

**Damon Runyon**

*Written in Sickness*

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## Why Me?

When physical calamity befalls, the toughest thing for the victim to overcome is the feeling of resentment that it should have happened to him.

‘Why me?’ he keeps asking himself, dazedly. ‘Of all the millions of people around, why me?’

It becomes like a pulse beat—‘Why me? Why me? Why me?’

Sometimes he reviews his whole life step by step to see if he can put his finger on some circumstance in which he may have been at such grievous fault as to merit disaster.

Did he commit some black sin somewhere back down the years? Did he betray the sacred trust of some fellow human being? Is he being punished for some special wrongdoing? ‘Why me?’

He wakes suddenly at night from a sound sleep to consciousness of his affliction and to the clock-like ticking in his brain—‘Why me? Why me? Why me?’

He reflects, ‘Why not that stinker Smith? Why not that louse Jones? Why not that bum Brown? Why me? Why me? Why me?’

Was he guilty of carelessness or error in judgment? ‘Why me? Why? Why? Why?’

It is a question that has been asked by afflicted mortals through the ages. It is being asked more than ever just now as the maimed men come back from war broken in body and spirit and completely bewildered, asking ‘Why me?’

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I do not have the answer, of course. Not for myself nor for anyone else. I, too, am just a poor mugg groping in the dark, though sometimes I think of the words of young Elihu reproving Job and his three pals: ‘Look into the heavens, and see; and behold the clouds which are higher than thou.’

The Book of Job may have been an attempt to solve the problem why the righteous suffer and to point out that such suffering is often permitted as a test of faith and a means of grace. They sure put old Job over the hurdles as an illustration.

He was a character who lived in the land of Uz, ’way back in the times recorded in the Old Testament. He had more money than most folks have hay and he was also of great piety. He stood good with the Lord, who took occasion to comment favourably on Job one day to Satan, who had appeared before Him.

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‘There is no one like Job,’ remarked the Lord to Satan. ‘He is a perfect and upright man. He fears God and eschews evil.’

‘Well, why not?’ said Satan. ‘You have fixed him up so he is sitting pretty in every way. But you just let a spell of bad luck hit him and see what happens. He will curse you to your face.’

‘You think so?’ said the Lord. ‘All right, I will put all his belongings in your power to do with as you please. Only don’t touch Job himself.’

Not long afterwards, the Sabeans copped all of Job’s oxen and asses and killed his servants and his sheep were burned up and the Chaldeans grabbed his camels and slaughtered more of his servants and a big wind blew down a house and destroyed his sons.

But so far from getting sore at the Lord as Satan had figured would happen after these little incidents, Job rent his mantle and shaved his head and fell down upon the ground and worshipped and said:

‘Naked I came out of my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return thither; the Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.’

Now had I been Satan I would have given Job up then and there but lo, and behold, the next time the Lord held a meeting Satan again appeared and when the Lord started boosting Job for holding fast to his integrity, Satan sniffed disdainfully and said:

‘Skin for skin, yea, all that a man has he will give for his life, but just you touch his bone and his flesh and see what your Mr. Job does.’

‘All right,’ the Lord said, ‘I will put him in your hands, only save his life.’

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Then Satan smote poor Job with boils from the soles of his feet to the crown of his head. I reckon that was the worst case of boils anyone ever heard of, and Job’s wife remarked:

‘Do you still retain your integrity? Curse God, and die.’

‘Woman,’ Job said, ‘you are a fool. Shall we receive good at the hands of God and not evil?’

But when those pals of Job’s, Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar, came to see him he let out quite a beef to them and in fact cursed the day he was born. In the end, however, after listening to discourses from his pals of a length that must have made him as tired as the boils, Job humbly confessed that God is omnipotent and omnipresent and repented his former utterances and demeanour ‘in dust and ashes’ and the Lord made him more prosperous than ever before.

‘Why me?’

‘—Therefore have I uttered that I understood not; things too wonderful for me, which I knew not.’

## The Doctor Knows Best

A man has a pain in a certain spot.

It isn't a severe pain. It isn't an incapacitating pain. But it is nonetheless a pain.

The man goes to a doctor.

'Doc,' he says, 'I've got a kind of a pain.'

So the doctor examines him. He takes the man's temperature, feels his pulse. He looks down the man's throat. He listens to the man's chest. He tests his reflexes.

