

6-1-1993

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Recommended Citation

Jim Miller, *Deaths*, 4 *Hastings Women's L. R.* 271 (1993).
Available at: <http://repository.uchastings.edu/hwlj/vol4/iss2/5>

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Deaths

*a work of fiction by Jim Miller**

"You'll get a real show when they take me downstairs," Pierce promised other death row inmates. When the priest came to the holding cell to accompany Pierce to the gas chamber, the convict grinned and revealed a gush of blood from his neck. He scratched and bit trying to fend off the guards, but they pinned his arms and wrapped a prison shirt around his neck. Witnesses watched in horror as Pierce was dragged into the chamber, bleeding, weeping and cursing, and strapped into Chair B. "Lord I'm innocent," Pierce yelled, "Don't let me go like this, oh God!" Smith E. Jordan was then brought into the chamber and strapped into Chair A within arm's reach of his crime partner. Jordan sat quiet and composed while Pierce cursed the spectators. Pierce managed to get his bloody right arm free and was working on the left when the gas felled him.

Hotel Arno

"3-2 Padres after six," buzzed the voice on Betty's small transistor radio. "Come on guys, hold on," she said to herself as she took the cap off a blue marker to put the finishing touches on her handmade GOD BLESS AMERICA poster. "There," she said holding it up in front of her at arm's length, "Perfect." Betty set it down on the bed, bent over to sort through the small cluttered nightstand drawer for some tape. The Giants had Clark on second with one out. She found the roll, taped the poster to the window so the message faced out to 5th street: GOD BLESS AMERICA in red, white, and blue. She stood there for a while, watching the cars drive by, the people walking on the sidewalk below. Everybody doing something. Across the street, one of the construction men saw her poster and waved. Betty smiled, waved back through the closed window. Her feet hurt, she

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sat down on the edge of the bed. 4-3 Giants, 2 outs for the Padres in the bottom of the seventh. Nobody on. Tony Gwynn was up. "Come on Tony," she said softly. It was always better if they won, the people on the radio were more cheerful. Pop up. Home Federal commercial. Betty sighed, stared at the pale green walls of her room, the posters: GO PADRES, a pink happy face, I LOVE SAN DIEGO. Maybe she'd go to Denny's after the game. It would be a nice walk. The weather had been very nice lately.

Sacrifice

In March, 1938, a pig from the San Quentin prison farmyard was strapped into the new 5,000 dollar chamber and sacrificed.

Hotel Reiss

Too hot to sleep, Melvin thought, staring at the dim lines of light that seeped in through the cracks in the venetian blinds and spread across the ceiling above his bed. He leaned over, clicked on the lamp on the nightstand, glanced at the paper lying on the floor next to the bed: CHANGING MONGOLIA REDISCOVERS ITS SOUL. Melvin got up, slipped into the baggy brown slacks that were draped over the back of the small wooden chair by the window. Same sweaty undershirt. He grabbed his Newport's off the nightstand, headed out the door of his room. The hallway smelled like stale farts. "Jesus," he said shaking his head at the dirty white walls all the way to the staircase. "I'll be dead tomorrow," he thought as he walked down the stairs to the lobby. It was full, quiet. He didn't know anybody. Unable to get a chair, he walked out to the sidewalk in front, lit up and stared back into the lobby. A large woman in a black and white polka dot dress was leaning against the desk in front, staring at the row of occupied chairs: A bald old man with a big white hearing aid, sitting very still, very straight, both hands resting on the handle of the adjustable metal cane in front of his chair. Another old man, gray hat, gray suit jacket, black slacks, wing tips. Everything immaculate but the cigarette held clumsily in the side of his mouth, ashes falling onto his lap, his eyes uncomprehending behind thick-lensed glasses. Next to him, a young guy with stringy long black hair, killing cig after cig with big fast draws, drumbeats leaking out of his walkman. And next to him the crazy woman who'd been there a week, her eyes darting back and forth, her feet ceaselessly tapping, tapping, her hands opening and closing, opening and closing. Then there was the can lady counting change, putting it in rolls, stuffing them into her little yellow purse. All of them just sitting there, lost

in a blue-gray haze of cigarette smoke. Melvin finished his Newport, walked back up to his room.

Leanderess Riley

When the guards came for Riley, a one-eyed 33 year old who weighed less than 100 pounds, he grabbed the bars with both hands and began a long shrieking cry. He fought as he was taken to the gas chamber and fastened to the seat. He struggled free of the straps once, forcing the guards to go back in and tie him down again. He managed to free both his hands again when the lethal gas began to rise, putting both hands over his face to hold the gas away.

