

# Commonweal

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# Runyon's Way

Peter Quinn

*"All life is six to five against."*

**N**o writer grows up aiming to be a copycat, at least none I have the good fortune or misfortune to know. It is true that some writers never grow up at all, and it is also true that I have never been to France or Europe where, or so I am told by those who have, there are customs and practices which, while they hold wine over there, do not hold water over here. I cannot claim to have the skinny on all writers over there. I know for sure that over here, as a general proposition, they have heroes they look up to in the way ballplayers do to the bronzed immortals bolted into the walls of Cooperstown.

For ballplayers and scribes alike, the goal is not to be a gonniff and lift their heroes' stuff in the sense of committing larceny in the style of a first-class four flusher. It is to learn what it takes to keep alive the desire to stand apart and above, the grit that keeps a wheezer in the game when he digs deep into his pockets to feel what he has got left and all he can feel are his fingers, and them just somewhat.

If you ask me, and I know you did not but I will tell you anyway, being a writer is a little like falling in love. No matter how uncomplicated it seems at the start, it is always complicated. It ends up breaking more hearts than it mends. It is always a whole lot easier to make sense of when you are out of it than in. The trick is to persist.

Writers must learn these things for themselves and find their own way. Yet for most, if not all, the path is so crooked and confusing that getting lost is as easy as falling off a barstool after gargling one-too-many alcoholic beverages of one type or another. (My preference is for Manhattans.) Sometimes, however, with luck—and don't kid yourself, whether it comes to love, or writing, or playing ball, or staying alive, luck has as much to do with it as anything—it makes all the difference if a guy or doll is introduced to or stumbles upon a hero at just the right moment.

*Peter Quinn was a speechwriter for two New York governors. He retired as corporate editorial director for Time Warner in 2008. Dry Bones, the third novel in his Fintan Dunne trilogy, was published by Overlook in November 2013.*

Take Damon Runyon, for instance. We are never formally introduced because he has the bad fortune to die several months before I have the good fortune to be born. The first time I hear his name is from Joe O'Brien, who is not given to gab about events and personalities in Ulan Bator, Tibet, or Fort Lee, New Jersey, so right away I presume Runyon lives in or close by our Bronx bailiwick.

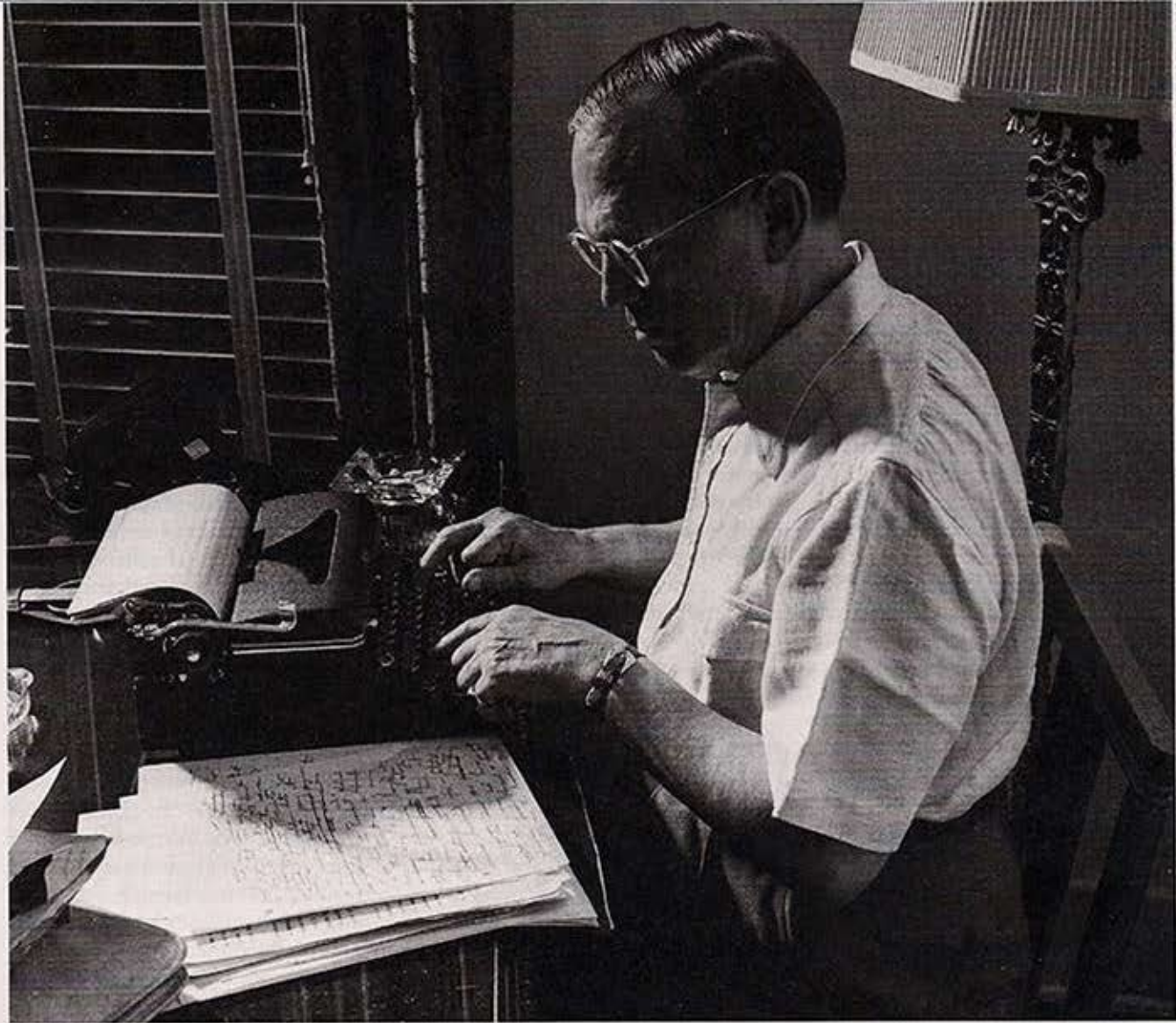
The year is 1955 or 1957 or somewhere in between and I'm eight or ten or somewhat close. Royal blue bathrobe tied tight around his spare frame, Joe sips his morning coffee at the table in the dining room (which is more nook than room) in the Parkchester apartment he shares with short, plump Gertie, my hug-you-till-it-hurts aunt who sits directly across from him and neither smokes cigarettes nor drinks coffee. She places a chocolate doughnut on the plate in front of me and pours Coca-Cola into two red plastic glasses filled with ice, one for me, one for her.

