

## CHARACTERS

- Newcomer (dressed normal)
- Tellers (plain clothed)
  - Criminal (T1 / T2 / T4)
  - Citizen (T3)
  - Reporter (T4 / T1)
  - Sydney Silverman (T3)
  - Retentionist (T2)

## PRE-SCENE

*Tellers onstage only. Alongside them will be the items/props that aid character transformation. No character will be distinct in this scene.*

T1: *To the audience* One of you is meant to be here. I can feel it.

T2: We haven't had to introduce anybody for a long time-

T3: It wouldn't be their time yet, anyway!

T1: No, I am certain of it.

T3: Right, well, which one?

T1: How would I know that? Forget it. It does not matter.

T4: Guys... (*repeatedly attempt to get their attention*)

T3: Exactly. If you are bored of us, you can drift off into another area of the Afterlife.

T1: How dare you? I will have you know that I was here first.

T3: Your old age is not something to be proud of.

*Newcomer stands from within the audience.*

T4: Guys!

TELLERS 1 & 3: What?

T2: We have a Newcomer.

T1: I knew it!

T2: Who?

T4: Them.

Newcomer: What's going on? Why are you so far away?

TELLERS: Welcome.

Newcomer: Yes, yes, thank you - which hospital is this?

T4: I believe you are confused.

T2: We are welcoming you to the Afterlife.

Newcomer: What?

*Newcomer and TELLERS onstage.*

T4: At the moment, you may not remember much about your life. Do not worry, that is completely normal.

T2: You have just passed through the Threshold, it provides an amnesia block so that you are level headed when we provide you this information.

Newcomer: As opposed to?

T1: Crying and begging us to take you back. We have not got time for that when there is so much to explain!

T3: *Points at the audience* You can see them, can't you?

Newcomer: Obviously.

T3: They cannot see you.

Newcomer: They are quite literally looking at me.

T2: They only look like that from here. They each have their own lives. Their own families. Stories. We cannot access them from here.

T4: That one might be a boxer. That one a nurse. That one a popstar. We do not know. We cannot know.

T2: Most of them are aware we exist in the same way that we know they exist. They are in the Land of the Living.

Newcomer: So you're all dead?

T1: As are you, my friend.

T3: We cannot interact with the Land of the Living but we can see them. You are now in the Afterlife.

T2: There are different sections and we must explain them. You can travel anywhere you would like, you can meet family members, you can spend each day without being tied down to a single purpose. A single destination.

T1: Or, the truly ambitious might pick up a job.

Newcomer: You work in heaven?

T4: Not heaven. Afterlife. Heaven's a nice idea... heaven's not reality.

T2: For instance, we are the Tellers. We introduce the Newcomers, like you.

T3: We guide you through the Afterlife until you no longer need us and can navigate it alone.

T1: For some, it takes all of 2 minutes as they do not really want to know or see or learn very much. They just want to move on, start grieving who they used to be immediately.

T3: For others, it can take quite a while.

Newcomer: You know the amnesia block I have, do you have them?

T4: No, why?

Newcomer: I do not really have very many questions, to be honest. I think I can figure it out once I remember what happened to me and who I am; anyway - but who are you? Who were you, in the Land of the Living?

*Teller 1 wears a jacket, and becomes Criminal*

T2: Names lose significance here, for most people.

Newcomer: I won't remember my name?

T3: No, you will. Your Living name will only matter to those who know you, to everyone else, you are a completely new being, separate as a culmination of your experiences.

T4: In other words, most of us do not have a name.

T3: But we all have a story.

Newcomer: What's your story, then?

Criminal: I was a convicted criminal. It is how I died, actually - death penalty.

*Newcomer is shocked, shirks away, horrified while T2 & T3 do not react.*

Newcomer: What did you do? You know what, I don't even think I want to know. I don't want to know any of your stories, in fact, I will just leave, thanks.

Criminal: What do you see when you look at me?

Newcomer: Murderer? Rapist? Terrorist? All things I do not want to be around so I am leaving - where is the door? Are there no doors in the Afterlife?

T3: You will leave when you are ready to leave.

Newcomer: I am quite ready to leave, actually.

Criminal: If that were true, we would not need to point out a door for you. You would just go.

