

The First Death of 2057

by Douglas Lucas

www.douglaslucas.com/fd2057

“The First Death of 2057” is a short story about punishment, capital and otherwise, in the future. On 29 Aug 2009, the website above became the second publication of the story. *descant* (www.descant.tcu.edu) published the story in its Summer 2007 print issue (Volume 46) first. Minor revisions have been made for this second publication.

“The First Death of 2057” is also available in HTML and plain text formats at www.douglaslucas.com/fd2057

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“It's the way we do it every year, George; don't try to get out of it.”

George picked up the remote and turned the television off. “And I say it's just not right.”

He looked at Harriet sitting across from him in her beige recliner. Over the years, as he had sat in his beige recliner watching her age — her wrinkles deepening into gravelike pits, her muddy-snow hair thinning to a ghostly cloud — he had felt his own age encroaching, like heavy sand burying his body, trapping him in his seat. It seemed neither of them ever moved.

“You say that every year,” Harriet said. “and I always make you leave it on anyway. So why don't you do me a favor and go ahead and turn it back on?” She snapped open the lid of her sewing kit with an efficient turn of her wrist.

“Remember that big ball they used to drop on Times Square? That was the way New Year's Eve should be done.” He nodded to himself several times.

“George. Turn it back on.”

George considered it. Maybe this year the television would show him something he could use to persuade Harriet the First Death was wrong, base, that it shouldn't defile their home. They wouldn't have to watch all of it. He turned the television on, then put the remote on the end table that sat between them.

“— is reporting live from the National Mall in Washington D.C. Stephen, how many people are at the Mall tonight?”

The reporter's cheeks swelled as he smiled at George. His eyes smiled too, as if he understood something George didn't. “Bill, Washington police estimate that 275,000 people are here tonight. That surpasses the number who attended Martin Luther King Jr.'s 'I Have a Dream' speech, given here at the Lincoln Memorial in 1963, by 25,000. The spokesperson also told me that the First Death of 2057 —”

George picked up the remote again and switched the television off with a firm thrust of his thumb. “Now King was a good man. What do you remember about him?” He felt hopeful. She had studied him in college. King could serve as common ground, and as a foil for the First Death.

Harriet looked up from her knitting. The maroon afghan hid every hint of her legs like a long skirt. “He cheated on his dissertation in college. Some people —”

George shook his head. “A man's entitled to a few mistakes. His speech made up for it.” He noticed something: he had forgotten what his home smelled like. He sniffed and tried to put the odor into words. It was grainy and pale. That can't be, he thought. He shifted around in his seat.

“Some people say King was a *philanderer*.” She jabbed her needle through the afghan. “A *philanderer*. Turn the television back on, George.”

“Man's entitled to a few mistakes,” George mumbled. The smell was, was — he wasn't sure what. He squeezed his eyelids tight against his eyes, blacking out the living room, then opened them slowly. He switched the television back on.

The television showed a sweeping panorama of the National Mall. George watched the images with a taut glower. Before the Lincoln Memorial, fixed searchlights illuminated a staircase-and-gallows built of grey metal that glowed alive in the skybeams. At its peak a crimson digital clock counted down to New Year's Day. Two guards, bedecked with traditional black hoods, led a handcuffed man, too cold in his prison jumpsuit to stand up straight, toward the gallows, at the ritual's rate of one stair per minute. The camera moved to the barricades; there yelling teenagers crowdsurfed and moshed. It inched through the throng of people, where fathers held their sons and daughters atop their shoulders for a better view.

George had to take his eyes off the screen. He looked at his hands. White skin was crawling off his bones like crinkled plastic wrap. He had kept the television on every New Year's Eve for seven long years. Those people, that mob, every year, looking upon death — real, living death — with hungry faces, as if what they saw was something sultry. No more. Not in his home. He picked the remote up off the end table.

Harriet eyed him smugly. “A *philanderer*, George. Leave the television on.”

He held still and watched the lips of the reporter move. They seemed petite and too soft, the lips of a child. The reporter was talking about Earl Winters, the First Death of 2057. He had murdered a man twenty-five years ago. He was fifty-two, six-foot-three, brown-eyed. He had visited prostitutes as a teenager; he had recurrent hemorrhoids.

“They shouldn't talk about a man's problems like that.”

“George, you bring this up every year. And every year I tell you the same thing. He's been caught, and we chose him to be exposed. He deserves it, after all the pain he caused.”

The remote slid out of his hands. “That's not right to do to a man, even if you have to kill him.”

“Exposing him is what really kills him, George.” He saw her carefully feeling the sharpness of her needle with her finger. “Once you're exposed, you're through.”

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George listened to the television. The speakers were stationed all around him. When they showed Earl's face George could hear the harsh blusters of the wind just the same as he did, whipping from the front of the room and trailing off behind the recliner. It made him feel obscene to be so close to Earl.

He glanced at Harriet. She was hard of hearing and always made him set the volume too

high. If he couldn't turn the television off, he at least could turn it down. The trouble would be getting the remote off the end table without her noticing.