Beyond that he is my uncle by dint of marriage to Gertie Quinn, my father's older sister, there is not a lot I know about Joe. There are occasions when I overhear whispered conversations and insinuations that make me suspect that there are things about Joe I am not supposed to overhear. For instance, whether he ever spends time in the Big House is a matter of conjecture of the kind I usually do not indulge in and, the one time I do, my parents put the kibosh on.

When it comes to the Little Red School House, I know by way of for sure that Joe doesn't go beyond a stretch in the third or fourth grade. In terms of reading, I never see him eyeball anything besides bladders the likes of the *Daily News* and the *Mirror*. Joe is the night clerk at the George Washington Hotel, on Lexington and 23rd, a house of hospitality that when it comes to high-class amenities isn't exactly running neck and neck with the Waldorf Astoria but is free of bed bugs and in-house floozies whose affections rent by the hour.

The George Washington, which has many guests who are there for longer than a night or two, maintains a strict no-questions-asked policy with all who sign in, which is why, as I learn years later, W. H. Auden and his lover Christopher Isherwood reside there for a time. They are by no means the only pair of such an inclination as theirs to do so.





Damon Runyon in 1944

Gertie and Joe are like no two other adults I know, not only because of the nocturnal lives they live but they have no kids, which among married couples in the Bronx of that day and age is about as common as the practice of animal husbandry or polygamy. Stranger still, they like having kids around, particularly nieces and nephews, and supply all the chocolate doughnuts and Coca-Cola said nieces and nephews should care to consume, and my special status as their only godchild brings a number of additional fringe benefits, including but not limited to a shiny silver quarter every visit.

Gertie works full time. After she bids the schoolhouse a fond adieu—to be honest, I'm not sure about the fond part—in or near about the eighth grade, she obtains a night gig with the phone company that with the passage of several decades leads to a position as a supervising operator, about as high as anyone of the feminine persuasion can rise in a company that, known far and wide as Ma Bell, is pure Pa Bell when it comes to big jobs, cushy offices, and plenty of moolah.

Joe, whose wavy hair and pencil mustache make him a ring dinger for actor William Powell—he of *The Thin Man* movie fame—always takes his wake-up cup of coffee this same way: clad in the same royal blue bathrobe, enthroned

in the same chair at the same dining-room table, he flips through the morning blats at two o'clock in the afternoon.

This is their regular routine as Joe and Gertie leave for work somewhere around 5:00 p.m. and sign out in the neighborhood of 4:00 a.m., then hang in Manhattan until whenever they come home. According to my father, Gertie and Joe haven't been up before noon since around the time President Warren G. Harding was either done in by a heart attack or stroke or poisoned by his wife, depending on which version of events you prefer.

Joe parks a Chesterfield cigarette in the corner of his mouth. He uses the stub of one to light another so the parking space is always taken. He deposits generous doses of cream and sugar into his coffee and swirls them with a tarnished silver spoon embossed with what I take to be a grapefruit and an ice pick until Gertie explains to me they are the Trylon and Perisphere which, Joe chimes in to add, served time as symbols of the 1939 New York World's Fair.

I cherish the time I spend in their apartment, which is tidy clean but not immune to a dust ball there or messed cushion here, nowhere near the spic-and-span formality or lace-curtain gentility I'm accustomed to at home. Lean, long Joe and round and low Gertie are, in their way, a kind of Try-



lon and Perisphere, an observation I keep to myself as I am careful not to say anything that might sound critical or, although unintended in any way, give offense.

**G**ertie and Joe gab about the gangland rubouts and Broadway shenanigans and socialite swanky panky that are the bread and butter of the blats. They never worry about making it sound fit to print in a hoity-toity tattler the likes of the *New York Times* or suitable for the ears of a legal minor the likes of me. But this time, when Joe puts down his Trylon-and-Perisphere World's Fair spoon, instead of thumbing through the *News* or the *Mirror* as he normally does and kibitzing with Gertie about the contents, he picks up a book and starts pawing through it.

Gertie gloms the blats and scopes out Klein on the Square's full-page ads for brassieres and garter belts and girdles and women's hosiery of all kinds and configurations, preferring them to the latest rubouts and shenanigans. Joe flips through until he fingers a certain page in the book he holds and suddenly, without a poke from Gertie or me, begins to read aloud.

I am surprised not just because I never heard Joe recite aloud from a book before—or, for that matter, hold a book—but also because of the easy way he manages the words, never stumbling somewhat for even a small second, and I think it's sad that for whatever reasons Gertie and Joe missed out on the education my parents got. Though my parents never bring it up, at least in front of me, I see their eyes roll when Gertie or Joe pronounce "oil" as "earl" and "choice" like "cherse" and theater "thee-ate-her," which without ever being told directly I know are the pronunciations used by people who in terms of scoring a hit with the Three R's never get beyond batting practice.