T2: Something is keeping you here. Curiosity, maybe. Perhaps you have more questions to ask.

T4: We come from different time periods, Newcomer. During the Bloody Code, capital crimes did include offences like murder-

Criminal: That was not my crime. How much does your watch cost?

Newcomer: £30, I think - I do not see how that is relevant.

*Criminal takes the watch*

Newcomer: You were a thief?

Criminal: Taking this from you was sufficient to kill me. In the Land of the Living, I stole something of the same value and lost my life as a result.

Newcomer: What did you steal?

Criminal: It does not matter. Do you still want to hear my story?

*Criminal approaches Newcomer, facing away from the audience and out at the scene across from them. T2 takes the jacket and becomes Criminal.*

Newcomer: I cannot leave until I do. I'm sorry for judging you so harshly-

Criminal: You aren't the first.

*Criminal and T3 act as the thieves, running across the stage while concealing something they have stolen. They may run through the audience to intensify the chase, but T3 will be caught by T4 and taken to the middle of the stage, but Criminal will escape.*

Criminal: Ask them.

Newcomer: What?

Criminal: You may have a connection with the Land of the Living as you have only just arrived. Ask them what the punishment shall be.

*T3 shall be apprehended by T4.*

Newcomer: Hello, Living. What shall the punishment be for this thief?

Criminal: Tell them their options.

Newcomer: Imprisonment. Death.

*Newcomer will choose a member of the audience, would have to improvise a response.*

Criminal: Imagine I am caught. Ask them. What shall the punishment be?

*Newcomer will choose a different member of the audience. If it is the same punishment, Criminal will say 'An equitable decision between the judges. Is following what has always been done always the right answer? Is change not necessary?' If it is a different punishment, Criminal will say 'Well, well, well.. Someone certainly does not like following the rules. Law is fickle, Newcomer - see how quickly it changed hands!'*

Newcomer: That is not your story, though. They cannot have control over what happened in the past.

Criminal: No. They cannot.

*T4 shall wear a judge's wig, with Criminal watching the trial.*

T4: I shall now hear the trial of the first thief. Guilty. 3 months' imprisonment.

Criminal: What? I have been chased around the country, barely eating, constantly alert and paranoid and all that awaits me are some months? What's a few months to do to me?

Newcomer: Oh..

*Criminal enters the courtroom*

Criminal: I turn myself in, I am the second thief.

T4: Fine, fine.

*T4 will pass the judge's wig to T2 and T4 shall apprehend Criminal and bring them up to the judge.*

T2: I have heard the trial of the second thief. You have been found guilty. Thieves like you.. Without proper correcting always become murderers. We must rid England of vermin like you. Death.

Criminal: What? You can't kill me!

T2: Verdict is final.

*T4 and Criminal will walk across the stage.*

T1: You know what the worst part is?

Newcomer: Losing your life so young?

T1: No. It's the walking. Each step is closer to your death. Each breath too close to your last. Your heart is pounding and you are so panicked that no plan can form in your mind. I could not make a clever escape that day. I could not keep running away. Me and my fate, only paces away from each other. *During the monologue, Criminal will look up at the audience.*

Criminal: Then, the people. Crowds. I had a name. Up there, on the stage, the noose ahead of me... my name did not matter to any of those people. I became a show. Light entertainment before tea. Pairs of eyes accompanied by smiles. Maybe they were horrified. Memory is only half the story, really. All I know is I looked out at a crowd full of people and not one of them understood their privilege to see the sun rise again. I played the part. *T4 attach a noose* I knew my cue line. I just needed to wait for the rope to tighten and then I would fall.

*Criminal falls, T1 drags the body away and takes the jacket*

Newcomer: I'm.. so sorry.

Criminal: Don't be. Can I be selfish and ask you a question? Capital punishment... my life.. I - I am unsure how to phrase this. Would I have died in your century?

Newcomer: No-

Criminal: It does not matter. Do not worry. *Removes the jacket* I am not that person anymore. I'm a Teller.

T3: How depressing, let's liven it up, shall we?

Newcomer: What crime did you commit?

*T3 laughs and takes their prop: cane / pipe, becoming Citizen*

Newcomer: Not a criminal, then. Who are you?

Citizen: Name's not important, not really. British Citizen is all you need to know.

