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MY PICTURE IN THE PAPER

by WILLIAM SAROYAN

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NOW I know how it feels to be famous.

I have always been a bit famous, only it hasn't been an established fact the way it is now, my picture in the paper, the telephone ringing, letters in the mailbox, people taking second looks at me, etc. When they put your picture in the paper, and ask you how you write your short stories, why, and what are trends in contemporary literature, then you can feel you've arrived and that nothing can stop you any more, nothing, certainly, less than a major war.

Well, it happened, and now I am a public figure in this city, and it may be that I am an international figure. The sun is out today and I feel sort of international. Chances are I am.

A week ago today, Tuesday, January 30, 1934, I was standing in my room, being famous the old way, not having it established in the mind of the public. Then the telephone rang, and that started it, and ever since the weather has been rotten, no sun; clouds, fog, etc. It took the weather a week to get over my being famous, and today the sun is out, though a bit weakly. Usually when the telephone rings it means somebody wants two pounds of hamburger and a bunch of radishes, and I have to explain that although I once worked in a vegetable market my connection was severed when it was discovered that I didn't know the difference between a honeydew melon and an avocado. Or it means that the City Collection Agency is still trying to get those four dollars I never paid a dentist in 1926.

But this time it was fame ringing the telephone. When it is fame ringing the telephone the sound is the same as ever, so it is necessary to be very careful. To a number of people it is a fact that I died suddenly last year, and I have to be careful not to be alive again for these people. It would be embarrassing, and I would have to do a lot of swift explaining. Well, I lifted the receiver and said hello. A young lady gave my name and asked if I was there. No, I said, didn't you hear? He died last spring. That couldn't be possible, said the young lady. It couldn't be possible because he had a story in a magazine.

Oh, I said, I beg your pardon. I thought you were out to collect a bill. Hold the line a moment, I said, and I will get him.

I went to my room and put on my coat. I brushed my hair. Then I returned to the telephone and said the party she wanted was speaking. This is the young writer, I said.

The young lady, I learned, was a feature writer on the *News,* the best paper in San Francisco. It seemed that I was an infant prodigy, and she wanted to write a story about me. Well, this was a mistake. I was an infant prodigy at one time, but this wasn't established either. And it's certainly too late to be trying to establish it now, me going on twenty-six and a moustache as big as the former Kaiser's. So I said I was no infant prodigy, but I was a grown-up one.

Hold the line, said the reporter, greatly disappointed.

You see, a typographical error in the date of my birth had made me ten years younger, and for a fifteen-year-old the story I had written was pretty startling. Of course ten years ago I wrote a story just as startling as this one, only a big editor rejected it and made me sore at him. But what is past is past, and I couldn't get out that old story and have them write about me the way I was ten years ago, no moustache or anything.

All right, said the reporter, come on down. I'll write a story about the brilliant young writer.

I'm not a brilliant young writer, I said. Maybe we ought to drop the whole thing.

No, said the young lady, come right down. I think your story is great."

Certainly it's great, I said, but it isn't news every time a twenty-five-year-old writes a great short story.

I'll be expecting you in a half hour, said the young lady.

Shall I wear my tan suit, I asked, or the dark one?

Wear the dark one, said the young lady.

Thank you, I said. It's the only suit I have. It used to be my brother's. I'll see you in a half hour.

Well, there it was, fame knocking at my door.

I got into my brother's dark suit, and ran to catch a street car. Everybody on the car took me for nobody. They didn't know I was going down to get my name and picture in the paper. They thought I was some young man who always looked a little excited. I went out to the front platform and started a conversation with the motorman. It was a misdemeanor to carry on a conversation with a motorman, but I did it anyway.

Well, I said, I'm famous at last. They're going to write about me in the newspaper.

What did you steal? said the motorman.

I didn't steal anything, I said, unless maybe a little space in one of our national periodicals. I wrote a short story a while back, and now I am famous.

You wrote a story? said the motorman. He took a good look at me. What was it about?

It was about a young fellow, I said, who starved to death.

What did you want to write a story like that for? asked the motorman.

I don't know, I said, but it's making me famous.

If you want to write, said the motorman, why don't you write good stuff? Stuff that will make people happy, cheer them up a little. We see enough sad stuff every day.

I'll do my best next time, I promised. I'll try to make everybody laugh. I won't write about a young fellow who starves to death. I'll write about an old capitalist who eats himself to death. I ought to be able to be very funny about that.

No, said the motorman. Why don't you write about nice things? What do you want everybody to die for?

I don't want everybody to die, I said. But that's the way it goes all the same. Take me, for example. Fifty years from now where do you think I'll be?

Well, said the motorman, you may live more than fifty years.

Sure, I said, but I've got a good head start on the fellows who were born this morning. Fifty years from now I'll be pushing up daisies, and if there is any flower I hate it is the daisy. I wish they'd let me push up a eucalyptus tree.

