and race and politics and the discretion we leave to D.A.s is always going to keep it from being a uniform and fair process," I say, "and even locale plays a part. Some states have the death penalty and some don't."

Vernon is getting some color in his face.

Elizabeth looks relieved.

An attendant has now appeared to bring Vernon to X ray. "What we really oughta do," he says as his stretcher begins to move away, proving to me just how effective my arguments have been, "we oughta do to them exactly what they did to their victim. Willie should've been stabbed seventeen times, that's what we oughta do to them."

I tell him to hang in there and I'll be coming back with an apple pie.

One evening in January 1991, I'm facing another doorknob and taking a deep breath before I turn it. Behind it are members of Survive, the victim assistance group begun by Dianne Kidner and now directed by Mary Riley, another Mennonite volunteer. During the two years Dianne worked with victims she mostly helped individuals, but now Mary has moved the organization toward group self-help and has begun weekly gatherings on Monday nights in one of the conference rooms at the Lovola University law school. Under Mary's direction, membership has been steadily growing and it now numbers about forty people — mostly indigent black women trying to cope with the death of sons, daughters, spouses, parents. Mostly sons — almost all of them killed with guns. *Bang, bang, bang, bang, bang, bang, bang*. If sounds of the killings could be accumulated and played back, it would sound like a war — which, in fact, it is. The *Louisiana Weekly*, a black-owned newspaper, ran a full page listing the name and race of the 323 homicide victims in New Orleans in

1990 (284 were black) with the headline: "For the City of New Orleans, Saddam Hussein Was Not the Only Horror of the Year."¹⁴

And Dr. Frank Minyard, Orleans Parish coroner, in a recent newspaper interview said, "Between AIDS, drugs, murder, police, prisons . . . You talk about genocide: by the year 2000 we will have lost a whole generation. There will be no more black males between the ages of 30 and 40."¹⁵

I open the door.

I feel prepared for what I will hear tonight. "Braced," maybe, is a better word because almost every week at Hope House staff meetings I hear stories of shoot-outs and deaths in the St. Thomas Housing Development.

As the stories begin, I think of the plagues visited on Egypt recorded in the Book of Exodus. The last plague was the worst — the slaying of the firstborn sons of the Egyptians. The Israelites who had put lamb's blood over their doorposts were spared by the Avenging Angel. But no one here tonight seemed able to get the blood on the doorpost in time, and some have been visited by the Avenging Angel more than once.

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.

My son was abducted and shot twelve times. It was just a few days before he was to appear as a witness to a drug-related murder. He had seen two boys killing someone. We had gotten threats and I had called the D.A.'s office and asked for protection. I sent my other son to the country to stay with kinfolk. They was callin' and threatenin' him too.

Well, they know me at City Hall, yes, they do, because I still get out there with my picket sign and I let them know I know my son was set up to be killed by the police. He had been dating a white girl, a policeman's daughter, and I'm gonna stand up to 'em 'til the day I die.

My son was shot by his girlfriend. She just got a gun and shot him in the eye, his right eye, and I'm going to

have to quit my second job so I can pay more attention to my younger daughter. I'm so worried about that child.

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 died of hepatitis, and now my twenty-four-year-old son was shot to death.

I had to drop out of LPN [licensed practical nurse] school for the second time now. Got a bad case of nerves.

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.

My eighty-three-year-old father was shot in cold blood. I think it was because he was speaking out about crime in the neighborhood.

My son was a crack cocaine addict. I called his parole officer and tried to get him to arrest him but the officer said my boy was hopeless, that it was no use. They found him shot.

I went to several stores where they sell guns — not to buy one exactly, I just asked about buying one. It was so easy. All I had to do was show a picture ID . . . All these young kids are totin' guns — handguns, sawed-off shotguns, .357 Magnums, Uzis. Even thirteen-year-olds have guns. They go in people's houses and steal them.

As each of the women speaks, a litany punctuates the testimonies — "Oh, Lord . . . Yes, Lord . . . Jesus . . . Say it . . . Amen . . . Jesus, help us . . . God makes a way out of no way" — and sometimes soft moans and tears and heads bent down and then raised up, and at times hands reaching to clasp another hand.

