

“Slow Death”

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I am here to see Tommy Lee Norman suck cyanide and die. I walk through a handful of protesters at the prison gate. Their faces ghoulishly under lit by flickering candles, their bodies vague shadows in the predawn murk. I automatically clutch my bag tighter and quicken my stride.

An elderly black man with a halo of white hair and burning eyes steps into my path intoning, "...and forgive those that trespass against us." My gaze slides away and fixes on the visitors' entrance. I continue my journey surrounded by muted prayers.

A guard with gut straining his uniform buttons and the haunted eyes of too many fourteen-hour shifts passes me through to a waiting area. In that brief moment, I'm distracted by the thought that so many serial killers have the middle name Lee. Is it a brand from birth? A handicap to be overcome?

The warden arrives to escort the crowd of journalists and observers to a claustrophobic room with a large sound proof window facing the execution chamber. There are no chairs. I take a position in the front and a little to the left of the center. The crowd is quiet with only the shuffle of feet on worn carpet and the occasional cough to break the silence. The nervous tension is palpable. We're all here to witness another human being's death. We don't have to wait long.

The guards march Tommy Lee into the brightly lit execution chamber. The overhead lights throw stark shadows on the gray concrete walls and floor. The three men fill the room with elbows, knees and clenched fists. Tommy Lee seems dazed, his face sweaty, his eyes glazed. Do they offer condemned men drugs to dull the experience? He sees the chair. He tries to dig in his heels, but can't get any purchase. The guards drag him to his final destination.

He struggles and, in spite of manacles, kicks a guard in the shin. The man's craggy face screws up in pain. He slams Tommy Lee into the chair. He then unlocks Tommy Lee's manacles, avoiding more kicks. He anchors the prisoner's ankles to the chair with thick leather straps. His partner does the same for Tommy Lee's arms. The first guard gives each strap a quick tug and steps back. Tommy Lee shouts at the guards, his face turning red and veins throbbing in his throat. The guards leave through a door on my right. It slams with a vibration I feel in my feet.

The reporters and prison personnel give me a wide berth. Whether out of respect, or misguided sympathy, I don't know, or care. In a way, I'm the closest thing to family or friends here. I smile at the thought and hope Tommy Lee can see me through the thick glass. I move closer to the window, almost pressing my face against it. I will him to see me, to have my face be his final memory.

Tommy Lee stares back. He screams, probably curses. Spittle sprays from his mouth to dot his prison T-shirt. In the corner behind the prisoner, a simple timer tips sixteen one-ounce cyanide capsules from a cup into a bucket of sulfuric acid. I quickly glance at my watch. Precisely 6:00 a.m. I imagine the fizz as chemicals combine to make deadly hydrogen cyanide gas. The mist rises languidly, swirling across the floor. It curls around Tommy Lee's legs. My nose twitches. I can almost smell the almond ammonia fumes, feel the burning in my nose and throat.

Tommy Lee tries to hold his breath. He trembles with the effort. His struggles are futile. There will be no mercy, no reprieve. His eyes roll up as he faints.

No! He can't get out of it that easily. He has to feel death creeping up on him, life leaking away. I pound my side of the window. Worried faces turn my way. An authoritative voice mumbles in my ear. I shake off a warning hand.

His first involuntary breath of gas brings Tommy Lee back to consciousness. The voice in my ear stops. Tommy Lee starts to choke. I step back to watch. His eyes dart back and forth. He strains against the straps with his final strength. Better. This is what I had come for.

The gas blocks oxygen exchange. Tommy Lee is strangling, choking to death. A nice slow painful struggle for life-giving air. He jerks and lunges. His chest heaves. His mouth forms final curses, or maybe begs for mercy, or forgiveness. He'll get none from me. His face turns purple. He bites his tongue which protrudes from his mouth. Blood flows down his chin, soaks into his prison T-shirt, another dark stain to accompany the wet patches of sweat on his chest and under his arms. The minutes march on. He continues to thrash and choke, until his eyes stare fixedly out into space, and his body subsides to final tremors.

It will take a few minutes for the guards to evacuate the poison from the chamber and a doctor to examine the body. I look at my watch. 6:08:47 a.m.

He raped and tortured my daughter Ellen for over five hours, forcing her to drink Drano, burning her with cigarettes. Finally, he executed her, with a bullet to the head. Five hours of pain, fear, and hopelessness before her death. Five hours I've lived over and over in the police station, in the court room, and in my nightmares for ten years, seven months and eighteen days. Tommy Lee's death is mine.

I look at the agony on his dead face and try for the millionth time to understand why. Why Ellen? Why that night? Why him? Did he ever feel love like mine? Joy that wasn't the result of violence?

The defense lawyers talked of an abused child shuttled from foster home to foster home; a wasted teen leading a gang, living on drugs; a man with few choices, no hope and no responsibility for his actions. I try to imagine a better life for the child, a better ending for the man. For once, my imagination fails me. It keeps stumbling on the dead eyes, the savage grin that even a horrible death doesn't erase.

The body of the man I have hated so long slumps like wet clay. My own body feels curiously light and detached. The exhaustion of living a nightmare, fueling the fires of grief and revenge gives

way to nothingness. I lean trembling against the window expecting relief, joy or, at least, satisfaction. Nothing.

Eight minutes and forty-seven seconds for Tommy Lee to die. A long time for an execution.

Not long enough.

Author's Note: I rarely write horror stories, because I feel real life is filled with enough horror. All you have to do is open the papers or turn on the TV and your home is flooded with pain and despair. Occasionally a horrific news story will grab me and I have to write about it to exorcise it from my consciousness. I don't remember which particular story sparked this piece – take your pick.

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