The doctor finds nothing. He gives the man some simple remedy and tells him that ought to do the trick.

The man is back in a few days. 'Doc,' he says, 'that pain is still there. I don't feel so good.'

The doctor makes another examination. He has the man go to an X-ray fellow for a few takes of his teeth and his interior. The doctor puts the exposures on a rack and gazes at them intently. He sees nothing. He lets the man look at them. The man does not see anything, either.

Then the doctor gives the man diathermic treatments. He gives him vitamin pills and vitamin hypodermics. The needles hurt the man like hell.

'How are we to-day?' the doctor asks the man on the man's next visit. The doctor is not taking the needles himself, so he has no call to cut himself in on the man's suffering with that 'we'.

'Doc,' the man says, 'that pain is still there. I don't feel so good.'

Now the doctor puts the man on a strict diet. He tells him to stop smoking and drinking and to cease doing all the other things the man enjoys.

'Doc,' the man says, 'that pain is still there.'

The doctor commences to resent the man's attitude. He commences to hate the very sight of the man's kisser. So do his office attendants. They look at one another knowingly when he appears for his treatments.

When the man's friends ask the doctor what's the matter with the man, the doctor shrugs his shoulders. He purses his lips. He smiles slightly. He as much as says there is nothing the matter with the man.

The man is observed taking one of the pills the doctor ordered.

'He's always taking pills,' the observer remarks. 'He's a hypochondriac. His doctor can't find a thing wrong with him.'

Now if the man has had a good break from life and remains a bachelor, he is not in such bad shape, but if he has the misfortune to be married he is in an awful fix because his wife and family are more difficult to convince that he has

a pain than the doctor. They resent his attitude even more than the doctor.

‘I’ve still got that pain,’ he says to his wife.

‘It’s just your imagination,’ she says.

‘You never looked better in your life. You mustn’t give way to every little ache that comes along. Think of all the suffering in the world. I’m really the one that ought to be in bed.’

‘I don’t feel so good,’ the man says.

‘Nonsense,’ his wife says.

So the man finally hauls off and gives up the ghost. He ups and dies. His wife and family are astonished, and indignant.

‘Well,’ the man’s friends say. ‘He wasn’t looking any too well the last time he was around and he was complaining about a pain, too. Must have been something radically wrong with the old boy, at that.’

The doctor is in a bit of a huff about the man dying that way.

## No Life

You have been noticing an uneasy sensation in region of the Darby Kelly and the croaker says it looks to him like it might be—

Well, nothing serious, if you are careful about what you eat and take these here powders.

All right, Doc. Careful is the word from now on. Thanks.

Wait a minute. No orange juice.

What, no orange juice, Doc? Always have orange juice for breakfast.

No, no orange juice.

Okay, Doc. That's gonna be tough, but grapefruit is just as good.

No grapefruit, either. No acids.

No grapefruit? Say, what does a guy do for breakfast, Doc?

Cereals.

Don't like cereals, Doc.

No syrup.

You don't mean a little sorghum on wheat cakes, do you, Doc?

No sorghum. No wheat cakes. No sugar.

You don't mean no sugar in the coffee, Doc? Just a couple of spoons a cup?

Yes, and no coffee.

Now look, Doc. You don't mean no coffee at all?

No coffee.

Say, Doc, that's all right about no sugar, but you must be kidding about no coffee at all.

No coffee.

Not even a coupla cups a meal, Doc? Why, that's just a taste.

No coffee.

Doc, that ain't human.

No candy.

Not even a little bitsy box of peppermints at the movies, Doc?

No, no peppermints. No ice.

Yo ain't talking about a tiny dab of banana ice cream, are you, Doc? The kind that goes down so slick?

Yes, no sweets at all. No highly spiced stuff. No herring.

What kind, Doc?

Any kind. No herring.

But you don't mean a little of that chefs special, Doc? The kind with the white sauce on it?



No herring.

Not even matjes, Doc?

No herring.

Well, all right, Doc. No herring. Gefüllte fish will have to do.

No gefüllte fish. No goulash.

What kind of goulash, Doc? Hungarian?

Any kind. No salami. No highly seasoned Italian food.

I never eat that more than a couple times a week, anyway; I'll take a lobster Fra Diavolo now and then.

None of that.

Are you sure about the herring, Doc? There must be some kind that're all right.