*Citizen and Newcomer will sit with the audience.*

Newcomer: What are we here for?

Citizen: My story!

Newcomer: I don't think-

Citizen: I must set the scene. *Returns to the stage* We would all be gathered here, waiting for the criminal to show their face. *Pass the cane/pipe to T3, who will become Citizen* We read about it in the papers, you see and we know what's going on - just about - but nothing beats the thrill of seeing them in the flesh. The condemned onstage. Knowing that justice was to be served and you, yes, little old you, was to bear witness. The most notorious criminals had the largest crowds, everyone wanted to see them, some of them were quite attractive, you know, quite beautiful people committing crimes - you wouldn't believe it!

*T4 takes a book and a feather, acting as Charles Dickens and sit beside Newcomer*

*T1 & T2 will become criminal and executioner and Citizen will cheer*

Charles Dickens: This is awful! Today, I have seen vagabonds, prostitutes, common ruffians within the crowd, behaving in an unsightly manner.

Newcomer: Right-

Citizen: That's just Charles Dickens. Ignore him, he doesn't get it.

Charles Dickens: I believe that no genius could work such ruin to English society than a public execution. I stand astounded and appalled by what I have seen today.

*Citizen will shove Dickens out of the audience*

Newcomer: Maybe he has a point. You're cheering at the death of a man, celebrating life being taken-

Citizen: Do not listen to him. Him? He's a hypocrite. He'll write some letter denouncing us all, the common folk for enjoying what is class entertainment. They don't understand what we're doing here. They don't! This is justice.

*Citizen and Newcomer will come back to the stage*

This is a good thing. This is something to celebrate, to dance around, to cheer for! Gruesome, it may be but there is a thrill in that. There's something exciting about seeing.. Contained violence. Why should we feel guilty for an activity that is not a crime? And yet you can feel sorry for the next convict? Hypocrites, I tell you. Before he came along, you were having fun. You could scarce blink in case you missed it. That moment where the life in front of you lives no more. Being horrified is a sick form of entertainment.

Newcomer: I understand.

Citizen: You have public executions?

Newcomer: No. We have.. A version.

Citizen: How's that, then?

Newcomer: Video games and movies, source of entertainment can depict truly horrifying violence. With the games, you can even be the one to commit this violence.

Citizen: And I am assuming you didn't engage in these things because it's a celebration of life being taken?

Newcomer: Well, no-

Citizen: Right.

Newcomer: That is different.

Citizen: How so?

Newcomer: Well, these games are never realistic - usually... sometimes.. And everyone knows that it is just a game, nobody really gets influenced to do anything; it's a way to release anger for some people and-

Citizen: Public executions influenced a lot of people. We had a terrible writer, I doubt you would know him, nobody liked his novels, questioning Christianity and our society-

Newcomer: Who was it?

Citizen: Thomas Hardy. What? You know him! Anyway, when he was a boy, he watched an execution and then when he grew up, he based his novel on it. Tess of the d'Urbervilles it was.

Newcomer: Wow.

Citizen: He saw violence and wrote about violence against women, advocating against it; that's the influence it had. I'm assuming your games and movies did not transform men into pacifists.

Newcomer: No.

Citizen: You have no right to judge, then. In fact, I would argue that your lot would enjoy them too. Are there still public executions?

Newcomer: No.

Citizen: I suppose there is no need when games and movies exist.

Newcomer: We also do not have capital punishment.

*T4 will take a camera and become Reporter*

Citizen: Really? Sydney will be happy about that.

Newcomer: Who?

Citizen: You'll meet him later, maybe. He is not as interesting, depressing like the Criminal. You need to meet the Reporter.

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*Reporter, Newcomer and Citizen onstage, speaking while T1 and T2 will be at desks, writing as though they are working in the media industry.*

Reporter: *shakes Newcomer's hand* Hello. We have already met but yes, I was a reporter.

Newcomer: Are there no reporting positions in heaven?

TELLERS: *Correcting* Afterlife.

Newcomer: Afterlife.

Reporter: I could tell you about the different positions here, if that is truly what you want to know. Or I could tell you my story.

Newcomer: I will not be taking up an Afterlife occupation, so go on.