Electric Avenue

X slithered past a long line of Ms. Pac Mans to the love booths, stepped inside a deluxe: plush vinyl seat, 30 inch screen. 75 channels, stereo. He dropped four quarters. The screen lit up.

Pale white people in the missionary position

Grunt

Sigh

X hit the button.

Gaunt French intricately intertwined: the high cheek bones, the sophisticated, semi-bored response.

oh

uh

Slightly aroused, X picked up the pace.

Click

Nympho white school teacher can't get enough of those black bucks, their sculpted asses, their

Click

love mound, brown-haired and pretty

Click

water sparkling on her deeply-tanned stomach as she lay sunbathing on the deck, waiting for the skipper to

Click

only cooperated out of obedience, but strangely, despite herself

Click

When he flexed the wings of the falcon tattooed on his

Click

Luftwaffe fantasy

Click

discharged into the child's ass the moment her
father expired

Poof! Screen dead. Party over. X, quarterless, stayed in the booth until his eyes adjusted to the dark.

Mix and Match

Connect the stars with their movies, books, network docudramas:

Ted Bundy	Helter Skelter
John Wayne Gacy	The Nightstalker: The True Story
Son of Sam	Killer Clown
The Hillside Strangler	Two of a Kind
The Manson Family	Hollywood Casebook
Gary Gilmore	The Stranger Beside Me
Richard Ramirez	Deviant
The Zodiac Killer	Friday the 13th Part V
Ed Gein	The Ultimate Evil
Jason	Executioner's Song
Freddy	Zodiac
The Matamoros Cult	The Believers
Various	No One Gets Out Alive

The Promise

Eaton Metal Products Co. of Colorado had promised that the gas chamber would be clean and swift. "Our calculations show that this new chamber should snuff out life in about 15 seconds," designer Earl Liston assured California penal authorities.

Bijou

V made his way into the theater just in time to buy a bucket-sized Coke and a bowl of gooey artificial cheese nachos before the show started. Chow in hand, he pushed his way through the closed theater doors. He set down his Coke and felt a few seats: spilled soda, nacho cheese? ripped upholstery . . . finally a suitable spot. No previews, just a Pepsi commercial. Lights, camera, action. Hit the whimsical theme song:

Don't go out in the woods tonight
It's not a good idea
Yes there's a nasty killer there
And he's not very nice

He'll chop you into little bits
And store you in his igloo cooler.

Showtime. Caveman-like woods inhabitant with bungie cords crossed over his face is a little bored. He grabs his machete and hunting spear and goes carousing for camping coeds, Bingo, tent city!

Victim one: bifocaled geek.

Victim two: helpless girl in wheelchair.

V laughs, grabs a nacho.

Victims three and four: Ugly girl and bookish boyfriend, caught in the act. Last time they'll zip their bags together. The marines behind V: "Didn't even get off."

Confrontation: Football jocks get macho, attack. Bad idea. Thirsty, V gulps some Coke. Nobody left but the cheerleaders. They've fled. Wahoo, babe hunt! One by one the neanderthal-like nemesis hunts down the cuties until there's no one left but the big-busted blond bombshell.

Enter rescuing small town sheriffs. Exit: the black one, the goofy eccentric one, the stupid one. Then, just when V thought it was too late, valiant sheriff Dick saves the day by blowing the evil weirdo back to hell with a sawed-off double barrel shot gun. Applause. Enough ketchup to keep Heinz in business for a year. Exit babe and sheriff Dick into squad car sunset.

Intermission.

V sits quietly, sipping Coke, munching nachos until the next feature, SHOCKER. Whoa . . . not even the electric chair can kill this inhuman freak. They strap him down, plug in and he likes it! Jesus! How are they going to kill this guy, atom bomb?!!!

The Duchess

The first woman to be executed legally in California was Juanita Spinelli, the cold-blooded "Duchess" of a Bay Area robbery gang. A grandmother and ex-wrestler, she had a reputation for being able to pin a poker chip with a thrown knife at 15 paces. The duchess was a hag, evil as a witch, horrible to look at, impossible to like. The day after Thanksgiving, her time came. She wore a short-sleeved green dress and clutched a white handkerchief in her left hand. Photos of her children were tied over her heart. She was being walked into the chamber when the warden noticed that the 100 or so witnesses were not in place. The Duchess stood outside the gas chamber and chatted about the weather as the witnesses filed in. They came. She was strapped in. Her face, minus dentures, looked sunken as the gas began to rise. She coughed, her head dropped forward, then whipped back, streaming her long gray hair over the chair

back. The Duchess coughed again, then blew out her breath with a sound like a horse sometimes makes with his lips.