No herring.

It's a conspiracy. Whoever heard of a little herring hurting anybody? Why, Doc, people have been eating herring for years and it never bothered them.

No herring.

Well, all right, no herring after to-night and to-morrow. What's this list, Doc?

It's your diet. Follow it closely.

But there ain't anything on it a guy can eat, Doc. It's terrible. You were just kidding about the coffee, weren't you, Doc? No coffee! Can you imagine a guy trying to live without coffee—what? You can't!

And no cigarettes.

Doc, a guy might as well be dead, hey?

## Good Night

### Dialogue between Runyon and Bed

(A Little Style Larceny from Benjamin Franklin)

RUNYON Well, Bed, here I am again. Gosh, I feel tough.

BED What's the matter now?

RUNYON I ache all over. I think I've got a fever. Gosh, I feel tough.

BED I'm not surprised. You can't stand it any more, old boy.

RUNYON Stand what?

BED Staying out all night and eating what you please and when you please.

RUNYON Say, what has that got to do with the way I feel? I've picked up a germ of something somewhere.

BED Well, that's because your physical resistance to germs is weakened from staying out all night and eating indiscriminately. You ought to know better.

RUNYON My physical resistance is all right. This is some kind of germ that has nothing to do with staying out and eating. Say, why don't you have more covers? You haven't got enough blankets on to make a boxing glove for a bumble bee.

BED I've got on as many as usual.

RUNYON Well, look how I'm shivering.

BED That's because your resistance is low, I tell you.

RUNYON I guess I need a doctor.

BED It doesn't make any difference whether you need one or not—you'll have him. I wish you would get one that doesn't dump himself down on me when he's looking you over. I'm a little tired myself from the way you tossed around last night and hollered.

RUNYON What was I hollering about?

BED How do I know? You kept hollering 'take that!'

RUNYON Oh, I remember. I was dreaming I was a prizefighter and was knocking Joe Louis out. I guess it was the knackwurst and sauerkraut I ate before I came home.

BED Knackwurst and sauerkraut, eh? And you wonder why you don't

feel good? Why, that's enough to kill a donkey.

RUNYON See here, Bed. Knackwurst and sauerkraut don't make your bones ache and give you a fever. My chest is sore, too. I may be getting pneumonia. Gosh, I feel tough. I'm afraid I'm in for a siege.

BED My goodness, I hope not.

RUNYON Why, don't you like my company?

BED Oh, your company is all right, but I enjoy it more a little at a time. Then I'm not in so much danger.

RUNYON What do you mean—danger?

BED Well, I have to constantly be on guard against being destroyed by fire from those cigarettes you are always smoking. When I think of the narrow escapes I've had it makes my pillows shiver. You shouldn't smoke cigarettes when you are sick, anyway.

RUNYON Say, a fellow has to do something. He can't just lie still all day and night, can he?

BED You certainly don't anyway. You keep me in constant torment by kicking around and getting my sheets all knotted up. Your constant groaning is most disturbing, too.

RUNYON Say, I seem to have a lot of faults, don't I?

BED Oh, I won't say anything about the soup stains you get on me when you are having your meals off a tray, but I wish you would be more careful about the bread crumbs. They are really most annoying. Another thing, your language is at times slightly offensive.

RUNYON Listen here, Bed. Maybe I'd better go to a hospital and be sick if you're going to be so critical.

BED You wouldn't like it. They would turn the lights out on you early and wouldn't let you do so much reading. You couldn't have the radio turned on all the time, either. By the way, why do you keep switching from station to station every few minutes instead of listening to one programme all the way through?

RUNYON That's because I'm always trying to find torch music when I'm sick. It makes me feel better. I wish Ukelele Ike was always on the radio singing 'It Had to Be You' when I'm sick. Gosh, I feel tough. Say, Bed, how does typhoid fever start?

BED Oh you haven't got typhoid fever. If you've got anything it's probably just a little cold. Is that another cigarette? And didn't I hear you groan? Well, I can see that I'm in for it again. Oh, my

goodness!

RUNYON

Send for the doctor! Gosh, I feel tough!

## Bed-Warmers

When I was in a hospital for a sort of check-up, I was reminded of a medical friend of mine in Hollywood who has the biggest check-up business in all Southern California.