*Reporter and Newcomer will stand side by side, watching the scene unfold. Citizen will take papers from T1 & T2 and throw them away, or take them home and read them, ripping them in half.*

Reporter: Citizen has told you about the thrill of public executions, I suppose I contributed to that feeling. Articles about the beautiful murderess, advertisements for the next execution beside a notice about baby powder.

Newcomer: And you were okay with this?

Reporter: I am not sure how the world is now. Maybe it has stayed the same. There is a perception, I think, of reporters having complete freedom to write what they like, to create any persona and make it news. It does not matter what I think, not really. It matters what they think. And they loved it. As soon as I realised that *Reporter will approach T1 and pass on the camera to them* I became a better reporter for it. *T4 will come back to stand with Newcomer while the Reporter will stand and approach Citizen*

Citizen: What's the story?

Reporter: You can read all about it, sexy blonde to be put on trial-

Citizen: I'll take that! *Citizen will leave to read it*

Reporter: *defeated* And.. current debates in Parliament on the second page.

*Reporter will approach T2*

T2: How's the story?

Reporter: Same old, just putting the news on sale. Yours?

T2: Currently writing a piece criticising the hangings.

Reporter: *laughs* Good luck with that!

T2: I think it could put the Times on the map.

Reporter: The what?

T2: The Times.

Reporter: You write for the Times?

T2: Who do you write for?

Newcomer: I don't understand.

T4: The Times could write whatever they liked. They had the name and the audience, they were respected enough to venture away from giving the people what they wanted.

T2: What would you write about, then?

Reporter: I would report on the capital crimes, its extensive list without rhyme or reason. My audience would not care about ridiculous theft crimes - did you know stealing goods worth five shillings in a shop could cost you your life? And in a dwelling house, it would be goods worth 40 shillings?

*T4 will wear the jacket, becoming Criminal*

Newcomer: Was that the crime you were convicted of?

Criminal: Theft, yes. Not necessarily the shop and dwellinghouse, though. There were many theft crimes. Too many. I do not approve of stealing - I do not think any thief views themselves as being in the right - but at some point, it appears that the justice system aimed to criminalise the poor rather than to find criminals. The law is meant to protect the innocent, would you not agree? The Bloody Code only protected the wealthy.

T2: That is quite extreme but that is not a story.

Reporter: No, no, the story is that there have been 1,872 people charged with those crimes - just those two. Capital crimes, that is. Estimate how many were executed.

Newcomer: Maybe half of them, around 900?

Reporter: One.

Criminal & Newcomer: Wow.

T2: That is a story, have you-

*T2 will become the Retentionist and find a rope to lay on their shoulder*

Reporter: I have. You know what my supervisor told me? Report the one that was executed. They will not care about the 1,871 - there is no story there.

Newcomer: Have you had to.. Compromise your morals a lot then?

Reporter: Anything for the story.

*Criminal removes jacket and stands with Newcomer*

Reporter: *defeated* If you wish the death penalty to remain, raise your hand! *T4 raises* And if you do not?

*Newcomer raises*

*Reporter goes to T1*

Reporter: I have a story!

T1: What is it? None of that conviction to execution ratio nonsense, is it?

Reporter: No- 50% of British people are in favour of the death penalty.

T1: Where did you get that number from?

Reporter: Conducted a survey.

T1: You have just got us a headline! Everyone, I need this printed: The Brits have spoken - Keep, keep, keep!

*T1 and T4 will print out these papers while Retentionist will take a paper and read it*

4

Retentionist: *direct address* Have you heard about this? The better half of the nation supports the death penalty, read about it in the papers today and I cannot say that I am surprised. You have all these abolitionists making their opinions known but what about the common man? The one who sees the value in the noose. We are here, you know, says it right here. What, you don't believe me?

*T3 will wear a top hat and become Sydney Silverman, greet Newcomer*

Sydney: Hello.

Newcomer: Are you the last one?

Sydney: Of the Tellers? I should be.

Newcomer: Then who is that?

Sydney: Ah. Do not pay them any mind. My story must describe two people, I am one extreme and they are the other. Sydney Silverman, pleased to meet you.

Newcomer: Are you depressing?

Sydney: What?

Newcomer: Nothing - something one of the citizens said.

*Retentionist will put an arm around Sydney and drag him to face the audience*

Retentionist: If you don't believe me, I can prove it right here, right now with my friend Sydney.