Joe reads, chuckles, and keeps reading. Gertie looks up from the full pager for Klein on the Square's brassieres and girdles and women's hosiery of all kinds, frowns, not chuckles, and says something like this:

"Joe, it might be funny to you, but it's nothing a kid his age"—she leans her head in my general direction—"who also happens to be an altar boy should be hearing from a book, mobsters and murderers and the like tying people up in sacks, practical jokes that are nothing more than the crimes and antics of no-class hoodlums."

I pretend I'm not listening to what Joe is reading, munch my chocolate doughnut, take a generous gulp of Coke, and

study the pages of the *Mirror*, a blat I only read at Gertie and Joe's because my parents forbid it from entering our house and, truth be told, don't their pussies curdle and go sour at the mention of its name.

I'm thinking to myself along the lines of this: It's funny the way Gertie is okay with me reading about rubouts and Broadway shenanigans and socialite swanky panky in the *News* and *Mirror*, and she is fine kibitzing with Joe about such dirty, rotten doings in front of me, but objects to Joe reading aloud about such from a book.

Years later, as I think back, it dawns on me Gertie's early adieu, fond or otherwise, to the formal pursuit of the arts and sciences leads her to regard books as something the likes of holy water fonts, sources of moral uplift and spiritual inspiration, not feeding troughs filled with the world's sins and scandals, the slops on which blats everywhere feast and grow fat.

Joe is silent a second or somewhat. He employs the stub of one Chesterfield to ignite a fresh one, parks it in the familiar spot, wields the World's Fair Trylon-and-Perisphere spoon to re-stir his coffee. "It's Damon Runyon," Joe says. "We were together once in a card game. I always loved reading his stuff when he was alive and then somebody leaves this volume on the front desk and I can't put it down once I pick it up. It's as good as it gets."

He starts reading where he left off. Next thing, his chuckle gets brevetted to general laughter and before you know it, tears are running down his cheeks and he's breathing like it's hard to drag air into his lungs.

Gertie gives her head a disapproving shake or two. "Runyon, onion, bunion, it stinks like an East River garbage scow." She turns the page from Klein on the Square's brassieres,

garter belts, girdles, and the like to Wanamaker's ovens, refrigerators, radios, and TVs. "If you got to read it, read it to yourself."

Joe drags on his Chesterfield and exhales through his nose. Smoke steams dragon-style out of each nostril, a trick I promise to learn as soon as I reach twelve or fourteen, which is the generally accepted age among Bronx youth of my generation for taking up a lifelong (and life-shortening) relationship with cigarettes. He ignores Gertie's cease and desist, and goes back to his reading.

At this time, since I'm eight or ten, I'm definitely not fully ingesting the nuances and meanings of every line but despite what difficulties exist, my altar-boy brain gets the drift, which is as follows, and also to wit: A character named





Joe the Joker who hangs around a restaurant called Mindy's claims to be the inventor of the hot foot.

Though some might question Joe the Joker's claim, and prefer to date the invention of the hot foot to the days when Aristotle or Alexander the Great or some other toga-wearing ancestor of Nick the Greek first figured out the sandal, there is no disputing the basic technique, which involves slipping a match into where the sole kisses the upper part of the footwear. When lit, this causes the unsuspecting proprietor of said footwear to jump around in the fashion of a Radio City Rockette who's temporarily lost her marbles.

Gertie shakes her head as Joe repeats the story word for word, exactly—as far as I can tell—as Damon Runyon writes it, including his assessment of Joe the Joker as such a pro at pranks that “many guys on Broadway are willing to lay you odds that he can give a mouse a hot foot if you can find a mouse that wears shoes,” which is among the many lines that cause my uncle to laugh.

He laughs heartily as well at other of Joe the Joker's comic endeavors such as where he rigs a chair with electric wires intending to give a schlemiel named Commodore Jake a friendly jolt but delivers “too much juice” and comes within a whisker of turning jest into capital punishment.

“What's funny about that?” Gertie wants to know, but Joe keeps reading as if he doesn't hear.

It seems to me that the story takes an altogether threatening turn when Frankie Ferocious, a gangster from Brooklyn, comes upon the scene and Joe the Joker sizes him up as a suitable candidate for a hot foot, which even someone with a ten-year-old altar-boy brain instantly recognizes as most unwise.

As Joe continues reading, more and more of what follows stretches my powers of comprehension, such as when Rosa Midnight, a singer at a watering hole called the Hot Box and Joe the Joker's wife, runs off with Frankie Ferocious, and a gangland hoo-ha ensues in the course of which several guys are “scragged,” which I take to mean—accurately, as it turns out—killed, including Joe the Joker's brother.

Truly, this I am impressed by, which makes it harder for me to pretend I'm so absorbed in the *Mirror* that I'm not hanging on every word of Damon Runyon's that issues forth from the mouth of Joe. I turn to the sports pages and dutifully run my finger down the box scores like I give a squirrel's nuts who among the Bronx Bombers or Brooklyn Bums gets a hit or strikes out. Why my uncle continues to chuckle at certain parts, especially when Ropes McGonigle enters the story, escapes me.

Ropes's talent is for trussing people in sacks in such a way that when they struggle to get out, they end up strangling themselves to death, an outcome I suspect will reappear in the nightmares that compete with increasingly vivid dreams of a mortally sinful nature, such as the racy possibilities when Rosa Midnight, clad only in the brassiere and

garter belt she purchases at Klein on the Square, undertakes indecent flirtations with the patrons of the Hot Box.

