

Dead Man Thinking: Text Excerpts

Passage 1

My hope for the Harveys is that eventually they will be able to overcome their terrible grief and once again live positive lives. How I can help them I am not sure, but I want to try. And Robert Willie? What can I possibly do for him? I will do what Millard Farmer asked me to do—accompany him, treat him with dignity—but I will also challenge him to take responsibility for his crime and to ask forgiveness of the Harveys.

Emotionally it's confusing to think of the Harveys and their needs alongside Robert Willie and his. Hearing the details of Faith's vicious murder, I find myself sucked into the Harveys rage. But then I think of the death the state has in store for Robert Willie.

A few days after visiting the Harveys I visit Robert for the second time.... Robert comes into the visiting room. He is wearing a black knitted hat. He walks with a little bounce, poising momentarily on the balls of his feet. I dispense with preliminaries.

"I went to visit the Harveys," I say. "They told me about Faith's death. Robert, you raped and stabbed that girl and left her to rot in the woods. Why?"

"All right," he says, and he lights a cigarette. "I'm telling you what, ma'am, I'm real, real sorry that girl got killed, but like I told the police when they was questioning me, I didn't stab and kill that girl. Joe went crazy and started stabbin' her. I told them that when I gave my statement, and I offered to take a lie detector test then and there on the spot, but they wouldn't let me. I told them I don't kill women. I don't. But when Joe started stabbin' her, her hands went up and he told me to hold her hands and I did. But it was more instinct than anything, and with him slashing with that knife, there was blood everywhere, I was scared. I just did what he said, 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."

I groan inside. The truth. What's the truth? Not another one of those situations where two perpetrators each accuse the other and it's so difficult to ferret out the facts. He admits that he held Faith's hands. He did not come to her

defense. Even if he's telling the truth and did not stab her himself, he is responsible for her death. Does he know what he did? And if he does, how can he live with himself?

"Robert," I say, "Vernon Harvey tells me that you taunted him in the courtroom. You said you'd never fry. Is that true?"

"He said he'd see me fry and I said, 'The hell you will,'" Robert says. "I'd never show my inner feelin's out there in the courtroom, in public like that. Ever since I was a little boy I ain't ever showed my real feelin's. See, my daddy went to Angola when I was a baby. People would point to me and say, 'That's John Willie's kid,' and wham, there I am in a fight. My mama had her hands full in her own life, much less trying to take care of me. I don't blame her none for what's happened. She separated from my daddy when I was real young and married again, and me and my stepfather never got on too good. I'd stay with my grandmother sometime, my aunt and uncle sometime, my mother and stepfather sometime. By the time I was in seventh grade I was sniffin' glue, paint, gasoline, you name it. Me and Joe were loaded on Valium, acid, and booze when this happened with Faith Hathaway. I had this light airy feelin' inside. I hadn't slept in two nights."

I say, "Robert, drugs don't explain violence like this. Thousands of people take drugs and don't slash and rape and kill people. The Harveys told me about that young boy, Mark Brewster, and his girlfriend whom you and Joe kidnapped after you killed Faith. They say you raped the girl and stabbed the boy and shot him and tied him to a tree and left him to die. The boy's paralyzed now for the rest of his life and God knows about the emotional scars on the girl. Did you do that?"

I am keeping my voice low, but it's an effort. I am quivering inside.

He pauses. He always speaks in a measured way and softly. "Yeah," he says, "I let Joe Vaccaro call all the shots and I went along. I wasn't thinkin' straight.

"The only other time I was involved in hurting somebody bad, where they died, was when me and my cousin struggled in the woods with this drug dealer for a big hunk of

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Passage 1 (CONTINUED)

money - \$10,000. We was all three fighting in the river and me and my cousin held his head under the water and then dragged him out and left him on the bank. We thought he was just unconscious, but he ended up dead.

"But with that couple we kidnapped, Vaccaro told me to kill the boy and I took out my knife, which was pretty dull, and I cut him across the neck and punched it into his side, but not hard or deep 'cause I really didn't want to kill him, and I said to Joe, 'He won't die,' and then Joe came up and shot him in the head."