Why don't you write about love? said the motorman.

I do, I said. I write about love of death, the only love, the love that begins when being begins, when the evasion of death begins, which is life. The whole thing is an evasion, you know. We are just killing time now, waiting to get back into the emptiness.

You'll never be famous, said the motorman. All that crazy talk. Why don't you write about happiness?

I'll try it sometime, I said. I'll remember your good advice, and I'll try it.

I would advise all young writers to cultivate the friendship of motormen, conductors, day laborers, janitors, lending library clerks, and so forth, as these people constitute one of the greatest critical forces in native literature, and communion with them is of great practical use to the young writer. The criticisms are verbal and unstudied; therefore they are honest, and a young writer can greatly benefit by going to such people now and then for advice.

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I got off the street car and went around to the newspaper editorial offices. The young lady appeared and I saw that she was lovely, which was what I wanted to find out in the first place. She had a pencil and a notebook.

How did you happen to write that story? she asked.

Well, I said, I was starving and there was nothing to eat, so I wrote that story.

It is the most propagandist story I have ever read, said the young lady. Did you intend it as such?

No, I said. I intended it to be unpropagandist, against groups, a young man dying quietly, by himself.

It sounded propagandist, said the young lady. Are you a Communist?

No, I said. I am just what you see. A young man with a moustache. Are you a Communist?

No, said the feature writer, but I thought you would be.

A young man can starve to death, I suggested, without being anything other than a young man. It is possible. That was what I meant to bring out, something alive becoming personally unalive.

When did you start to write? the young lady asked.

When I was ten, I said. When I was in the low fourth. One day I was doing my language lesson and instead of sticking to the subject I wrote a short story. My teacher began to talk to me after that. She began to keep me in after school, begging me to go to college. I told her maybe I would, but I never did.

What kind of books do you read? the young lady asked.

Technical books, I said. Dry facts, our finest poetry. Books about machine gun practice and tactics, descriptions of patents, and advertisements.

Why do you like such books?

Because out of them, out of the theories, man emerges. When you study machine gun practice, you understand that ideas, even when they are monstrous and destructive, constitute the heart of man. Man creates the idea, then the idea destroys man. We've got to be aware of the ideas we are creating, and the ones that are destroying us. It is part of our job.

How do you earn your living? asked the young lady.

I do not earn a living, I said. I sponge on relatives. Everybody alive is sponging on somebody, and I am sponging on relatives. I am doing it because I am a better writer than anything else. Rich people sponge on poor people. I am not rich and I do not hope to be, but I am sponging on poor people. I am getting something to eat and a place to sleep, but I am not piling up a fortune. If a man expects to write, he must be willing to do a little sponging. Think of anyone you like, anyone at all, and if you think carefully you will see that he is sponging on somebody. Mine is the most innocent form of the vice.

Well, we talked this way for about an hour, and the young lady made notes of some of the things I said. Then I was photographed and sent home. On Friday, February 2, 1934, my picture appeared in the paper, along with a story about me and my writing. The story said, He has tried various ways of earning a living, but prefers to loaf, he said.

I knew this would make a good impression on my friend Leah Wood, so I went around to her apartment with the story and the picture. Leah knows me as Joe, anonymously. She liked the story very much and was glad to learn my real name, but she continued to call me Joe, having very good sense. She asked if I wouldn't write the story of her life. I could go around week-day afternoons and she could give me all the details. She wouldn't be busy week-day afternoons and there would be time enough to go over her life from the time she entered the orphanage to the present moment in the apartment.

But I already knew Leah's life, and I may get around to writing it some day. Anyway, she was glad I was famous. She said I certainly deserved to be famous. Then she had to leave me to attend to business; somebody had rung the doorbell; so I beat it, promising to return sometime for a literary conversation, Leah being one of the most alert students of modern prose among any of the girls in the business in this city.

The people downstairs saw my picture in the paper, and smiled at me very nicely. They always thought I was a little cracked, but with my picture in the paper it's different. There he is now, they said, that fellow upstairs who is always coming in and going out all hours of the day and night. He is a writer. Look at him. He looks like somebody.

A young writer telephoned me. I saw your picture in the paper, he said. I am seeking a kindred spirit.

How old are you? I asked.

Thirty-two, said the kindred spirit.

Go down to the Newport Hotel, I said. 515 Jones Street. Take two dollars and ask for Leah. She is the most kindred spirit I know of. Take a manuscript with you. She'd be very interested.

So I hung up.

Letters in the mailbox. We saw your picture in the paper and read the story about you. We write too. We would like to meet you.

So I suppose I am famous all right. I know now how it feels to be famous, and it feels rotten. The weather has been bad ever since they made me famous, and the sun is very weak today. I am in my room again, doing my best to get over this sudden fame, trying my best to be famous the way I used to be, quietly, anonymously, and as soon as the sun comes out with all its might I'll know that I am famous again the old way, and that I can start writing again the way I like to write.