Gertie carefully tears the page of Wanamaker's ovens, refrigerators, radios, and TVs from the newspaper and gets up from the table. She puts her hand on my topper as though to bestow a blessing sufficient to ward off the serpents Joe might be carelessly setting loose to slither amid what she imagines is the formerly pure and uncorrupted Eden of my pre-pubescent altar-boy brain.

“All I got to say is it's lucky for you the boy isn't listening,” she harrumphs. “So go on and keep reading because I'm going shopping and you'll be reading to yourself.” With that, she plucks her pocketbook from the chair beside the door and leaves the apartment to Joe and me alone. I close the *Mirror*, push the pile of blats aside, and focus my full powers of attention on Joe's recitation of Damon Runyon's story, which, it has become obvious to me, is speeding headlong in a direction that will not end anywhere close to happily ever after for one or more of the participants.

In fact, when the end comes, I am a little shocked and maybe more than a little scared, as my Aunt Gertie is probably right that the still-intact and heavily fortified ramparts of my safe, sanitized, parochial-school-boy brain leave me wrestling to process such mayhem as what Damon Runyon chooses to describe.

Soon after, if not that night, I have one of those more than somewhat very scary, horrifyingly real dreams you're not sure are dreams at all until you are out of them. In this one, Ropes McGonigle trusses me up in a burlap sack he delivers to Frankie Ferocious whose evil laugh echoes in my ears as he pulls out his John Roscoe intending to plug the sack with a half-dozen or so bullet-shaped ventilation holes.

Apparently, I cry out in my sleep because next thing somebody sits next to me on the bed. A hand gently rocks my shoulder. The light on the nightstand clicks on. Momentarily startled, I open my eyes. I feel well north of relieved to find there beside me not Ropes or Frankie Ferocious, but my mother.

“You're having a bad dream.” Small as her smile is, to me it is as monumentally reassuring as the Statue of Liberty. Her hand rests on my topper the same way Gertie's did, as if to guard against the snakes that crawl into a kid's noggin. “What was it about?”

I know it is a sin to lie, maybe even a mortal sin when it's to a parent, yet I am not about to rat out my Uncle Joe, so I lie as follows: “I can't remember.”

My father looms in the doorway behind her. “What's the matter now?”

“He had a nightmare.” My mother turns slightly but leaves her hand where it is.

“Jesus.” The *Times* is folded and tucked beneath my father's right arm. “Damned television. It's terrible what it's doing to kids' minds. God only knows where it'll lead.”

My mother's eyes are twenty-two karats worth of caring, just what a kid wants his mother's eyes to be, all soft



and concerned, my father's, what a kid expects his father's to be, not exactly angry but definitely on the other side of the street from my mother's. "Go to sleep," he barks.

"Sweet dreams," my mother purrs and snaps off the light.

Well, she gets her wish, in a fashion, although not likely in the fashion she or any other Irish Catholic daily Mass-going mother in the Bronx of the 1950s might intend.

I never again dream of Ropes McGonigle or Frankie Feroocious or Joe the Joker. Instead, as time goes on, the dreams ripen into suggestive and saucy and way beyond sweet. The portal of sleep proves a revolving door into a Hot Box of the imagination, where new and improved versions of Rosa Midnight and her ilk are dolled up in brassieres and garter belts, and frolick with raw abandon in positions of such a compromising nature that in its wildest flights of fancy the ten-year-old altar-boy brain never anticipates them.

**I**n the years that follow, I spend a lot of time reading but Damon Runyon is never on my card. Maybe it is a bit because the story my Uncle Joe reads aloud that day when I am an impressionable kid in the Bronx makes an entirely wrong impression. More likely it is because I develop a taste for reading history before anything else, even planning one day to become a history professor with pipe between my teeth and suede patches on the elbows of my tweed jacket.

My closest encounter with Runyon is when an English teacher, whose mission in life seems to be inflicting on his charges the driest, dullest stuff penned in the English language in the last five hundred and fifty years, dismisses a mug or moll in some book or play as "Runyonesque," which he doesn't really explain but which I take to mean a kitschy, quaintly exaggerated urban-type person gone the way of vaudeville and the Victrola, and now planted in an unmarked grave next to the public toilet in the park behind the 42nd Street Library.

The one place I keep running into Runyon is in the movies. His short stories (he never writes a novel) are for a long time popular with the Titans of Tinseltown. I see the 1934 version of "Little Miss Marker," starring Adolphe Menjou and Shirley Temple on the *Late Show*. Adolphe was okay. Born in Pittsburgh to a French father and an Irish mother named Nora Joyce, he is a political reactionary and a better-than-ordinary actor, which is more than you can say about his right-wing pal, Ronald Reagan.

At the end of every Shirley Temple movie I always feel like where I am at Gertie and Joe's and scarf down too many chocolate doughnuts and Cokes and have to fight the urge

to throw up. (The movie was also released under the title *The Girl in Pawn*, a homonym whose X-rated possibilities are unthought-of in the days when the sun shines bright on America's Queen of Cute.)

For reasons unknown or known alone to the moviemaker's mind, *Little Miss Marker* is remade three times: in 1949 as *Sorrowful Jones*, with Bob Hope and Lucille Ball; in 1962 as *40 Pounds of Trouble*, with Tony Curtis and Suzanne Pleshette (filleted by Bosley Crowther of the *Times* as a "witless remake of a Runyon story...hackneyed and dull"); and again in 1980 under the original title, starring Walter Matthau. I miss the Curtis-Pleshette version but while crawling through the sleepless, lonesome gulch of a busted romance, I see the other two on late-night TV.