Some talk of considering suicide, of staying in bed and sleeping, of numbing the pain with alcohol or drugs. They talk of confusion and bewilderment. But mostly they talk about carrying on. The struggle for physical survival — meeting utility and rent payments, putting food on the table, taking sick children to Charity Hospital — helps keep them going. Except for the one woman who pickets in

front of city hall, it seems to be a given, a fact of life, that no one expects anything from the criminal justice system.

A pattern emerges: of the forty or so members of Survive, only one hopes to see her child's murderer brought to trial. *Maybe*, another member cautions. She, too, had thought her child's killer would be brought to trial, only to be told that the charges had been dropped because of "insufficient evidence."

One case in forty of a perpetrator brought to trial is not a very good track record for a D.A.'s office. I soon discover that in the majority of these cases the perpetrator is still at large, or, if apprehended, kept in jail for a short while, then freed. A good number of Survive members have never been interviewed by investigating officials. Some have never seen a document of any kind — a medical or autopsy report or even a death certificate.

Granted, even the most fair-minded law enforcement officials face a substantial challenge in a city as crime-ridden as New Orleans. First there is the sheer volume of homicides, where in a single weekend there might be as many as four murders, especially in poor black neighborhoods, where most homicides take place.¹⁶ The police are not legally required to investigate every reported crime.¹⁷ Then there is the difficulty of getting witnesses to come forward. Blacks in low-income housing projects are reluctant witnesses because they both distrust the police and fear retaliation from drug dealers. Nor are police investigators eager to conduct investigations in violence-ridden neighborhoods.

In such circumstances "equal protection of the laws," a Fourteenth Amendment right, is indeed a challenge. Yet some tough cases show that where there is resolve, results can be expeditious.

A recent New Orleans case comes to mind of a judge's son who was murdered. The young man, who had been to a bar, was killed in the street near the bar in the early-morning hours. There were no witnesses to the crime, yet within four days of vigorous investigation two suspects were arrested, charged, and jailed. A high bond was set, and the suspects were kept in jail pending trial.¹⁸

In 1989, there were 249 homicides in New Orleans. Eighty-five percent of the victims were black. Sixteen offenders were convicted and jailed.¹⁹

My hunch is that the large number of "unsolved" murders of black victims is not unique to New Orleans, but I discover that the Bureau of Justice Statistics does not track the race of the victim in its records of "unsolved" murders.

The "Chattahoochee Report," whose findings were presented

to the House Judiciary Subcommittee on Civil and Constitutional Rights of the Georgia House of Representatives on July 9, 1991, revealed strong racial bias in the way some D.A.s prosecute murder cases. The study of murder cases in a six-county area in Georgia from 1973 to 1990 found that although blacks made up 65 percent of murder victims and whites, 35 percent, the death penalty was sought in 85 percent of murder cases that involved white victims but only in 15 percent of those cases that involved black victims.²⁰

The section of the "Chattahoochee Report" entitled "Victims' Families: A Contrast in Black and White" could have been transcribed from a Survive meeting. Numerous black families in Columbus County, where the death penalty has been vigorously sought, testified that despite the D.A.'s protestation that he always met with victims' families, he had not in fact ever visited them. In contrast, the study shows, when the victim was white, the D.A. was solicitous of the family's feelings, often paying them courtesy visits at their homes and then announcing at a press conference that he would seek the death penalty.

The report cites one such highly publicized case in Columbus in which the homicide victim was the daughter of a prominent white contractor: "D.A., William J. Smith, phoned to ask the contractor personally what punishment he wanted the D.A. to seek. When the contractor told him to go for the death penalty, Smith told him that was all he needed to hear. He secured a death sentence and was rewarded with a \$5,000 contribution — his largest single contribution — to run for judge in the next election."²¹

In cases involving black victims, however, the report states, "not only did none of the murders of their relatives lead to a capital trial, but officials often treated them as criminals":

- Jimmy Christian was informed by the police in 1988 that his son had been murdered. That was the last he heard from any officials. He was never advised of any court proceedings. When an arrest was made, he heard about it on the street. He was not informed of the trial date or the charges.
- Johnny Johnson came home from church in 1984 to find the body of his wife, her throat cut. His one contact with officials occurred when he was briefly jailed on suspicion of her murder.
- Mildred Brewer witnessed the shooting of her daughter in 1979. Instead of being allowed to accompany her in the ambulance to the hospital, she was taken to police headquarters and ques-

tioned for three hours — during which her daughter died. When a suspect was arrested, tried and sentenced, Mrs. Brewer heard nothing from the D.A.²²

And so it goes.