#11

You're sick of her. Everyday she hops on the bus at Adams, walks to the back, sits across from you. "Hello, hello, hello," she says, "Wonderful day day day. Gotta do, gotta do gotta do." You hold up your paper to block her out of view. You can't read. "Read read read," she says, "I heard it put that way, now that you say that I see." You look at a picture of the Stealth bomber. "Wanna wanna wanna," she says, "gotta do." You know she is staring right at you, trying to work her way through the paper, "It's been said that way, it's been said. Yes, right right right." You can picture her sunburned face, her wild brown eyes. "Absolutely so," she says, "I heard it put that way, I certainly have." You stay behind your paper. "Beautiful day beautiful day beautiful day." 1st Street. You pull the cord, leave her alone, still talking in the back of the bus. "Wanna wanna wanna," she says, "Gotta do."

Kessel and Cannon

Kessel avoided looking up at the observers when the faintly visible plume of death gas began to rise. Cannon looked through the window and mouthed the words "Nothing to it." Another phrase was forming on his lips when his face contorted into a look that was neither smile nor grimace. His eyes rolled and his head dropped.

The Lobby

Arnie was drunk again.

"Hey Don, get me another double shot and answer me a question!" Don smiled at the three other men and tore himself away from the fight on TV.

"We'll keep you posted," one of the men said. Don poured a double bourbon and walked five stools down the bar to where Arnie's buddy Elmo had left him for the night.

"O.K. what is it Arnie?"

"Why is it all the best looking women live in big ugly houses and drive Japanese cars?"

"Ya got me on that one Arnie," Don smiled. "Three bucks." Arnie fished through his coat pocket, pulled out a fistful of crumpled ones.

"Divine justice," he said handing over the bills.

"Head butt!" yelled the three men watching the fight. Don walked back toward the TV, heard the word "guerra."

"Guerra, hey I know that one," said one of the men. "It means war." They laughed, kept their eyes on the fight.

"Hey at least the Mexicans don't charge you to see the fights on the tube," Don said.

"Damn straight."

"Christ that was low!" one of the men said.

"They're all low, amigo," Arnie yelled down the bar, ignored.

"My money's on the Mexican," said one of the men after observing a few quick jabs.

"I don't know," Don put in. "The black guy's been takin' that for eight rounds and he's still got his legs. I think he's a sleeper."

"We're all sleepers," yelled Arnie. "How 'bout some more anesthesia Don. Double." Don poured another double, stayed to watch the last ten seconds of the round.

"Christ, another head butt!" yelled one of the men.

"This guy's letting them get away with murder, not even a warning," said another. The black fighter was bleeding heavy from the nose. The Mexican had a cut under his right eye. Once the bell rang their trainers poured water on their heads, slapped them lightly on their cheeks to keep them alert.

"Guerra, no shit," said one of the men.

"How 'bout that double for the wise fool!" yelled Arnie.

"O.K. partner." Don returned as he headed down the bar.

"Hey Arnie, what ever happened to Elmo's buddy Ray?"

"Dead."

"No kidding."

"Yeah, found him three days later in the Arlington. They probably smelled him before anybody missed him."

"Shame."

"Yeah, they couldn't even find anybody to fork out for a box and stone."

"Nobody?"

"Nobody."

"Hey you're missing it," one of the men yelled to Don. The black fighter was on the ropes, hands down, taking heavy shots. Don walked back over to the TV.

"He's dead on his feet."

"We all are," yelled Arnie smiling. The black fighter hit the canvas.

"Dead, walking dead, or about to explode," Arnie continued. The count: 1, 2, 3, 4, up to his knees, 5, 6 back up, standing eight.

"Christ," yelled one of them. "The son of a bitch's got heart!"

"And the last kind either get killed, kill or kill themselves," Arnie finished before downing the rest of his drink. The black fighter was back in it. He took a hard shot to the ribs, snapped the Mexican's head back with a jab.

Wells

Short, deformed, slender and slowed by a limp, Wells was the target of the biggest manhunt in Southern California history. A posse of more than 1,000 men scoured the desert between San Bernadino and Las Vegas for the man the headlines called the notorious "Hunchback Killer." He eluded capture for a month before being apprehended in a Hobo camp in Spokane, Washington. He was sent to death row where he knew better than most what awaited, having helped build the chamber while serving a prior burglary term. Once there, he tried to stab guards, flooded his cell, lit fires, and howled the nights away.

Condemned

Hotel dwellers: 8

Movie goers: 2

Bus riders: 1

Bar flies: 5

Pigs: 1

Executed: 7

Supplementary torture: Recapitulate the names and/or qualities of all the personages your storyteller has mentioned.