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ONE MINUTE TO DEATH

by DAN STRIBE

Arrested, tried, convicted of murder. Must I die now?

THE details of that day I remember clearly. The tenth of December, the day I started to die.

I left the train as usual and joined the crowd as it crawled up the ramp like a centipede squeezing itself from the cocoon of Union Station. Fanning out through the doors, the wiggling, squirming flow of commuters swarms into the mist and down the concrete troughs to the loop.

It's Chicago with buildings tall and silent, tombstones of the living. In the brick-lined gulleys stream the bodies, mine included.

Cold tightened my face. Snow spattered my glasses. My scarf choked my neck and the overcoat whipped open at the bottom, gulping big swallows of icy air.

The crowd elbowed under the elevated. Whirling doors began sifting people into the marble hives. The clerks here, the bankers there. The executives up and the janitors down.

My door lay just ahead. I never reached it. Not that day. Not ever again.

But I saw the car and the man. He was tall, big. To me he was just a dark coat sagging from a pair of sloped shoulders, a hat pulled down tight, gloves held in bare hands. Another guy leaped from the same car. He was even less, only a vague shadow.

"Just a second, buddy," the overcoat said. Now it had a voice too. "I wanna talk to you."

I hesitated. Ahead I saw my office. It looked safe and warm. I quickened my pace,

hugging the wall. The two men broke into a trot. Roughly they shoved me into the doorway.

"Police," one said.

A bulging wallet flipped open waist high. A metal badge lay there.

"What's your name, mister?" he asked.

"Fred Fuller. Fredrick J. Fuller. I can prove it." My hand reached for my wallet.

Thick fingers clamped shut on my wrist.

"Stand steady, Mr. Fuller," the voice said from over my shoulder.

Hands appeared. Unbuttoning my coat, the hands moved briskly from chest to hips. They sought a gun and found none.

Now they'd see my credentials. My driver's license... needs glasses, it read. My draft card... born 1928. My business card... assistant advertising manager.

"What's this all about?" I asked. "Did I jay walk or something?"

THE face didn't answer. Instead the dry lips flipped

questions at me. Where did I work? Was I married? Where did I live? Had I ever been arrested?

I stammered. I stuttered. The life of Fredrick J. Fuller sounded like a jumbled mess. Yet it was so simple. If only they'd let me tell it straight. If only...

"Look, I'm a family man. Look..."

A wife, two kids, a mortgaged home and I've never been in jail. That's Fredrick Fuller, Social Security number 343 22 9296.

Only then two cops were towering over me. Questions, questions and more questions. In loud voices. In soft whispers.

Finally I shouted, "That's enough. Tell me what this is all about or leave me alone. I'm respectable. I don't have to take this."

Then a moment's silence.

"Sorry, Mr. Fuller," the officer said at last. "It seems you fit the description of a suspect. If you have no objections, we'd like you to come down to headquarters."

"Object? Of course, I object.

I'll be late for work. My boss'll raise hell."

"We insist, Mr. Fuller," the second cop said.

He tucked his arm under my elbow and led me to the curb. A crowd had gathered. It split to let us through. I ducked my head and pulled my hat down tighter.

We got into the car. The doors shut. We pulled away from the gawking crowd. The car crept along the snow slick streets to the precinct station. Like a hearse, only the corpse still breathed.

"I don't get this," I said. "Am I under arrest?"

"No, of course not, Mr. Fuller," the driver answered. "That shouldn't be necessary. If you cooperate."

"Naturally you can phone an attorney if you like, Mr. Fuller," the second cop said. "Not that we recommend it. Not at this point anyway."

"An attorney? What do I need an attorney for? I haven't done anything wrong."

The car stopped. The officers got out and waited. They stayed calm and casual. It was just another day for them. Through those doors they

walked every morning. Not me. The drab halls, the dirt-covered lights, the musty odor... all this had a strange horror to Fredrick J. Fuller.

INSIDE at a counter my escorts stopped, discussing the weather. They ignored me, almost. Eventually, a sergeant looked up from his desk. I got introduced.

"The cigar store case," one of the cops explained.

"Yeath, I see the resemblance," the sergeant nodded.

"Look, this is some kind of mistake," I said. My voice squeaked. My throat stiffened. Sweat poured out under my arms.

The sergeant smiled.

"We'll clear this up quickly, Mr. Fuller," he said. Then he turned back to my escorts. "Take him upstairs. The show's just starting."

"Show? What's that?"

No one answered. A hand took my arm. Up the stairs we went. A finger pointed to a long bench. Half a dozen men sat there already. I joined them, sitting next to a doubled up drunk. He had retched recently. I could smell it.

For five minutes I sat. I couldn't look up. I couldn't let myself think.

A door opened. A uniformed cop motioned at us and swore. I followed obediently into a brightly-lit room. For a second I didn't understand. The light hurt my eyes. Shadows concealed the far end of the chamber.

A voice shrieked.

"That's him. That's the bastard," it yelled.

I looked around, trying to figure which punk in the line up had been picked. Maybe the drunk on my left or the playboy with the tuxedo.

That's when it happened. A figure charged up at us. From the shadows he brushed past the outstretched arms of the officers. He leaped, his arms flaying. His fist beat into my face. His body toppled me to the floor. Pain swelled into my head, my arms, my chest.