The Survive meeting ends, heads all bowed in prayer. Later, people cluster in small groups, chatting and sipping drinks that some of the women have provided. All the sorrow and loss is overwhelming, yet I don't feel devastated. There's something in the women themselves that strengthens me. I think of the rallying cry of black women of South Africa: "You have struck the women. You have struck the rock." Maybe it's because black people, especially black women, have suffered for such a long, long time. Seasoned sufferers, they have grace, tenacity, a great capacity to absorb pain and loss and yet endure. *God makes a way out of no way.* For these women this is no empty, pious sentiment. It is the air they breathe, the bread they eat, the path they walk.

A ripple of laughter bubbles up from one end of the room and I see Shirley Carr slip her arm comfortingly around another woman's shoulders. Shirley was the first to speak tonight, telling of her two sons killed five months apart. She's worked through the paralysis of her grief and is now able to accompany others through the phases and seasons of denial and guilt, rage and loss, withdrawal and despair. Mary sees that when her term of service is up, Shirley will likely take over directorship of the group. Development of self-help and local leadership is important in the Mennonite philosophy.

Mary Riley and I have become friends, and we look for ways to build bridges between our two organizations — Pilgrimage, our abolitionist group, and Survive. When people join Pilgrimage, besides inviting them to become pen pals to death-row inmates, we also encourage them to volunteer their services to Survive or to other victim assistance groups in their town or city.

Lloyd LeBlanc, the father of young, murdered David. With him, I end this narrative.

In the years immediately after Pat Sonnier's Pardon Board hearing, my encounters with Lloyd were friendly but tentative. We talked on the telephone, wrote notes. I paid a few visits. My first visits to his home in St. Martinville had been especially difficult for Eula, Lloyd's wife. The thought of someone coming into her house

who had befriended her son's murderers was at first too much for her. When I would come, she would leave the house. It's better now.

One day two years ago in a telephone conversation, Lloyd said that he goes to pray every Friday from 4:00 to 5:00 A.M. in a small "perpetual adoration" chapel in St. Martinville, and I asked if I might join him. He said he would like that very much. I know I want to do this, even if it's four o'clock in the morning. Words of Rainer Maria Rilke come:

Work of the eyes is done, now
go and do heart-work.²³

I drive into Baton Rouge the night before to shorten the distance of the drive, and Louie comes to sleep over at Mama's house so we can save time in the morning. Good brother that he is, he says I should not make the trip alone. We have figured that if we leave Baton Rouge at 2:45 we can reach St. Martinville by 4:00. Louie fills the thermos with coffee.

Riding in the dark across Acadian Louisiana reminds me of when I was eight years old and I would get up with Mama during Lent to go to early-morning Mass. I remember the still, cold air, the feeling of mystery that is always there in the dark when you are awake and the rest of the world is asleep.

In his note Lloyd has told me how he prays for "everyone, especially the poor and suffering." He prays for "the repose of the soul" of David and for his wife, Eula. He prays in thanksgiving for his daughter, Vickie, and her four healthy children. It is the grandchildren — little Ryan, Derek, Megan, and Jacob — who have brought Eula back to life — but it has taken a long, long time. For a year after David's murder, Lloyd had frequently taken her to visit David's grave. Unless he took her there, he once told me, "she couldn't carry on, she couldn't pick up the day, she couldn't live." For three years his wife had cried, and he said the house was like a tomb and he found himself working long hours out of the house "to keep my sanity."

Once, during one of my visits, he took me to his office — he is a construction worker — and showed me the grandfather clock he was making after his day's work was done. "It's good to keep busy," he says.

Lloyd LeBlanc prays for Loretta Bourque and her family. The Bourques had been more anxious than he to witness the execution

of Patrick Sonnier. The day before the Pardon Board was to hear Pat's appeal, members of the Bourque family had visited Lloyd to urge him to attend the hearing and press for the death sentence. A few months earlier, trying to evade witnessing the execution, Lloyd had asked his brother to take his place, but the brother had a heart attack and couldn't.

There, at the Pardon Board hearing, Lloyd LeBlanc had done what was asked of him. Speaking for both families, he asked that the law of execution be carried out. But after the execution he was troubled and sought out his parish priest and went to confession.