Whereas I almost reach the end of the Hope-Ball film before I fall asleep, I'm quickly numbed into dreamland by grumpy, rumpled Walter Matthau's rendition of a grumpy, rumpled movie version of himself. Once amid a winter dreary,

stranded in a motel in Albany and channel-surfing weak and weary, I come upon the 1951 film based on Runyon's short story "The Lemon Drop Kid" (Bob Hope headlines in this one, too), a leftover lab specimen from the days when movie moguls and medicine men essentially operated according to the Hippocratic maxim of "Do No Harm."

The touchstone of my acquaintance with Runyon is the same one shared with millions of my fellow hoi polloi: The 1950 Broadway hit musical *Guys and Dolls*, lyrics by Frank Loesser and book (which is showbiz lingo for the script) by Jo Swerling and Abe Burrows, runs for some twelve hundred performances. It wins

the Tony for best musical and almost gets a Pulitzer Prize except the country is in a tizzy about Reds under every bed, and among those accused of being if not under the bed then in bed with the Reds is Abe Burrows. The Pulitzer is flushed.

I don't see the play during its original run. At some point—I'm not sure exactly when—I see the 1955 film version of the play. A deluxe Technicolor production bankrolled by Sam Goldwyn and directed by Joe Mankiewicz, it features Frank Sinatra, whose career is on the way back from a brush with oblivion, and Marlon Brando, whose role as Sky Masterson is ten blocks and a hundred miles away from his Academy Award-winning performance the previous year as Terry Molloy in *On the Waterfront*.

The popularity of hit songs like "Luck Be a Lady Tonight" help make the movie a sure-fire hit. It pays big-time spondulicks, to the tune of \$20 million on Goldwyn's \$5-million bet. No longer a could-a-been contender, Brando is a heavyweight box-office champ.

Someone once said that the happiest time in a novelist's life is the night before his first book is published. Though I'm sure that's not true for all novelists, especially ones who hit the bestseller list or score a Pulitzer or a Nobel, it proves true for me.



Born in Manhattan, Kansas, Runyon gets it in the neck (he dies of throat cancer) in 1946, and, so the story goes, his incinerated remains are scattered over Times Square from an airplane. The ashes are blowing in the square some nine years when the movie *Guys and Dolls* premieres. In fact, Runyon never wrote a story by the name "Guys and Dolls." It is the title of a 1931 collection of short stories and used for the play, a banged-together rewrite of Runyon tales, the main one being "The Idyll of Miss Sarah Brown."

Though I remain in the pygmy minority uncharmed and unconvinced by the supposedly convincing charms of the movie and the inevitable Broadway revivals (one of which I saw several years ago, which left me unconvinced still), it is indisputable that Runyon's reputation stays in lights not because of his stories but because of the juice generated by the theatrical versions of "Guys and Dolls" on stage and screen.

**I**n my thirties, I abandon my on-again-off-again pursuit of pipe, tweed jacket with suede elbow patches, and a tenured professorship in history and fall into a job as a political speechwriter. I spend the next six-and-a-half years as scribe-in-chief for two New York governors.

The excitement I feel at first has the shelf life of an over-ripe banana. After the umpteenth all-nighter spent writing and rewriting in a mostly dark and deserted state capitol, the endlessly grinding demands make me feel like a salt miner in one of Joe Stalin's Siberian labor camps.

Inspired by the success of James Patterson, who is fast becoming the country's most successful and richest mystery writer and who sits in back of me in freshman English class at Manhattan College, I decide to try to make my escape by becoming a fiction writer. Except possibly for certain facts and flourishes inserted in the gubernatorial oratory it is my responsibility to produce, the writing of fiction is territory in which I have traveled lightly, if at all. I start to familiarize myself by signing up for a course on "The Art of the Short Story" at the New School.

My classmates and I are required to read short stories by James Joyce, Christopher Isherwood, Frank O'Connor, Alice Munro, and many others. A woman who sits near me and has hair dyed the color of orange Jell-O, stubby legs, and an accent I recognize as sister to my own outer-borough style of speech, brings up O. Henry and Damon Runyon.

Our Italian-American teacher is a curvy, articulate, erudite native of the Nutmeg State. Right away, on top of leaving no doubt that she knows what time it is when it comes to short stories, she makes it instantly clear she is cold to frigid on O. Henry and Runyon.

At the mention of their names, she razzes the duo with the academic equivalent of a Bronx cheer: saccharine, out of date, and in Runyon's case, more cartoonist or caricaturist than artist, sexist, racist, and often downright silly. Quickly, like a boxer turned bloodthirsty after landing one on-target blow after another, she escalates the pummeling. Runyon is not really a twentieth-century writer at all. He

is a nineteenth-century sentimentalist. She aims a straight right cross to the jaw. Runyon is all artifice and affectation—and here it comes *pow* right in the kisser—utterly devoid of authenticity.

My stubby-legged, orange-haired classmate raises her hand. The teacher gives her the blind-man shuffle and declares a TKO: "Our time is better spent on writers of real consequence."

After I read short stories by James Joyce, Alice Munro, and many others, I try to write my own. It takes me a year to write one. It is eventually published in a journal whose readership is probably in the high single digits—I'm being generous—and is so obscure I don't recall its name.

I start another story. I struggle against the limits and constraints the form imposes. I recall fragments of a tune Roy Rogers sings, although it could be Gene Autry...*don't fence me in, don't fence me in...give me space, lots of space...let me ride with the wind...across a wide-open countryside*. Maybe it is not those words exactly, but close, and if the lyrics are off a bit, it is the sentiment that matters most to me.

I feel with the short story like I'm trying to swim laps in a bathtub or run a cross-country race in a closet. The point is this: I want space, lots of space. A friend of mine who is a published writer seals the deal when he points out that a short story is harder to publish than a novel and, with the exception of a few literary hot shots, far less lucrative.