The hospitals out there, as everywhere else, are always pressed for space for patients, especially private rooms. My friend's clientele is strictly the private room type and he had to devise some method of holding at least one or two private rooms in reserve at all times lest some of his patients die of mortification over having to lie ill in wards.

He keeps a list of movie producers, directors, executives and even a few actors and when one of his private room patients who has been really sick is ready for discharge, he calls up some fellow on the list and says:

'Henry, I have been thinking of you lately and I wish you would pop into Gates Ajar hospital to-morrow morning for a check-up. I have a room there for you.'

Naturally Henry hustles for the hospital so fast you can scarcely see him for heel dust because the chances are he is a hypochondriac to begin with and in any event the check-up is always de rigueur in Hollywood. It gives a man something to talk about when he goes out socially.

Henry takes with him an assortment of silk robes and silk pyjamas and slippers and other gear, just in case any of the nurses are attractive enough to warrant a display of this nature, and he crawls into the hospital hay still warm from the body heat of the last patient.

He does not know it but he is there just as a holder. He does not know my friend is using him to keep the room against the coming of a patient of greater illness or importance—and especially importance—than Henry. My friend drops around about noon and takes his blood pressure and is assuming a serious expression before telling Henry that it looks bad when the phone rings.

'Doctor,' the office downstairs advises him, 'Mrs. Farfel has just arrived.'

'Henry,' my friend says, as he hangs up, 'you are 100 per cent. okay just as I thought. You can get out of that bed right now and go home, and consider yourself checked up to who-laid-the-rail.'

'But, Doctor,' Henry says, 'don't you think—'

'Henry,' my friend says, 'please get up. I will help you put on your clothes. I need the room for Mrs. Farfel.'

'You mean the wife of—' Henry begins.

'Yes,' says my friend. 'Ah, here she is now! Henry, you will have to dress out in the hall.'

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Of course, I do not believe the story that my friend had three of these holders dressing out in the hall at the same time, but there is no doubt that his check-up turn-over is very rapid and very large. I fear, however, that he has lost a very good check-up customer in the person of another friend of mine, a top producer, who entered the Gates Ajar for a check-up, thinking he was going to get a good rest from his missus and was dispossessed by my medical friend in forty-eight hours.

What made the producer particularly sore was his discovery that the patient who succeeded him was that same missus who went in for treatment for a nervous breakdown. I am inclined to the opinion that my medical friend should have employed a stranger as holder, at that.

The hospital life is not for Runyon. It operates on the theory that the day begins at about eight o'clock in the a.m., at which hour the nurse comes barging in with bright hellos that have a slightly synthetic ring to one who knows that she must have got up at six o'clock to get to the hospital from her home so early unless she lives around the corner. Even then no one can be that cheerful at 8 a.m., especially on a dark day.

The hospital regime is too upsetting to my routine. I think it was originally devised for farmers. What proof can they offer that it does a man any good to be awakened at 8 a.m., and put to sleep at 9 p.m., when all his life he has slept until noon and gone to bed at 4 a.m.? Let us be fair about this.

After a couple of weeks of hospital order I find myself dozing at gin rummy games like Jules Saranoff, the champion gin player of the Friars club, a famous man with his violin in the old days of vaudeville. When 'Sary' plays gin, everyone bets on him up to the moment he heaves the ten of spades when he should have chucked the nine of clubs, which is apt to happen any minute after he has played eight or ten hours because he no longer possesses the stamina of former years.

One night I was nodding on 'Sary's' left and did not see exactly what came off but it seems his opponent ginned and won the game on a bad play by 'Sary' and I was awakened by his backers clamouring to be declared off the next game on the ground that he was asleep. I remarked that his eyes were open so he must be awake.

'The one on your side is,' said a backer, 'but the one on the other side is closed. He is sleeping one-eye.'

## Sweet Dreams

We think the greatest institution ever devised for human comfort is the bed. Let us talk about beds.

A man is usually born in bed, and spends at least half his life in bed. If he is lucky, he dies in bed. We used to think that the best place to die was on the battlefield, face to the foe, etc., but that was when we were much younger and more casual about dying.

Now we know that a battlefield is likely to be an untidy sort of place and much more lonesome for the purpose of dying than a nice clean bed, with the doctors and the sorrowing relatives clustered about, all wondering how soon they are going to get paid off.