Now, Lloyd LeBlanc prays for the Sonniers — for Pat and for Eddie and for Gladys, their mother. "What grief for this mother's heart," he once said to me in a letter. Yes, for the Sonniers, too, he prays. He knows I visit Eddie, and in his letters he sometimes includes a ten-dollar bill with the note: "For your prison ministry to God's children." And shortly before Gladys Sonnier's death in January 1991, Lloyd LeBlanc went to see her to comfort her.

Louie and I drive Interstate 10 West, then turn off at Breaux Bridge for the last twenty miles. We go through Parks, the last place David and Loretta were seen alive, and drive into the parking lot of the very old wooden church of St. Martin of Tours. Light shines in a steady slant from the tall stained-glass window of the chapel. Red, green, and yellow speckle the grass. All around is darkness. Nearby, large hundred-year-old oak trees spread their branches.

I tap the door of the chapel and a young woman with long dark hair lets us in with a quiet smile. She has a blanket around her. Her hour of vigil has been from three to four o'clock. We find out that she has eight children. Her husband preceded her in prayer earlier in the night. Louie and I are glad to get out of the cold. The fall weather is setting in.

Inside the chapel I see 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. Two pews along the back wall. Two kneelers, four red sanctuary candles on the floor. On the wall a crucifix and a picture of Mary, the mother of Jesus.

At five minutes to four Lloyd drives up. "You made it," he says, "I'm glad you're safe, you know those highways," and I introduce

him to Louie. The chapel is warm and close and filled with silence and the smell of beeswax. Lloyd and I kneel on the prie-dieu. He takes his rosary out of his pocket. Louie, in the pew behind us, already has his rosary in his hands.

We "tell" the beads, as the old French people used to say. *One at a time—Hail Mary, Holy Mary, Hail Mary, the mysteries of Christ and our own, life and joy, suffering and death—we round the beads one by one, a circle and round we go, dying and behold we live, the soul stretched taut, the soul which says: No more, I can take no more. Hail Mary, Holy Mary, breathe in and breathed out, linking what eyes cannot see but what the heart knows and doubts and knows again.*

Holding a rosary is a physical, tangible act—you touch and hold the small, smooth beads awhile and then let go. "Do not cling to me," Jesus had said to Mary Magdalene. The great secret: *To hold on, let go. Nothing is solid. Everything moves. Except love—hold on to love. Do what love requires.*

We pray the sorrowful mysteries. Jesus agonizing before he is led to execution. Jesus afraid. Jesus sweating blood. Were there beads of sweat on David's brow when he realized the mortal danger? Was it when the kidnappers turned the car down a road that he knew ended in a cane field? Was it when he was told to lie face down on the ground? His mother had bought him a new blue velour shirt that he was wearing that night. Standing by the kitchen sink, he wrapped his arms around himself and patted the new shirt and said, "Mama, this is going to keep me warm at the game tonight."

And Loretta . . . her last evening of life at a football game . . . She had seen friends there, laughed and talked and cheered her team, safe in the globe of stadium light, unaware of the dark road soon to be hers.

Lloyd LeBlanc has told me that he would have been content with imprisonment for Patrick Sonnier. He went to the execution, he says, not for revenge, but hoping for an apology. Patrick Sonnier had not disappointed him. Before sitting in the electric chair he had said, "Mr. LeBlanc, I want to ask your forgiveness for what me and Eddie done," and Lloyd LeBlanc had nodded his head, signaling a forgiveness he had already given. He says that when he arrived with sheriff's deputies there in the cane field to identify his son, he had knelt by his boy—"laying down there with his two little eyes sticking out like bullets"—and prayed the Our Father. And when he came to the words: "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us," he had not halted or equivocated, and he said, "Whoever did this, I forgive them." But he acknowledges that it's

a struggle to overcome the feelings of bitterness and revenge that well up, especially as he remembers David's birthday year by year and loses him all over again: David at twenty, David at twenty-five, David getting married, David standing at the back door with his little ones clustered around his knees, grown-up David, a man like himself, whom he will never know. Forgiveness is never going to be easy. Each day it must be prayed for and struggled for and won.

POSTSCRIPT

Since the publication of this book in 1993 the states of Kansas (1994) and New York (1995) have reinstated the death penalty and Congress has enacted the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act (1994), which expands federal crimes punishable by death to about 60 offenses.