I sit in my office late at night in the state capitol. I Bo-gart cigarette after cigarette, use stub of one to light another, exhale through the nose, and shoot twin columns of smoke, Joe O'Brien-style, out my nostrils. I listen to the wind as it whispers through the halls. It is freighted with the sad, haunted sighs of long-gone honchos like Al Smith and Tom Dewey and Nelson Rockefeller, whose high hopes for a rendezvous with destiny and a big wet kiss from history went dry and unmet.

Finally, in a mental sense, I give myself a good swift boot in the caboose. I read all the novels I can get my mitts on. I fall hard for Papa Hemingway. I imagine a day when I go on the lam from the gubernatorial gulag, shake free of salt mines, and pursue the writer's life amid sunshine and turquoise seas and the tropical embrace of the Florida Keys, where I have never been, but it must be more hospitable to human habitation than Albany in January. I start writing a novel.

**S**omeone once said that the happiest time in a novelist's life is the night before his first book is published. Though I'm sure that's not true for all novelists, especially ones who hit the bestseller list or score a Pulitzer or a Nobel, it proves true for me.

My first novel, *Banished Children of Eve*, which is set in New York City during the Civil War, takes ten years to research and write. I work on it in the early, early a.m. before I turn to my day job. During that decade, I go from politics to corporate speechwriter at Time Inc., which makes my life



somewhat easier, though not as much as I hope. I write slowly. Business interests me about as much as a manicure. But the pay is top shelf. I am happily married and soon father to two tots who quickly grow accustomed to three squares a day and sleeping indoors. The gulag is now a gilded cage.

The manuscript comes in at a King Kong-sized eight hundred pages. I inflict it on my pal Frank, a high-school English teacher who shares my writing ambitions. We often discuss writing while we excogitate, and imbibe, and commiserate about the books we wish to write but haven't. A wry and gentle native of Limerick, Ireland, he describes what I give him as "Napoleonic." I know Frank means it as a compliment. But I can't help thinking of the fate the Frenchman and his fellow frogs suffer on the frozen steppes of Russia.

When *Banished Children of Eve* is published in 1994, it crosses the finish line at 600-plus printed pages. The reviews range from high praise to whatever the critical equivalent of disembowelment is. The review in the *New York Times* is couched in such a way it takes me several readings to make out the thumb is up, not down. The second-to-last sentence in the last paragraph leaves me as much terrified as mystified. It reads: "This very long and quite accomplished book is, surprisingly, a first novel; *Banished Children of Eve* certainly seems the mature fruit of protracted labor. It is to be hoped that Peter Quinn hasn't shot his bolt. [Emphasis added.] Historical fiction as well made and whole as this is not common."

I leave unchallenged James Patterson's status as world's bestselling author. The following year my friend publishes his memoir, *Angela's Ashes*, and *bing, bang, bingo*, three cherries in a row, Frank McCourt is Pulitzered, cinematized, and financially speaking, baptized in the one, true faith of do-re-me.

I bang my head against the golden bars of my gilded cage. When I am done turning in my quota of corporate prose, which is routinely stuffed and mounted by in-house legal and financial taxidermists, I stare out my office window at the gray granite façade of Radio City and wonder, where oh where can my bolt be? I look under my desk. It is not there.

After two years, my bolt resurfaces and I reinsert it. I start another novel, a mystery set in New York and Berlin in 1938, which revolves around the eugenics movement. I give myself three years. I fall out with booze and butts and

Hemingway but still dream about the Keys. Soon I am lost without a map in the Great Okefenokee of research and rewriting. Three years balloon to eight.

My second novel, *Hour of the Cat*, is published in 2005. At three hundred and fifty pages, it is barely up to the waist of *Banished Children*. I am writing shorter for sure, whether better is not for me to say. My editor on the first book, a true hero of the publishing industry, is retired by now. My new editor is known as Red Ned, not because of his red hair or fiery temper or the leftward bent of his politics but because of his reputation for marking up manuscripts with his red pencil. It turns out that with me his touch is light. The pages I get back aren't heavily littered with scarlet, only lightly blemished here and there with crimson question or correction.

In our first conversation after he buys the book, Red Ned says how much he enjoyed reading the manuscript. He mentions one scene in particular in the George Washington Hotel where Joe O'Brien, the night clerk, maintains

what is the longest-running poker game on the island of Manhattan. I don't immediately own up that Joe O'Brien is based on my real-life uncle and how after he dies of lung cancer in or about 1960, Gertie tells me about Joe and the card game.

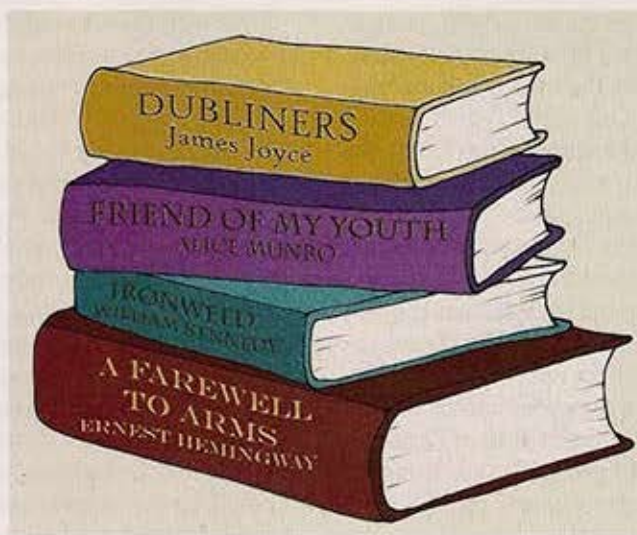
At the time Joe first sets it up, she says, around when the Depression gets really depressing, Gotham's banditti are on a tear, preying on each other's illegal liquor deliveries, knocking over banks, and holding up illicit gambling parlors and card games. Joe takes out a highly effective

form of no-fault insurance by seeing to it his game is seasoned with police detectives and, if possible, some of the brass. The game goes unmolested for nearly three decades.

