

## PLAGUE OF DEATH

By Norman Blake McKenzie

There is a window outside my cell. It faces the West. In the evening hours of each day the last sun rays beam inside my cell shining upon the bars casting an equaled measured line of shadows upon the back wall of my cell. It is said 'Do not watch a clock, because you will never see it move.'

Here, on THE ROW, time stands still for no-one. You can literally see the shadows of bars slide forebodingly, across the wall.

There is a maniacal passion about each day. It is a brash, boastful, facade you see on the face of every MAN here. With the passage of time their demeanor becomes even more animated. The laughter is just an octave too loud, imperceptibly forced. As if to live each day to the fullest, because the march of shadows never cease. Time is the enemy here. Every man faces it. The marching of incessant time means only one thing: appeals are running out. With each seasonal change comes one more denial from the courts. Laughter becomes a little more strained. Attention spans get a little more shorter. It is as if a playing disease has come. Men begin to distance themselves for fear of contamination. The Plague of Death be upon you. Everyone can see it.

Appeals have run out. The laughter fades away. Time is reduced to hours. Then minutes. Then seconds. Then none. The purest form of reality to be seen is when a man looks you in the eyes and tells you his appeals are over. He is done. Life is hanging by a thread. Every time the electronic locking device "clicks" on the Row, that inmate who is "done" awaits the inevitable, the sound of chains echoing down the Row. It happens unknowingly. Guards show up at your door. They tell you "It is time". Time? No. It is not time. There is no more time. Time has run out. It will never ever be "Time" again. When a man says "I am done", there is no facade. It is raw, it is pure nakedness. It is without hope. It is the Plague of Death.

I befriended a man when I came to Death Row. We talked about life. We talked about cars. We discussed philosophical points of views. We talked about Space and its mysterious beyond. We talked about love and the frivolity of hate. We talked about politics and the state of man. We talked about history, and we talked about God. I looked forward to these talks with the faceless voice. I ritualistically prepared for them when I awoke each day.

Then one day, a day like any other day, I heard the sound of chains. The silence was loud, but I did not know why. Several guards walked and passed my cell. The sound of their shoes, echoing loudly upon the concrete floor, stopped a few cells beyond mine. "It is time", were the words I heard. Time? Time for what, I wondered? I heard the sliding of a door opening, chains being moved about, then shoes moving once again. As my friend passed by the front of my cell he paused in his steps. Surrounded by Guards, "Take good care of yourself", he said as he looked me in the eyes. There was finality in his words. I did not understand. Was it a coded message? Was he secretly trying to tell me something? The escort of the guards led him away down the row, and he was gone. That was it. Over. I never ever saw him again. He was executed. It devastated me. He never spoke of death. Never spoke about his appeals. He knew he was done. It never occurred to me he was done. He had the Plague of Death. It shut me down. It boxed me in. I closed myself off to friendship on the Row.

There is no greater reality than the reality of Death Row. The sound of chains echoes in the silent mind of every man here on the Row. The shadows march across the wall of every cell on Death Row. Every occupant of every cell sees the shadows move. Time moves in the eyes of each and every man here. Nowhere else is the movement of time more aware of than right here on the Row. Each passing day brings each man closer to saying the words "I am done." A short time later they hear the words "It is time."

There is no cure. There is no escape. The Plague of Death awaits us all. Time marches on, until time runs out.

