

CRUCIFIX
By George Halitzka
Synopsis of the Play

ACT I

“Leonard, we’re gonna make a deal. You, me, and God. Corelli, you’re the witness.”

Public defender and avowed agnostic Carl Piotrowski is confident that he has his friend’s ministry all figured out. Chaplain Matt Leonard only makes converts in jail because the prisoners want to bargain with God for leniency. So Carl proposes a wager: If murderer (and recent convert) Howard Grafton still professes Jesus after his trial, Carl will go to church for a month. From this momentous event, corrections officer Vince Corelli deduces that it’s time to book his ski trip to hell.

Carl arrives home as his son Jason is about to go pick up his prom date. Jason is planning to become a pastor, much to the chagrin of his father. Nonetheless, it’s apparent the two share a close relationship. Once Jason leaves, Carl and his wife Abby reminisce about their son’s childhood. But then the unthinkable happens: a police officer knocks at the door. Jason stopped at a gas station on his way to the prom . . . and there, he was murdered in cold blood.

Matt tries to comfort Carl and Abby after the funeral with a card signed by Carl’s clients at the jail. But Carl tears up the card in Matt’s face, having recently formed a new opinion of accused murderers. “If there’s a God,” he hurls at Matt, “bleeding-heart assholes [like you] go to hell.”

Back at the jail, Matt shares his testimony with the inmates. He was a preacher’s kid – and a hellraiser. While in high school, he got a girl pregnant. When Matt was seen taking her to an abortion clinic, his father was thrown out of his pastorate. “If a man know not how to rule his own house, how shall he care for the church of God?”

On his way out of the chapel, Matt stops to see Howard Grafton, an African-American inmate and the subject of Carl’s wager. Unfortunately, Howard seems to be fulfilling Carl’s cynical prophesy: He chooses to follow Jesus only as long as Jesus might get him off the hook. He wants nothing to do with a God who might punish him for his sins.

Meanwhile, Carl is busy cleaning out his desk (while talking to a picture of his dead son). He is planning a leave of absence from his job. Wes Bradley from the prosecutor’s office stops by to tell him they found the murderer, Marcus Porter, and that they have a strong case against the man. Carl asks Bradley to “get this asshole what he deserves.” When Carl joins his friends Matt and Corelli afterwards, we find that Carl is trying – and failing – to reconcile an embryonic faith with recent events. He apologizes for his behavior at the funeral, but finds that Matt’s Biblical assurances can’t encompass the reality he faces.

Before the end of the day, Matt has one more duty: to see Marcus Porter, who has requested a pastoral visit. Matt finds it difficult to keep his temper in the face of

Marcus' deed – and his callous, condescending attitude. But then Marcus catches Matt's attention by asking if he wants to discuss the sovereignty of God.

Marcus spars with Matt over how God could exist in a seemingly random universe – particularly in light of the “random” occurrence that Jason, a future pastor, would be a murder victim. Matt insists that God is still present; Marcus argues that no God would allow such evil to occur. As though to prove his depravity, Marcus shows Matt a mouse he found in his cell and “crucified” on a tiny cross. Just as Matt is about to leave in disgust, Marcus insists upon introducing Matt to his next guest: his mother.

As the woman enters the visiting room, Matt realizes in horror that this is the same girl he slept with in high school. She didn't go through with the abortion. She has now come to visit her son . . . which explains why Marcus wanted to see Matt. Matt is the father of a murderer.

ACT II

From his pulpit in the chapel, Matt continues his testimony. “We know what we were, men: prodigals,” he says. “But then came the miracle. Then we threw ourselves at the foot of the cross, and found a Father who welcomed us home, amen?” Matt tells the inmates about the day he “hit bottom” – the day he almost threw himself from a bridge – when he experienced a miraculous deliverance from God. His father, whom he'd betrayed just days before, rescued him from certain death.

After the service, Matt visits Howard Grafton, who hasn't been to chapel since Matt's admission that God might not rescue him from punishment. As Howard accuses God of unfairness, Matt struggles to reconcile his own concepts of grace and justice. Then Howard accidentally reveals that he and his “boys” are planning to beat and stab Marcus Porter. Matt angrily defends Marcus and threatens to report the plan, and Howard sees favoritism – isn't this the same Chaplain who thinks Howard deserves punishment for his crime? Isn't this Marcus' just punishment? “Jus'once, I wanna see some whiteass stick his neck out fo'da black man. Jus'once, Chaplain,” Howard says.