However, let us not pursue those morbid reflections about beds. We prefer thinking of beds in their more cheerful aspects. We like to think of a bed as a place of refuge and rest—as a sanctuary against the outside world with its troubles and woes, where sometimes in beautiful dreams, a fellow can live a few hours in ecstasy.

Of course there may be a few bad dreams, too, but we always figured they are stood off by the pleasure derived from awakening to a realization that they are not true. Only the other night a bloke shoved us off a twenty-storey building, but we woke up just before we hit the ground and our joy on discovering that we were still safe in bed completely cancelled the few sweaty seconds we suffered while falling.

We claim to be one of the greatest authorities in the United States on beds—that is, on the sleeping qualities of beds. We have slept in beds in every State in the Union, and we must say good beds are fairly common in these days when the construction of springs and mattresses has reached a degree approaching perfection, and American housewives, in furnishing their homes, are properly placing more importance on beds than on any other items of household equipment.

We can remember when some hotel beds, and a lot in private homes, too, were pretty hard to take. Even now I occasionally run across a survivor of the times when a bed was commonly just a sort of rack with a lumpy mattress and creaky springs and skimpy coverings for a fellow to toss around on between suns, though in general Americans have become educated to the idea of complete comfort in beds.

The trouble with Americans about beds in the past was their theory that a bed typified indolence. They apparently did not realize that the better a fellow rested in bed, the livelier he was likely to be when he got up, and that the better

the bed, the better his rest. It is our opinion that the energy of Americans generally has greatly increased since the improvement in beds.

We hold that many Americans owe their lack of appreciation in beds to faulty education in youth. Some parents send their children to bed as punishment. If they would reverse this procedure and send them to bed only as a reward, and keep them out of bed as a penalty, it would inspire in the kids a respect and appreciation for beds for which they would thank their fathers and mothers in later years.

It might be a good idea, too, to teach the youngsters right from taw that they should never take any worries to bed with them—that they should regard bed as a secure nest in which they should rest without giving a thought to worldly concerns. If you started on them early enough maybe they would grow up with the knack of disregarding the winds of worry rattling at the window panes, or the rain of adversity pattering on the roofs that disturbs so much adult peace of mind in bed.

We never cared much for that Spartan simplicity in beds that some fellows profess to fancy. A cot in the corner, or a crude pallet on the ground 'neath the stars is not for us. We went through all that in our army days, and you can have it.

We will take all the luxury with which a bed can possibly be surrounded—a gentle, yielding mattress, and quiet, cushiony springs, and soft, downy pillows, and snowy linen and the richest of coverings. A fellow gets little enough out of life under any circumstances without making his hours of rest too tough.

We like a bed wide and long that we can kick around in without falling out or stubbing our toes. As we have said, good beds are common enough, but a truly great bed—one that fits perfectly, and that sleeps good, is a rarity that a fellow should cherish above all other possessions. We have a bed in New York City that we think is the sleepingest bed in the whole world and would not part with it for anything, but of course another fellow might not like it. It might not just fit him. That is the thing—to get a bed that fits.

I realize, of course, that my appreciation of a bed is due largely to the fact that I am one of those fortunate chaps who sleeps fairly well, for which I am grateful to a kind providence. I can imagine nothing worse than insomnia. I am lucky enough to be able to sleep after a fashion standing up, or hanging on a hook, but in a good bed—say, that is when I really saw wood!



## Passing the Word Along

Since I lost my voice or about ninety per cent. of its once bell-like timbre, I have discovered many inconveniences as well as some striking conveniences.

The greatest inconvenience is that it involved explanations to friends on meeting them for the first time since the vocal abatement and they are grieved by the absence of my former thunderous salutations.

You see in my set warmth of greeting is rated by the size of the hellos you give and receive and I was always noted for issuing the hood rive, or top size, the good old 'Hello, hello, hello, hello, the old well, well, well, hello, hello, hello.'

Now that I am perforce down to the 6-7/8 size hello for one and all which is just a nubbin of a hello and the brush off kind you give a gee you do not like my friends are inclined to huffiness towards me until I explain about the voice.

This is a bit of strain in itself but fortunately they soon start telling me about remedies that cure other blokes they know so all I have to do is to stand there and nod my head at intervals.

I find the nod wonderfully non-committal, especially when someone is delivering a big knock against someone else because word cannot be carried to the knockee that Runyon was a party to the knock. At least they cannot quote a nod.