Sydney: We are not friends.

Retentionist: Say aye if you wish the death penalty to remain. Aye! Say aye if you wish to abolish it.

Sydney: Aye.

Retentionist: Aha - see! Fool proof! The paper never lies.

Newcomer: That does not count.

Retentionist: Sure it does - 50/50. One vote for each, is that not 50/50?

Newcomer: There are only two of you, that can't represent an entire nation.

Retentionist: Fine. Where do you stand - remain or abolish?

Newcomer: Abolish.

Sydney: Seems it is no longer 50/50.

Retentionist: No, they weren't included in the survey anyway so it does not matter. How can you want to abolish it? Can you not think of anyone who deserves it?

Newcomer: Not sure it is about who does or does not deserve it. I do not think anyone should have the power to kill another.

Retentionist: Are they your long lost twin? I refuse to be surrounded by abolitionists! *Slams the rope down, back to being T2*

Sydney: Finally.

Newcomer: How come you have a name?

Sydney: Everyone has a name.

Newcomer: The other Tellers would not tell me their name. What makes you important?

Sydney: My bill abolished the death penalty. It became the Murder (abolition of the Death Penalty) Act 1965.

Newcomer: 1965? Abolition was that recent?

Sydney: Technically. Death penalty was abolished for murder in 1957 with the Homicide Act. Unfortunately, the Leader of the House made contradictory promises. *T1 approaches T2* To the Commons, he supported the Act and *T1 approaches T4* to the Lords, he opposed. As the Bill passed through, both Houses expected an opposite outcome. To resolve this, he made a somewhat unsavoury compromise... abolition with exceptions. My Bill removed those exceptions in 1965.

Newcomer: You must be so proud.

Sydney: Just because I was the last in the relay... does not mean I, alone, won the race. Abolishing the death penalty was not a duel between me and the Retentionist, for example. It was a long battle, started by early abolitionists like Samuel Romilly to cut down the Bloody Code to eradicate capital punishment completely. In fact, Sir Mackintosh criticised our criminal law, for being savage in threat but feeble in punishment.

Newcomer: What does that mean?

Sydney: The judges.

*T1 will wear the judges' wig, T2 and T4 will enact coming up to the judge as different criminals, hearing their punishment.*

T1: Guilty. Imprisonment.

T4: And I?

T1: Guilty. Imprisonment.

T2: And I?

Sydney & T1: Guilty.

T1: Imprisonment.

T4: And I?

Sydney: What do you think?

Newcomer: Well, guilty.

Sydney: And the punishment?

Newcomer: Imprisonment.

T1: Guilty. Death.

Sydney: Does that look like justice to you?

Newcomer: I don't understand - did they not all commit the same crime?

Sydney: They all committed capital offences, yes. All of them should have received the death penalty. But even judges knew it was extreme, so they refused. Sometimes, the Home Secretary could award a pardon on behalf of the Monarch. It protected the criminals, until, as you saw yourself, it didn't.

Newcomer: That is horrible.

Sydney: It is. *Removes top hat, but still holds it* I am a Teller now. I was Sydney, witnessing injustices day to day but I do not anymore.

T1: You have heard all our stories, Newcomer.

T4: Do you remember your own?

Newcomer: What do you mean?

T2: How did you die?

Newcomer: Car accident.

T3: If there are no more questions for us, you should be able to see the way out now. You can venture forth into the Afterlife.

T2: You will meet the Listeners but they should not keep you long.

Newcomer: Who?

T1: They help you move on from Living. They listen to who you were and wait as you might cry or lash out... you have to grieve the person you used to be because you will not be that person here, not really.

Newcomer: So they just.. Listen to stories?

T4: Yes.

Newcomer: I can do that. Be a Listener.

T1: You can claim your role afterwards.

*Newcomer exits*

T3: Before you go... may I ask you something?

Newcomer: Go ahead.

T3: Capital punishment. Will it come back? I suppose what I am trying to ask is... have I done it? Did my Bill-

Newcomer: Is capital punishment gone for good?

T3: Yes, that's what I'm asking.

Newcomer: *looks at the audience* I suppose that is up to them.

*T3 will put down the hat and Newcomer will leave the stage - lights out.*