He shakes his head. "I was stupid to let myself get messed up with Joe Vaccaro. He was supposed to be such a tough dude. He had been to Angola and so I was saying, 'Hey, man, he's been to Angola.' All that week when we were doin' all this, I knew it was wrong. This voice kept going off in my head, 'This is wrong. This is wrong.' I was a damn fool."

"Have you ever told the Harveys that you're sorry?" I ask him.

"Well, ma'am that's hard to do because Vernon Harvey keeps holding these press conferences, mouthin' off about how he can't wait to see me fry. Personally, I think the guy is his own worst enemy. He just needs to let it go, man. The

girl's dead now, and there's nothin' he can do to bring her back. Even watchin' me fry ain't gonna bring her back, but he won't let it go and he's just makin' himself miserable, in my opinion."

"Robert," I say, "you understand, don't you, that you are the last person in the world with the right to say that to Vernon Harvey?"

"I guess you're right," he says, but he doesn't seem terribly convinced.

"Hell," Robery says, "it's hard, ma'am, to be having much sympathy for them when here, they're tryin' to kill me. When somebody's after your hide, it kind of tends to occupy your mind, if you know what I mean."

"But look at what those parents are going through," I say. "Their daughter raped and stabbed and left to die in the woods. What if someone did that to your mother? What would you want to do to them?"

"Kill 'em," he says. "I sure as hell would want to kill 'em." I'm quiet then for a while.

I'm hoping he can take in his own words so he can feel the Harveys' pain.

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Passage Two

I tell Robert I've been talking to his mother on the telephone and he says that now she's his biggest worry. He can do it, he's "ready to go," but he doesn't know what he'll do if she starts "crying and breaking down" in the death house.

That was what Pat Sonnier had feared most, his mother breaking down and causing him to lose emotional control.

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

He gives a little laugh, a nervous laugh, and I know he's listening.

"There's another mother who's suffering, Robert," I say. "Elizabeth Harvey. She and Faith 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 Faith—have you ever really faced her pain, felt it, taken it inside yourself? I'm saying all this to you because I'm your friend and 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 Faith's death."

"I am sorry, I really am sorry about Faith," he says, "I hope my death gives the Harveys some peace. I really do. Maybe my death will help them get some relief, some peace."

His head is down and his voice is soft, and when he says this I say to him, just as I said to Pat Sonnier, that his last words can be words either of hate or of love and maybe that's the best thing he can offer the Harveys, a wish for their peace.

Dead Man Thinking: Active Listening

As you listen to each of the eight excerpts from the opera, pay close attention to how Joseph De Rocher’s character is described and who is describing him. Chart your findings in one of the four categories.

TRACK 4: “Heavens! Look at the time”	
Others’ perceptions of him:	His perception of himself:
Character traits revealed:	Evidence of grief of catharsis*

TRACK 5: “I don’t like that man”	
Others’ perceptions of him:	His perception of himself:
Character traits revealed:	Evidence of grief of catharsis

TRACK 6: “Thank you”	
Others’ perceptions of him:	His perception of himself:
Character traits revealed:	Evidence of grief of catharsis

TRACK 7: “The defendant’s mother, Mrs. Patrick De Rocher”	
Others’ perceptions of him:	His perception of himself:
Character traits revealed:	Evidence of grief of catharsis

*Catharsis refers to an emotional release which allows an individual to achieve a state of spiritual renewal, free from stress or anxiety.

Dead Man Thinking: Active Listening

TRACK 8: "I believe in the here and now"	
Others' perceptions of him:	His perception of himself:
Character traits revealed:	Evidence of grief of catharsis

TRACK 9: "I'm scared, OK?"	
Others' perceptions of him:	His perception of himself:
Character traits revealed:	Evidence of grief of catharsis

TRACK 10: "I killed her"	
Others' perceptions of him:	His perception of himself:
Character traits revealed:	Evidence of grief of catharsis

TRACK 11: "Dead man walking!"	
Others' perceptions of him:	His perception of himself:
Character traits revealed:	Evidence of grief of catharsis

Dead Man Thinking: Open-Mind Portrait

EXTERNAL PERCEPTION

SELF-PERCEPTION