As Matt is leaving the jail, he is stopped by Wes Bradley, who is investigating a complaint from Marcus. “Porter says you repeatedly declared his guilt, in the hearing of other prisoners,” says Bradley. Matt is obviously frightened that Marcus may have revealed more. But it seems that for reasons of his own, his son remained silent about their relationship. Still, Matt is deeply shaken.

After Bradley leaves, Matt tries to convince Corelli to help him get Marcus into protective custody for the weekend. Corelli is incredulous that Matt would try to protect Jason's killer – “You traitorous bastard.” Matt leaves angrily to call Corelli's supervisor.

The next morning in the Piotrowski household, Carl's wife is preparing to leave for church, but Carl won't go with her. He's convinced that God was responsible for their son's death. Matt knocks at the door, carrying a box of Carl's personal things from work. Carl is eager to share his ideas about criminals – “You ever think, Leonard, maybe it's their genes?” Matt is hostile to any idea that implies parental responsibility. But finally, with great difficulty, he admits his secret: “Marcus Porter is my son.”

Without a word, but barely restraining himself from physical violence, Carl throws Matt out of his house.

Matt returns to the jail to check on Marcus, who has refused protective custody. Matt tries to apologize to his son for his lack of fathering, but Marcus will have none of that (“Motives are a con game to feel better about ourselves”). Marcus insists that belief in God is only a matter of childhood conditioning, and implies that perhaps his crimes also grew out of his upbringing – particularly an absentee father. He will have nothing to do with the God who allowed him to grow up in such hideous circumstances.

Monday afternoon, Wes Bradley comes to visit Carl with bad news. Because of a problem with the search warrant, all of the physical evidence against Marcus will be inadmissible in court. He suggests that Carl agree to a plea bargain that will put Marcus in prison for twenty years. Carl adamantly refuses – “Does Jason get *his* life back at forty?”

Later, Matt visits Marcus again and discovers that Howard’s “boys” have, indeed, carried out their threat to beat Marcus. He is bloodied and bruised, but still refuses protective custody. He has discovered that due to the problems with evidence against him, he will likely be a free man soon.

Meanwhile, Carl arrives downstairs at the jail and talks his way past Corelli to gain admittance. As Matt tries to convince Marcus to reform his life, Carl arrives outside the cell. He draws a gun. Marcus believes that Matt must have brought Carl with him. Matt vehemently denies it; he had no idea . . . he tries to reason with Carl . . . and then Carl pulls the trigger. “Marcus, I swear I didn’t know,” pleads Matt. Before he dies, Marcus only replies, “May God have mercy upon your soul.”

Carl is arrested by armed guards. Matt returns to the empty chapel and preaches to the vacant chairs. He has lost his faith. “Our Father, who art in heaven . . . who when your son asks for bread, gives him a stone; a serpent for fish. Listen now as your servant asks for nothing.”

Bradley arrives at the jail to deliver some news: the DNA test from the crime scene just came back, and the killer is still unknown. Unfortunately, he will be unable to deliver his message to the innocent Marcus.

Carl is in jail. Howard Grafton, who has been made a trusty, invites Carl to attend chapel with him. It seems that Howard returned to faith after an amazing occurrence. Since he told the Chaplain about the plans to beat Marcus, his “boys” were planning to kill Howard for snitching. But as they approached Howard with shanks, Marcus jumped in harm’s way. (That was the cause of the wounds that Matt observed in his last visit.) He was injured, but prevented Howard’s death by bringing guards to the scene. Howard finally saw in Marcus what he never saw from Matt: “I ain’t never seen no cracker stick his neck out fo’ a niggah like dat. But dat crazy mo’fo’ save my life; dat da truth.”

“Mr. P, God gon’fo’ give you,” says Howard. He exits, pushing his broom. Carl can only weep, “I’m sorry, Jase. I’m so sorry . . . so, so sorry . . .”