I am occasionally distressed by strangers to whom I address myself in my low murmur answering me in imitative whisper, possibly inadvertently, possibly because they think I am kidding and possibly just because they have no sense. Sometimes even my friends do the same thing in that gentle spirit of mockery of human affliction from which many actors and others have long drawn their humour.

You have undoubtedly heard some of our public performers discoursing humorously on cross-eyed persons, on bald heads, on the deaf and the dumb and the lame and the halt. You have perhaps seen them simulate limps and other distortions of the body to point up their jokes. It is a common practice for us to apply nicknames suggestive of affliction such as 'Gimp', 'Frip', 'Humpty', 'Deafy', 'Blinky', 'Baldy' and the like.

False teeth and glass eyes and the toupee have long been standard items of jest among our jokesters. A person who is compelled to resort to a hearing device, one of the greatest boons to afflicted humanity ever invented, is said to be 'wired for sound' which is supposed to be good for a hearty laugh.

And not only is infirmity one of our leading topics of humour but it is often brought up by men in moments of anger against the infirm, as when they say

things like 'That one-legged so-and-so', as if the infirmity itself was a reproach.

Of course the humour that deals with infirmities is in bad taste. Most American humour is in bad taste and growing worse under the present vogue for the suggestive and the downright obscene in the spoken and written word. But even the suggestive and the obscene is not as unkind as the humour dealing with bodily affliction.

The hale and hearty shun the afflicted and I cannot say I blame them much. I can well imagine that I am a great trial to my friends who have to bend their ears close to my kisser to hear what I am saying. Maybe it would be better for all concerned if I did not try to talk at all because everybody else is talking these days and I would not be missed.

I carry a pad of paper in my pocket and when conversation is indicated I jot down my end of the gabbling on paper and pass it on to my vis-à-vis who takes a glauum at the chirography, crumples up the slip of paper and casts it aside, nodding his head or muttering a non-committal um-hah because he cannot read it any more than I can after it is two hours cold.

The forced practice has produced a headache for me as this morning I was waited on by four guys who were all mighty belligerent. I mean they all wanted to place the sluggola on me. They wanted to bash out my brains, if any. I mean they were sizzling.

The first one to appear we will call Pat, though his name is really Pete. He had a piece of paper in his hand that he handed to me, saying, truculently:

'What does this mean?'

The paper had obviously been wadded up and smoothed out again and I could not decipher the writing, though it looked familiar.

'Who wrote this?' I asked Pat (in writing).

'You did,' he said, fiercely.

Then it dawned on me that it was indeed my own writing and I read it better.

'Pat is a louse,' the writing said.

I tried to remember when I had written it. It could scarcely have been at the editorial council in Joe Connolly's office because insects were not discussed, only a few heels. As a matter of fact I did less talking in Joe Connolly's office than anywhere else in town because when I walked in he had a great big pad of foolscap lying on his desk and I felt insulted. It was a hint that I talk a heap.

It might have been in Lindy's late at night when I had a meeting with Oscar Levant and Leonard Lyons, but it comes to my mind that we did not get as far down in the alphabet as the P's. We quit at the O's because I ran out of pad paper and Lindy commenced to get sore at the way I was working on the backs of his menu cards.

I was busy writing out a denial for Pat when Joe and Ike and Spike, as we will call them, came barging in and each of them had a crumpled slip, and were so hot that taken jointly you could have barbecued a steer on them. I read one slip that said Mike would rob a church, another that stated that Ike would guzzle his grandmamma if he thought it would help him while there was still another that I would not think of putting in a public print. I did not realize that I knew some of the words.

I think if there had been only one present he would have belted me but the four being there at the same time complicated matters because each one knew the others are copper hollersers or stool pigeons, which is what I had in mind in my writing, and would belch to the bulls if a murder or mayhem came off.

So they finally left muttering they would see me later and I was taught a lesson about leaving written testimony scattered around. However, I think that there is a plot for a great crime story in all this by my favourite mystery writer of the moment Raymond Chandler of Los Angeles. I mean he could have the real killer going about dropping notes that finally land him in the gas chamber at Quentin because Chandler puts all his mysteries in California as if we do not have them in Florida, too.

I notice that whipping out the pad sends most of my acquaintances to searching themselves for their specs and they invariably have some fatuous remark to make about getting old as if I did not know by just looking at them or remembering how long I have known them.