I am about to reveal these real-life roots when Red Ned zooms ahead of me and interjects something like this: "It's obvious who one of your literary heroes is."

I clam up. While I make no claim to literary scholarship, I have not one hero but two, and so what? My former editor never brings it up. Why should he? What scribe perspiring for his daily bread as a wage slave doesn't harbor at least one or two literary heroes whose mastery he silently aspires to?

In my case, as well as being nobody else's business, this is a matter of special sensitivity. For years, whenever I feel blocked or stale, I make it a practice to copy out sentences and paragraphs from the works of my *patronos*, Raymond Chandler and William Kennedy. I write and rewrite their





words and sentences over and over, trying to distill what makes their words and sentences so much better than all the other words and sentences I regularly encounter that are DOA.

**G**et me right: I aim to be a maker, not a mime—to get inside their hoodoo spells and hocus-pocus power over words, to ingest their unholy magic and be digested by it, to have it the way I have skin and bone and soul, to own it, myself alone.

Red Ned asks, “You still there?”

I say, “Yes,” and no more.

“I can tell you’re a big Damon Runyon fan.”

When I speak, I hear the rumble of shock and anger in my voice, as if I am reacting to Sugar Ray Somebody or Rocky Whoever landing a direct hit on my beeper: “*Damon Runyon?*” Suddenly smacked by the similarity between “Damon” and “Demon,” I repeat myself thus: “*Damon Runyon?*” Words race through my head like a half-remembered lyric: *all artifice and affectation...utterly devoid of authenticity.*

Now the silence is all Red Ned’s. He’s no knucklehead. I sense him backpedaling, as if getting set to dodge a counterpunch. Maybe he’s not sure what he said that made me sore, but he knows he’s said something. Finally, he says like this:

“Well, I’m not talking about the Runyon style, the gangster patois, the colorful names, the grammatical tics and trademark penchant for casting his stories in the ever-present present tense. I mean your sympathies.”

“Sympathies?” I am smoothed, mostly, but confused, a bit. Sympathies are close to affections and that sounds a lot like affectations.

“Yes, your feel for the city, for its tempos and personalities. You love the place the way Runyon did and that shines through, I think. I presumed you borrowed the name Brannigan for that nasty cop of yours from ‘the strong-arm copper’ in his stories.”

“I’ve never read Runyon.” I zip my lip about the story Uncle Joe read me all those years ago. It dawns on me that I don’t even know the title.

“You should. I think you’ll enjoy him.”

“I will.”

I do. But not yet. First, I kvell a while over the success of *Hour of the Cat*. The reviews are uniformly positive. *USA Today* calls it “a chilling history lesson wrapped in a murder mystery...the novel packs good writing and riveting history.” It is republished in France, Britain, and Australia. There is a feeler from a film-production company that, oh so predictably, turns out to be nothing more than a quick feel.

Three shakes of the old-fashioned fountain pen with which I still write and I am back in the Valley of Uncertain Beginnings to which the aging, grizzled scribes of my acquaintance all eventually return, the forsaken, shadow-ridden hollow at the foot of the foreboding alp which can only be scaled empty page by empty page, line by line, one sentence at a time.

*Hour of the Cat* pays the kind of return that earns another run around the track. I agree with my publisher that it is the first of a trilogy—we joke about calling it a tricycle—of novels featuring Fintan Dunne, World War I vet and ex-New York City cop turned private eye. The following novels will not be written in strict chronological order. They are to be stand-alone stories, yet those who care to dig beneath the fiction will find a running commentary on the changes in the city between 1918 and 1958.

*The Man Who Never Returned*, the second saga in the trilogy, is a case of my stumbling across the police files surrounding the strange, still-unsolved case of Judge Joseph Force Crater, a justice of the New York State Supreme Court who on the evening of August 6, 1930, after dining with two companions, gets in a cab on West 45th Street, between 8th and 9th Avenue. Neither the taxi nor His Honor is ever seen again.

Crater’s vanishing is a cause célèbre in its day. It is officially closed in 1979. The files are presumed destroyed, except they aren’t. They sit atop a cabinet in an NYPD file room, a tale from the crypt unopened and unread, for the next twenty-five years. The minute I begin reading them, I know I have a novel, or at least the beginnings of one. I know too that the hour is come round at last to read Damon Runyon who enters his heyday as nonpareil chronicler of Broadway’s guys and dolls just as Judge Joe plants his keister in that cab and off they go to wherever it is they go.

It is not hard to get my hands on his stories. My local library has several collections and anthologies. I take one home. It has an intro by William Kennedy, who it turns out is quite a fan. I page through it until I find the story my Uncle Joe reads aloud that afternoon in the Bronx half a century before. I discover the title is “Sense of Humor.” It is originally published in *Cosmopolitan*, in 1934. I understand for the first time what my Uncle Joe finds funny and why my Aunt Gertie is not amused.

The quips and observations snap, crackle, and pop. Yet underneath the narrator’s shtick is an undertone dark as India ink. Joe the Joker and Frankie Ferocious are monsters, not much different from real-life, cold-blooded killers like Vincent “Mad Dog” Coll and Dutch Schultz, angry, out-of-control kids from fatherless immigrant families (Irish Catholic for Coll, German Jewish for Schultz) who don’t need much more than a tickle to incite them to homicide.

