

# SLOW DEATH AND OTHER DARK TALES

FAITH L. JUSTICE



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*To the members of Circles in the Hair*  
*—a writers' group extraordinaire.*

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

## INTRODUCTION

ALTHOUGH I GREW UP WATCHING FRIDAY NIGHT HORROR movies, the traditional monsters didn't scare me. Frankenstein, Wolfman, Dracula, Godzilla, were all tragic characters in their own way. Since my youth they have evolved, morphing into something far from the original material. I've never once been tempted to write a vampire story—dark or sparkly—or any other traditional monster story. That may change, but I'm not betting on it.

The stories that sent me shivering under the covers have no visible monsters like *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, *The Thing*, and *Wait Until Dark*. Unseen evil stalks neighbors, friends, and family. If you can't trust your mother, who can you trust? But again, no temptation to write such a story. I felt, as an adult, that the world offered up enough dark twisted reality. I didn't need to read or write any horror fiction. I could read the morning paper and get my fill of horror reality.

But, sometimes, a writer has to go to the dark side. Stuff happens, and one of the best ways to deal with it is to write about it. I wrote most of these dark stories in an attempt to purge something—usually a pessimistic feeling about people's inhumanity—but some reflect fear of the future, regret for the past, or a need to right a wrong. Whatever the impulse, I've explained it in the "Author's Note" at the end of each story. Half of these hit a raw nerve, so I didn't send them out in the world. They were too personal. But time and distance...

I hope you enjoy them and thank you for supporting independent publishers. Writing is a lonely business, so feel free to get in touch through my website or by writing a review.

—Faith L. Justice  
faithljjustice.com



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 underlit 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 a gut straining his uniform buttons, and the haunted eyes of too many overtime 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 room with a large soundproof window surrounding the tiny execution chamber on three sides. 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 almost palpable. We're all here to witness another human being's death. We don't have to wait long.

Two 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 claustrophobic 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 digs in his heels, but can't get any purchase. The guards drag him to his final destination. He struggles and, in spite of shackles, kicks a guard in the shin.

The man's craggy face screws up in pain. He slams Tommy Lee into the chair. He unlocks Tommy Lee's restraints, 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 turns red and veins throb in his throat and forehead. The sound doesn't penetrate the thick glass separating us.

The guards leave through a door on my right. It slams with a vibration I feel in my feet.

The reporters and prison officials 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. 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. Spitte sprays from his mouth to dot his prison T-shirt.

The warden gives the signal and the executioner pulls a lever. Under the chair, sixteen one-ounce cyanide capsules drop from a cup into a bucket of sulfuric acid.

I glance at my watch. Precisely 6:00 a.m.

I imagine the fizz as chemicals combine to make deadly hydrogen cyanide gas; the invisible killer rising languidly, curling 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.

The first involuntary breath of gas brings Tommy Lee back to consciousness.

The voice in my ear stops.

Tommy Lee starts to choke.

I smile and watch.

His eyes dart back and forth. He strains against the straps with his final strength.

Better. This is what I came for.

The gas blocks oxygen exchange. Tommy Lee is strangling; choking to death. A slow, painful struggle for life-giving air. He jerks and lunges. His chest heaves. His mouth forms final curses, or maybe he 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. 6:10:47 a.m.

Ten minutes and forty-seven seconds.

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 Norman'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.

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.

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

Not long enough.

### **Author's Note:**

This is a “ripped from the headlines” story. The details of the rape and murder are based on a real crime. The description of what happens inside the gas chamber is accurate. Way back, when I wrote this story, the death penalty was hotly debated. I sympathized with those who argue that innocent people are convicted and shouldn’t pay the ultimate—some say inhumane—penalty for something they didn’t do. (The Innocence Project reports 317 post-conviction DNA exonerations in the US to date; eighteen from death row.) However, I wanted to write the story from the point of view of someone for whom this prolonged agony would feel like justice. Whether or not it gives her peace, is up to you to decide.

If you liked this sample of

# **Slow Death and Other Dark Tales**

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