I do not pull the pad and pencil on the dames. I just shake hands and grin idiotically. Most women are near-sighted since infancy and too vain to wear cheaters but why should I embarrass them. Besides not all of them can read.

## Death Pays a Social Call

Death came in and sat down beside me, a large and most distinguished-looking figure in beautifully tailored soft white flannels. His expansive face wore a big smile.

‘Oh, hello,’ I said. ‘Hello, hello, hello. I was not expecting you. I have not looked at the red board lately and did not know my number was up. If you will just hand me my kady and my coat I will be with you in a jiffy.’

‘Tut-tut-tut,’ Death said. ‘Not so fast. I have not come for you. By no means.’

‘You haven’t?’ I said.

‘No,’ Death said.

‘Then what the hell are you doing here?’ I demanded indignantly. ‘What do you mean by barging in here without even knocking and depositing your fat Francis in my easiest chair without so much as by-your-leave?’

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‘Excuse me,’ Death said, taken aback at my vehemence. ‘I was in your neighbourhood and all tired out after my day’s work and I thought I would just drop in and sit around with you awhile and cut up old scores. It is merely a social call, but I guess I owe you an apology at that for my entrance.’

‘I should say you do,’ I said.

‘Well, you see I am so accustomed to entering doors without knocking that I never thought,’ Death said. ‘If you like, I will go outside and knock and not come in until you answer.’

‘Look,’ I said. ‘You can get out of here and stay out of here. Screw, bum!’

Death burst out crying.

Huge tears rolled down both pudgy cheeks and splashed on his white silk-faced lapels.

‘There it is again,’ he sobbed. ‘That same inhospitable note wherever I go. No one wants to chat with me. I am so terribly lonesome. I thought surely you would like to punch the bag with me awhile.’

I declined to soften up.

‘Another thing,’ I said sternly, ‘what are you doing in that get-up? You are supposed to be in black. You are supposed to look sombre, not like a Miami Beach Winter tourist.’

‘Why,’ Death said, ‘I got tired of wearing my old working clothes all the time. Besides, I thought these garments would be more cheerful and informal for a social call.’

‘Well, beat it,’ I said. ‘Just Duffy out of here.’

‘You need not fear me,’ Death said.

‘I do not fear you Deathie, old boy,’ I said, ‘but you are a knock to me among my neighbours. Your visit is sure to get noised about and cause gossip. You know you are not considered a desirable character by many persons, although, mind you, I am not saying anything against you.’

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‘Oh, go ahead,’ Death said. ‘Everybody else puts the zing on me so you might as well, too. But I did not think your neighbours would recognize me in white, although, come to think of it, I noticed everybody running to their front door and grabbing in their “Welcome” mats as I went past. Why are you shivering if you do not fear me?’

‘I am shivering because of that clammy chill you brought in with you,’ I said. ‘You lug the atmosphere of a Frigidaire around with you.’

‘You don’t tell me?’ Death said. ‘I must correct that. I must pack an electric pad with me. Do you think that is why I seem so unpopular wherever I go? Do you think I will ever be a social success?’

‘I am inclined to doubt it,’ I said. ‘Your personality repels many persons. I do not find it as bad as that of some others I know, but you have undoubtedly developed considerable sales resistance to yourself in various quarters.’

‘Do you think it would do any good if I hired a publicity man?’ Death asked. ‘I mean, to conduct a campaign to make me popular?’

‘It might,’ I said. ‘The publicity men have worked wonders with even worse cases than yours. But see here, D., I am not going to waste my time giving you advice and permitting you to linger on in my quarters to get me talked about. Kindly do a scammola, will you?’

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Death had halted his tears for a moment, but now he turned on all faucets, crying boo-hoo-hoo-hoo.

‘I am so lonesome,’ he said between lachrymose heaves.

‘Git!’ I said.

‘Everybody is against me,’ Death said.

He slowly exited and, as I heard his tears falling plop-plop-plop to the floor as he passed down the hallway, I thought of the remark of Agag, the King of the Amalekites, to Samuel just before Samuel mowed him down: ‘Surely the bitterness of death is past.’

## Transcriber's Notes

No changes have been made to the text, but it has been reformatted for a digital presentation.

[The end of *Written in Sickness* by Damon Runyon]