Runyon’s description of Frankie Ferocious captures exactly the simmering menace that defines a generation of urban gunslingers, bootleggers, and gangsters:

Frankie Ferocious’s name is not really Ferocious, but something in Italian like Feroccio, and I hear he originally comes from Sicily, although he lives in Brooklyn for quite some years, and from a modest beginning he builds himself up until he is a very large operator in merchandise of one kind or another, especially alcohol. He is a big guy of maybe thirty-odd, and he has hair blacker than a yard up a chimney, and black eyes, and black eyebrows, and a slow way of looking at people.



I read Runyon's stories at the same time as I study the police files. I am amazed by the fluency and clarity with which the detectives searching for Crater record their investigations. One dick in particular, Jacob Von Weisenstein, writes with a flair that make me think he must be reading Runyon as he works on the case. He records meetings with what he refers to as "denizens of the demi-monde," prostitutes, informants, showgirls, cops, gangsters, bookies, pimps, bootleggers, who belie the notion that Runyon invents the inhabitants of the midtown blocks he dubs the Roaring Forties.

I remember Uncle Joe tells me he and Runyon "were together once in a card game." I search the stories looking for Joe. I think I find him here and there. I know I'm projecting, finding what I want to find. Yet Joe is a 100-percent habitué of Runyon's world, and to the degree Runyon gets that world right, he gets Joe.

Runyon is no mere cartoonist or caricaturist. I'm certain of that. In his stories I hear the real ring-a-ding of people I encounter in the police files and those I come to know in my gypsy years as Wall Street messenger, dishwasher, court officer in Bronx Landlord and Tenant Court, and in the half-Yiddish, half-English conversations of the old men in the Jerome Avenue Cafeteria where I eavesdrop as I eat lunch, and in the banter of the cops and steamfitters I grow up with, and in the table talk of my Trylon-and-Perisphere aunt and uncle in that dining nook in the Bronx.

At times, I suppose, Runyon comes across as a sentimentalist but so do Dickens and Shakespeare and Hemingway, and if he is not quite in their league, there is a hard-edged realism to many of his stories that captures the brutality and cynicism and inequality and dog-eat-dog reality of Prohibition and the Depression. The plots can be all-too-predictable. They can also be sophisticated, surprising, and riveting.

Guys get riddled with bullets. Dolls are used, abused, betrayed, and tossed aside like Kleenex. Ethnic and racial slurs are as common as cigarettes. The world of financiers and cops and stuffed shirts is every bit as rigged and unfair as that of the gamblers and bootleggers and racetrack touts. Damon Runyon's America is neither Norman Rockwell's nor for that matter the stage set for theatrical or Technicolor renderings of *Guys and Dolls*.

*The Man Who Never Returned* comes out of the gate strong but fades at the turn. The reviews are favorable but far fewer than with my previous books. It finishes out of the money. I am so taken with Runyon that I toy briefly with attempting to write a story in his style. But the notion passes. I stash it for some other day. I need to get pedaling on the third novel in the tricycle.

The whole print industry is being turned upside down. I'm told I must have a website. I accede but am not quite sure what a website is or what I am to do with it once I have one.

The bookstore in my town—a town chockablock with

writers—closes down. Retired from my corporate job, I ride the train into Manhattan less frequently than before. When I do, I am agog at the speed at which my fellow travelers abandon books and newspapers for iPhones, iPods, and I don't know what. I feel as though I need to complete the trilogy while the hardcover book is still to be found outside a display case in the Museum of Print.

I can't seem to get off the dime. I begin several stories only to dump them after a week or so. I call Red Ned and arrange to meet him for a gargle or two. He is no longer an editor. He is a restaurateur. He misses the book business but is married and wants to start a family and feels he will never make dough enough to afford it.

It is a winter afternoon when Red Ned and I meet in a shebeen across from where the imperial, Roman-style edifice of Penn Station stands before the Visigoths not only sack the old masterpiece but, to add injury to insult, stick in its place a concrete-and-plastic Space Age hunk of junk unworthy of downtown Yonkers or Buffalo or some other down-for-the-count upstate berg.

I have divorced cigarettes on the basis of forever. But alcohol and I are reconciled. Now in my golden years, I burnish their twilight hue with an occasional Manhattan. Or two.

I unload on Red Ned my doubts and fears. I expect only sympathy for the old skeesicks such as I feel myself to be this particular afternoon. He offers none. He speaks as follows: "I enjoyed the book business, but I can live without it. You, on the other hand, have a gut-seated passion for this city and for writing about it. You need to write to stay alive. Look at Runyon. He kept writing right up to the bitter end. He never gave in. Neither should you. Finish the trilogy and go on from there."

I indulge a third Manhattan. The booze makes me more sad than mellow. I resurrect a line of Runyon's that is buried in my head: "All life is six to five against."

Red Ned shrugs. "Odds aren't outcomes. The big tell in a writer's life is persistence. That's as true for you as it was for Runyon."

We part company in front of the pub. He gives my shoulder something between a friendly poke and a real punch. "Remember what I said."

I stroll over to 8th Avenue. The sun sets over New Jersey. It is cold. I shove my almost-numb fingers into my pockets. I walk and think and study the sidewalk as if I might find some message there. The first time I look up, I am at 45th Street, just down the block from where Judge Crater is last spied. It's a spot with which I'm intimately familiar from having written *The Man Who Never Returned*.

The streetlights are on. I don't know if I never see it before or if my failing memory is now in a free fall or if it has only recently been put up but, whatever the case, the moniker below the numerical street designation hits me like a hammer right between the peepers. It goes like this: RUNYON'S WAY. ■