He quietly crooked his elbow around the remote. Across from him Harriet stabbed her needle through the afghan. She kept looking down at the afghan, up at the television, back down at the afghan, in fixed rhythm, as if she weren't a person, only a machine. George felt distant, outside himself. He couldn't remember the last time they'd held hands.

Harriet reached over to her sewing kit. With a tiny motion of his forearm George slid the remote into his other hand, clearing his throat once to cover up the noise. He slipped it into the crack between the seat and the armrest of his recliner, reached down to its controls, and lowered the volume. The whirling moans of the television's wind, quieter now, still seemed too alive, too personal.

“Can you turn it up, George? I can't hear it.”

“It's loud enough.”

He set his hand on the remote as if to shield it from harm. He winced. If the First Death was so disgusting, why couldn't he keep the television off? He knew the answer; it was the same every year. He looked at their mottled carpet. Then why was he sneaking around with the remote? He could just leave the room and let her watch it. No. That was the cowardly way out. He must save them both from the First Death.

“Where's the remote, George?”

A bead of sweat formed on his forehead — where his bangs used to be — and hung, pendulous, wanting to fall but sticking to his skin instead. Should he just give her the remote and be done with it? The room felt stuffy, cramped. On the television the reporter was talking about the length of the drop hanging. It used to be figured by the weight of the prisoner for

humaneness. Now they ignored the prisoner's weight and hoped for a beheading.

“Some people say the FBI shot King,” George said. He touched a finger to the remote and turned toward her. She was looking right at him. I could just take the remote out, he thought, and not say a damn thing. Say it fell. He tried to pick up the remote quickly — nonchalantly — but instead he felt his hand creeping and splaying across the remote as if his flesh were water. Harriet glanced at the television. Just grab it, he thought. There. He set the remote on the end table unnoticed.

“George.” She slid her eyes toward the phone, to her left, away from him. “If you don't turn the volume up and leave the television on, I'm going to tell Audrey. We go through this every year. Leave it on.”

He clenched his toes. He cherished Audrey, his stepdaughter — Harriet and Audrey were his only family left. “The FBI shot him. That's what King's family believed, believed until the end. That's the way it should be. The FBI wiretapped him, they sent him a letter telling him to kill himself, they blackmailed him with all sorts of stuff . . . all sorts of stuff, they . . . his *family*, they believed —”

“The man was a philanderer, George. A *philanderer*.” She said the word slowly, as if to taste all its syllables.

“That's *not* true. They never proved it. He did cheat some in college, I'll grant you that. But they never proved it about the women. Never.” He tapped his right steel-toed boot against the ground. Its heavy weight reassured him. He had walked far in these boots in his time.

“They still shot him, George.” She laid a hand on the telephone. “Audrey wouldn't like to hear about you keeping me from enjoying the First Death.”

He tucked his chin and glared at the television with barbed eyebrows. “Why do you

enjoy it, Harriet?”

“It shows we have the evildoers under control, George. Where they can no longer threaten our peace.”

“No.” He felt anger made hard by certainty. “Because to you, Harriet, it takes evil and death out of *you* and puts it someplace else, puts it into this — this carnival. Makes you feel righteous. And you just *want* to see him die.”

She took in his comment without changing expression — unless that minuscule flicker of her lips he saw was a smirk. “And what have I ever done that was so evil? *He* —” she pointed at the television “— is a man who has done wrong. And *you* are a man who knows it. What did Earl Winters ever do to make up for his wrong? What speech did he ever give?” She looked at George and grinned. “He. Has done. Nothing . . . in his life . . . worthwhile.”

A flame seemed to shoot up from George's boots, and it fired him all the way to his fingertips. He found himself upright in an instant. He was saying something to her; his mouth was moving out of control. Whatever he was saying came to an end and he had to take a moment to replay it in his mind. He had said 'You don't know everything I have done — you don't know.' His wife gaped at him, her afghan fell to the floor, she drew up her knees and squeezed her arms around them. George felt a new emotion rising, distinct and strong, overwhelming the now-fading anger: victory. He hadn't risen like that in years. He hadn't told her anything so definitive in years. It was true; she didn't know. Had he made up for what he had done to her, what he had done to the both of them? All of his life — what he had done across however many years and years — she couldn't know. No one but him could know.

By now Harriet had released her legs and with shaking arms soon made steady she picked up the afghan and began to speak, looking at him evenly as though he were an animal she had to

keep at bay through an exhibition of confidence. “George. Always, after this day, we return to our peace and quiet, no matter what you have said about the First Death. That’s how we do it every year. Behave reasonably. I may still call Audrey; you’ll sit there and not interfere. I will enjoy the First Death.”

Still standing there, he thought: But what would Audrey think — of Harriet? George glanced at his recliner. Part of him wanted to sit, because to that part of him standing was somehow tiring. His glance returned to Harriet. She had put her hand on the telephone, and she shook her head back and forth, in a little jest. After all these years she still mocked him.

