



# LIFE AFTER DEATH

The shocking  
true story of an  
innocent man  
on death row

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'A brilliant memoir.' JOHNNY DEPP

'Haunting, painful, and uplifting.' JOHN GRISHAM

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## PREFACE

**S**aint Raymond Nonnatus, never was it known that anyone who implored your help or sought your intercession was left unaided. To you I come, before you I stand. Despise not my petitions, but in your mercy hear and answer me.”

Saint Raymond Nonnatus is one of my patron saints. I would be willing to bet that most people have no idea that he is the patron saint of those who have been falsely accused. I like to think that means I have a special place in his heart, because you can't get much more falsely accused than I have been. So me and old Raymond have struck a bargain. If he helps me out of this situation, then I will travel to all the world's biggest cathedrals and leave roses and chocolate at the feet of every one of his statues that I can find. You didn't know saints liked chocolate? Well then, that's one thing you've already learned, and we're just getting started!

I have three patron saints in all. You may be wondering who the other two are, and how a foul-mouthed sinner such as myself was

blessed with not one but three saints to watch over him. My second patron saint is Saint Dismas. He's the patron saint of prisoners. So far he's done his job and watched over me. I've got no complaints there. So, what deal do Saint Dismas and I have? Just that I do my part by going to Mass every week in the prison chapel, unless I have a damn good reason not to.

My third patron saint is one I've had reason to talk with many times in my life. Saint Jude, patron saint of desperate situations. I'd say being on Death Row for something I didn't do is pretty desperate. And what does Saint Jude get? He just likes to watch and see what ridiculous predicament I find myself in next.

If I start to believe that the things I write cannot stand on their own merit, then I will lay down my pen. I'm often plagued by thoughts that people will think of me only as either someone on Death Row or someone who used to be on Death Row. I grow dissatisfied when I think of people reading my words out of a morbid sense of curiosity. I want people to read what I write because it means something to them—either it makes them laugh, or it makes them remember things they've forgotten and that once meant something to them, or it simply touches them in some way. I don't want to be an oddity, a freak, or a curiosity. I don't want to be the car wreck that people slow down to gawk at.

If someone begins reading because they want to see life from a perspective different from their own, then I would be content. If someone reads because they want to know what life looks like from where I stand, then I will be happy. It's the ghouls that make me feel ill and uneasy—the ones who care nothing for me, but interest

themselves only in things like people who are on Death Row. Those people give off the air of circling vultures, and there's something unhealthy about them. They wallow in depression and their lives tend to follow a downward trend. Their spirits seem mostly dead, like larvae festering on summer-day roadkill. I want nothing to do with that energy. I want to create something of lasting beauty, not a grotesque freak show exhibit.

Writing these stories is also a catharsis for me. It's a purge. How could a man be subjected to the things I have been and not be haunted? You can't send a man to Vietnam and not expect him to have flashbacks, can you? This is the only means I have of clearing the trauma out of my psyche. There are no hundred-dollar-an-hour therapy sessions available for me. I have no need of Freud and his Oedipal theories; just give me a pen and paper.

I've witnessed things in this place that have made me laugh and things that have made me cry. The environment I live in is so warped that incidents that would become legends in the outside world are forgotten the next day. Things that would show up in newspaper headlines in the outside world are given no more than a passing glance behind these filthy walls. When I first arrived at the Tucker Maximum Security Unit located in Tucker, Arkansas, in 1994, it blew my mind. After being locked down for more than ten years, I've become "penitentiary old," and the sights no longer impress me as much. To add the preface of "penitentiary" to another word redefines it. "Penitentiary old" can mean anyone thirty or older. "Penitentiary rich" means a man who has a hundred dollars or more. In the outside world a thirty-year-old man with a hundred dollars

would be considered neither old nor rich—but in here it's a whole 'nother story.

The night I arrived on Death Row I was placed in a cell between the two most hateful old bastards on the face of the earth. One was named Jonas, the other was Albert. Both were in their late fifties and had seen better days physically. Jonas had one leg, Albert had one eye. Both were morbidly obese and had voices that sounded like they had been eating out of an ashtray. These two men hated each other beyond words, each wishing death upon the other.

I hadn't been here very long when the guy who sweeps the floor stopped to hand me a note. He was looking at me in a very odd way, as if he were going to say something but then changed his mind. I understood his behavior once I opened the note and began reading. It was signed "Lisa," and it detailed all the ways in which "she" would make me a wonderful girlfriend, including "her" sexual repertoire. This puzzled me, as I was incarcerated in an all-male facility and had seen no one who looked like they would answer to the name of Lisa. There was a small line at the bottom of the page that read, "P.S. Please send me a cigarette." I tossed the note in front of Albert's cell and said, "Read this and tell me if you know who it is." After less than a minute I heard a vicious explosion of cursing and swearing before Albert announced, "This is from that old whore, Jonas. That punk will do anything for a cigarette." Thus Lisa turned out to be an obese fifty-six-year-old man with one leg. I shuddered with revulsion.