"You killer. You dirty, lousy killer," he screeched.

An eternity later the guards pulled him off. Gently they eased him away, but not before he had slammed a kick into my groin. I lay there numb. No one helped me up.

Later I staggered to my feet. Cops surrounded me. Metal gripped my wrist. The handcuffs bit into the skin.

"All right, Fuller, let's go."

"Wait, I don't understand."

My protest sounded weak.

"You understand all right, Fuller," a voice said sharply. "We're booking you for murder."

Blood rushed from my head. My stomach knotted.

It didn't seem real. A dream perhaps, a horrible nightmare. Yet my legs were moving. They carried me along, down the steps, through the halls, past an iron door. Metal clanged. I whirled. Bars... black steel bars...loomed before me. The cell gripped me like a powerful fist.

"Stop, you can't do this," I hollered. "Guard, listen, I gotta get to work."

The guard stopped, looking around.

"Relax, mister, you probably ain't never going to that job again. So relax, you're probably going to spend the rest of your life in here."

That's when I said it for the first time.

"Wait, I'm innocent. Don't you believe me? I'm innocent."

I yelled it. I whispered it. I shouted it at the top of my voice. And I beat my fists against the bars until my hands throbbed in pain.

It was only the beginning. Just the first time I screamed out my innocence. It was only the start of an endless venture into hell

NOW some of the later details have faded. The mind plays its tricks, sifting memories, destroying some and magnifying others. It's a little game played with hours, days and months.

The grilling I forget. The questions weren't important. Not to me. I just wanted to get home for supper. Nothing else mattered. Just to be home at the kitchen table with the kids spilling milk and sipping the soup.

But I didn't make it. Instead, Cathy, my wife came to me. They ushered her into the cell. The metal door rattled behind her.

Her frightened, startled

look, I never forgot. Fear had tattooed its tortured lines across her cheeks. In hours she had aged a decade.

The prosecuting attorney I remember, too. What a blood sucking leech. To him Fredrick Fuller was not a man... not a living, loving man. No, Fred Fuller was just a rung on a ladder. On my body he could climb one step higher towards success.

His case was weak. Only one man could identify me. Only sixty year old eyes had watched from the back of the cigar store. But the old man's story was pat. He saw me pull a gun and then dip my greedy palm into the cash register, that was his claim.

Then with tears streaking his cheeks he continued: His gallant son had resisted suddenly until I pumped a hole into the boy's chest. The youth died in his father's arms.

I denied it. I denied everything. But how do you deny a murder?

"Where were you at 9 p.m. on October fourth?"

How would you know? How would you prove it?

And motive...who hasn't

at least one motive for robbery and murder? A mortgaged home, a big debt on a car, a sick child. Any one will do.

Or how's your character? Sure I got questioned by the cops once before. I faked my age on my driver's license as a kid. You could buy a drink that way sometimes. Yeah and I took a defense job to stay out of the Korean deal. They got me anyway. And I even wrote two bad checks once. What the hell...hasn't everyone overdrawn their account now and then?

Then at last came the verdict. The skinny little guy with the lisp read it off. Guilty, he said. Just like that.

And later when I stood before the judge for sentencing, I fainted.

I had to die, he said. I had to sit in a chair and let the state of Illinois pump voltage through my body until I was dead. That's the law. That's the big penalty for murder. Whether you're guilty or innocent, it makes no difference. You stay dead just as long.

"Of course, we'll appeal," that's what my lawyer said.

Why not? My insurance would pay the bill. He couldn't lose.

Yeah, he appealed. He didn't miss a trick. It took days and weeks and months. And every hour of those months I spent looking at bars and walls.

IN the death row every hour is bleak and hideous. Yet every second is cherished by those who wait. But with every moment lingers a thought of death. Even in your sleep you dream of that walk. Fifty steps they say. A hundred feet or so to hell.

Here in the shadow of the chair you cry your innocence again. Here perhaps a few believe you. It doesn't matter.

Throughout every day, too, the mental battle continues. For a moment there's hope. Then dread. First the appeals. Then the denials. Finally your lawyer makes the last begging plea to the governor.

Not even a day more, the governor says. Not another day can you live.

Suddenly there are only hours and then only minutes.

Not even enough time to finish one last letter. There's only moments for fear, all encompassing fear that starts in your stomach and spreads into your head and knees.

They're coming. The uniformed guards with their heads ducked and the warden with his eyes straight ahead. They're looking at me from far away now, from a distant world somewhere. Are they real?

"It's time," the warden says. "Are you ready, Fred?"

He speaks softly as though to avoid arousing the others in the row. There's kindness, too, in that far off voice that invites me to walk with him

into the void.

He hates this moment. It's an instant of excruciating torture to him, for tonight he thinks he slays the innocent. Executing the guilty is sin enough to him, but burning the life from the proclaimed innocent bores into his mind like a fiery torch of Satan.

Now the cell door opens. I hear myself screaming from afar.

"Oh, God, why do I have to die? For a lousy hundred bucks. Why did the fool resist? I didn't want to shoot him. What made me do it? Please, please, don't let me die."

THE END