The phone rang. The ringtone identified the caller as Audrey. He was no longer tired; it was as if the ringing was blasting him with hot shower water.

“Earl Winters!” the television shouted. “Do you have any last words?”

“She can’t be calling at the best part,” Harriet said. “It’s the *best part*.”

“Why not? She doesn’t watch this garbage.” He felt tall; he was a Colossus. He could do anything now that he was standing. He could kick the television in with his pointed boot. Instead he moved in front of it, blocking Harriet’s vision.

“She understands I can have my own preference!” Harriet shouted. She answered the phone. “Audrey, George is keeping me from watching the First Death. And do you know he —” she looked at him, terrified “— when we were in college, one night he — he went out and — oh my God —”

Earl had a voice that boomed like a gunshot in a canyon. “You people! All of you people hang with me! I don’t even remember what Kentucky Rogers looked like, they wouldn’t give me a picture of him; no redemption, no salvation, I couldn’t even make license plates —” The crowd was screaming, throats bleeding. The P.A. system began to feedback as a sound

technician cranked up Earl's microphone.

Harriet grabbed the remote and gripped it, holding it against her heart. “Audrey, in college George went out and — George, get out of the way!” She turned the volume all the way up. The speakers in the room started shaking.

George stood there, letting his feet take root, stronger than a mountain. He was bigger than she; she couldn't move him. She wasn't going to tell Audrey, he decided. She cared too much about her reputation. It was obvious from her fear.

“Audrey,” Harriet yelled. “Do you want to know what George did? You can tell *everyone*. George, if you don't move . . .”

He hesitated. He had underestimated her. The crowd on the television began chanting down from thirty seconds. It was now or never. He *had* done things in his life worthwhile. Every time he could have snapped back at Harriet he had held his tongue; every time she had complained — about life, about aging, about whatever miserable fate she had seen herself in — he had kept his composure, silently bearing her grievances. She deserved his patience, he thought, after what he had done. Now she deserved to be free of the First Death's ugly influence, too.

He squared his shoulders at the television. The chant was down to ten. He could time it just so. It might hurt, it might break one of his toes, but he could do it. He was a placekicker, aiming for the final game-winning field goal.

Harriet suddenly started sobbing. “Audrey, George —”

George rushed the television; Harriet screamed. He swung his right boot back, then swung it forward, right into the center of the screen. The glass popped loudly. It exploded onto the floor. He waved his arms furiously trying to maintain his balance. He stayed standing; his

toes weren't broken. The crowd at the National Mall still screamed through the speakers. There was something different about the noise this year, the announcer was saying something about a defective trapdoor, but George didn't care. He ripped the receiver off the television set and threw it on the floor, which pulled the audio cables out. He spun around. Harriet had dropped the telephone. She put her hands over her mouth and stood, transfixed. For a moment nothing in the room moved.

Audrey's shouting broke the silence. George dived for the telephone. He seized it and buried it under his chest like a football player falling on a fumble. His bones popped audibly and he heard himself breathing heavily. Still, to move! He was free!

Harriet fled down the hall toward the bedroom. George turned off the phone and pulled himself up; his body burned all over with pain. He glanced at his recliner. No time to rest, he told himself. He ran toward the bedroom. Harriet was his again. She would understand everything.

He yanked on the bedroom door's handle. Locked. If he had kicked the television he could kick down the door as well. Sounds came from the bedroom — sobbing, maybe — he couldn't make them out. His mind, his body, everything was surging. He saw nothing except the door. He raised his boot.

His lower back jerked in sudden convulsion, then locked up, wrenched out of place. He fell, arms flailing. He tried to get up; he couldn't move. He was an old man again, broken down. He regarded the shut door helplessly. It seemed to taunt him from above, mammoth and monolithic; it seemed to resist him with stolid self-assurance.

Through the door he could hear Harriet on the phone. She had won, he thought. “Audrey, Audrey, George has gone mad.” Her voice was choked with sobbing; this was the first

time she had cried in years. “He kicked in the television. He's outside in the hallway. I locked the door —”

The pain in his lower back had him paralyzed. In his mind's eye he could see the telephone box hanging from the roof just outside the back door, secured there like an unreachable Holy Grail. If only he could rip its wires out — Harriet wouldn't know how to plug them back in.

“Hello? Hello? My name is Harriet Hazard and my husband is trying to kill me.”

I'm going to be lying here forever, George thought. King had faced the clubs, the cattle prods, the fire hoses, the attack dogs of Bull Connor with nonviolence. George burned and burned in pain. He pictured the shards of glass from the television. They were little mirrors all over the living room carpet. He didn't want to go back there.

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The police arrived in less than fifteen minutes. Within a month George was convicted of family violence and sentenced to ten years of hard labor. As he was led out of the courthouse, he noticed the following headline pressing against the glass of a newspaper box. It seemed a message meant just for him:

EARL WINTERS STILL ON THE LOOSE!

THE END

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