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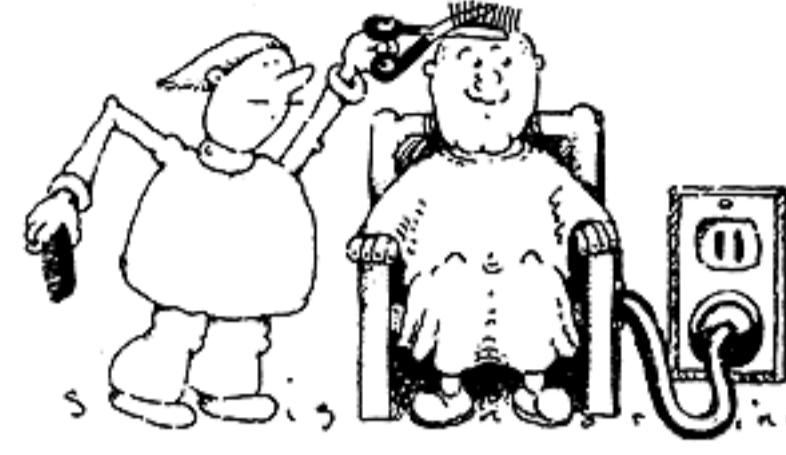
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A STRAIGHT DOPE CLASSIC FROM CECIL'S STOREHOUSE OF HUMAN KNOWLEDGE

What physically happens to someone electrocuted in the electric chair?

May 15, 1981



Dear Cecil:

I have a fear of, yet a morbid curiosity about, execution by electrocution. How does one get in to see an execution? What preparations go on before an execution? What happens to the prisoner before and after? What physically happens to the prisoner during an electrocution? Has anyone ever been strapped in, then taken out? Are there tours of Death Houses at prisons? Please try to be as detailed as possible.

— Scared Stiff in the Chair, Chicago

Cecil replies:

Great. Another nut case. Ordinarily I try to avoid inquiries from the mentally unbalanced, but this time I'm going to make an exception, in hopes of stamping out any incipient enthusiasm for the barbaric practice alluded to above. The squeamish are advised to avert their eyes.

Now then, clown, suppose we wish to electrocute somebody. Suppose it is yourself. Around midnight (this schedule for purposes of illustration only; times vary from state to state) we transfer you from Death Row to a cell next to the death chamber. At 5 AM or so we shave the top of your head and the calf of one of your legs, so as to permit better contact with the electrodes. A couple hours later we read you the death warrant. A few hours after that we take you into the electrocution chamber and strap you into the chair at the wrists, waist, and ankles, in the presence of witnesses. (Again, the exact number varies from state to state. Sometimes the witnesses view the proceedings from behind a one-way window.) Electrodes are clamped to head and leg.

At the designated hour, an electrician throws a switch and a high-voltage alternating current surges through your body for two or three minutes--typically starting at 2,000 volts at 5 amps, with the voltage varied periodically. Your muscles will instantly contract to a state of absolute rigidity, causing your heart and lungs to stop immediately. Some medical observers go so far as to say your blood will boil. If the guards have been careless and bolted you in too loosely, an arc may jump from the electrode to your body, searing your flesh. If you're lucky, you die promptly. If not, you get another jolt. Nobody, to my knowledge, has ever survived this process. By and by the doctors examine your remains and certify your decease.

Many years of scientific experiment have gone into making electrocution the refined art it is today. First suggested in the 1880s as a humane alternative to hanging, the practice figured prominently in the dispute between Thomas Edison and George Westinghouse over the merits of direct vs. alternating current. Claiming the latter was too dangerous, Edison thought to prove his point graphically by equipping Sing Sing's new electric chair with one of the competition's AC generators, an application for which it proved to be admirably suited. Unfortunately, upon being presented with their first prospective victim, one William Kemmler (he had murdered his girlfriend), the executioners seriously underestimated the amount of juice required. They burned him for a mere 17 seconds, at the conclusion of which Kemmler was still twitching slightly. The current was thereupon reapplied for another 70 seconds, causing one of the electrodes to smoke. Westinghouse later commented, "They could have done better with an ax." Still, Kemmler could safely be said to have expired, and a new era was born.

Offhand I can't think of anybody who was strapped in only to be taken out later, although I do know of a prisoner in California who had been placed in the gas chamber when a reprieve was phoned in--too late, as it turned out. Another guy in Texas got a reprieve while on the gurney with an IV in his arm waiting for a lethal injection. (He was executed six months later.) I am not aware of any tours, and I am not particularly interested in learning of any. Witnesses, incidentally, are usually reporters, officials, and the like; persons who are assholes, such as yourself, are not permitted to participate.

— Cecil Adams

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