

THE LONGEST WALK

A NOVEL



"COULD A
BABE RUTH
HOMERUN
REALLY SAVE
A LIFE?"

KIRK MARTY

The Longest Walk

by

Kirk Marty



Strategic Book Group

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In Memoriam

Russ Urban
Best friend and best Dodger fan

Special Thanks

To my wife for her love, patience and encouragement

Dedication

This book is dedicated to Vin Scully, Hall of Fame broadcaster, who for over sixty years has delighted, educated and entertained the child in all of us.

Foreword

In the fourth game of the 1926 World Series, Babe Ruth slugged an incredible three home runs. The Bambino reputedly launched those shots to keep his promise to an injured ten-year-old named Johnny Sylvester. Supposedly they lifted the boy's sinking spirits, and the hospitalized youngster enjoyed a swift recovery. The press ate it up, some suggesting that the Babe's heroics actually saved little Johnny's life. Many said Ruth didn't even know Johnny Sylvester existed until after that game. They were probably right.

Introduction

San Bernardino California is only ninety miles east of Los Angeles, which is home of the Dodgers. It might as well have been ninety light years away for the Stampede, a Dodger minor league ball club that called San Bernardino home in the year 2000. The jump from the minors to the Majors is not one many ballplayers can make.

After the rookie league, the minor leagues have three levels: Single-A, Double-A, and Triple-A. Class A is lowest in rank and ability. The Stampede was a Single-A team that bore little resemblance to their big league counterpart.

San Bernardino is located deep into the southern California desert. Summer is hot and dry, and this mid-sized, blue-collar city is, well, not quite as glamorous as LA. The Single-A “Dodgers” practiced and played their home games on a modest field on the outskirts of town. In a way, the players and residents toiled in unison, hoping their lots would improve. But it was only a hope, and for many only a distant dream.

If you were a member of the Stampede, the idea was to get out of San Bernardino as fast as you could. You also wanted to be going in the right direction—to a Double-A or Triple-A team. Going the other way pretty much took you out of professional baseball.

A-Ball is the edge, the cusp, the point of no return that leads to either higher levels or the search for a different life.

Chapter 1

Practice was over. Don Ogilvie headed for the place where he did his “special-occasion” drinking—a little neighborhood bar within crawling distance of his apartment. Most always he did his serious swilling at home. He didn’t want to take the chance of running into someone who knew he shouldn’t be hitting the bottle. For times like this, when Don was so downhearted he didn’t care, only a shabby drinkers’ bar would do.

He hadn’t seen the inside of The Spigot in a long time. His last go-round was before the arrival of the Alvarez family, over a year ago. Oly Nevin, owner and bartender of this seedy San Bernardino tavern, was mildly surprised to see him walk in. It had been awhile. The place was never too crowded. It had a simple square-shaped bar with ramshackle stools all around. A beat-up pool table and a hastily hung dartboard completed the low-life, loser ambiance.

Oly had seen Don Ogilvie at The Spigot off and on over the last decade. He was familiar with his customers’ drinking habits—at least at the bar. He knew Ogilvie was there for a bender. The big sixty-year-old, gray-haired, pink-faced bartender spoke as the crestfallen minor league hitting coach pulled up a stool. “Jeez, Don—where you been keeping yourself?”

Don did not feel like making small talk. “I’ve been around. How about a boilermaker? Scotch.”

A heavy drinker himself, Oly Nevin knew when to leave his

customers alone. He set him up with a boilermaker, saying, “Let me know when you need another.”

For Don Ogilvie, it was happening all over again—something he loved was being taken away from him by accident, bad luck. The first time it was his life, his baseball career that had been dangled so tantalizingly close; now it was little seven-year-old Roberto Alvarez, his best friend, his rescuer, his personal—if only temporary—redeemer, who was being torn from his heart. Incurable cancer is a cruel fate. The dark irony was not lost on him, and he grimaced as he drank. Life is not fair. This was a lesson he’d learned as a young athlete. He hadn’t forgotten it, even though he was now over fifty years old. Why was he fated to endure it again—this time at the expense of an innocent kid?

And what about little Roberto’s young parents, Antonio and Maria? What was all this doing to them? How could Antonio make it out of Single-A ball when his spirit was being crushed? How could Maria work if her sick child needed her? It was unbearable to think about. Ogilvie sat in the dim, dingy little saloon downing boilermakers. He and The Spigot were a perfect match—despair, with the faint stench of urine, mothballs, and booze.

He slipped out around 1 a.m. Way too gone to drive, he didn’t even try. He left his car parked and walked to a nearby liquor store. He was so drunk the clerk didn’t want to sell him the cheap bottle of whisky he put on the counter, but he changed his mind when he saw the disturbing look on Don’s face.

The forlorn coach stumbled out to the street, only a block away from home. Guzzling freely from a brown bag, he rambled aimlessly and wailed, “Take me! Take me! I’m a worthless piece of shit! Leave Roberto alone!”

Don wasn’t really talking to anyone, just railing against the injustice of it all. He repeated this mantra in various forms as he meandered back to his apartment. The fifth of Scotch was already a third gone. Staggering inside his monastic dwelling, he turned on the TV, imploded into his easy chair, took a last gulp and passed out.

A few hours later, a stranger awakened him in his apartment. “Hey,

Ogilvie—wake up!” the intruder demanded. Still drunk and in the early stages of an alcohol-induced sleep, he was slow to respond.

This time the voice was louder. “Wake up, Ogilvie!” Stuporous, the coach opened his eyes to see a short, bald, middle-aged man hovering over him. He was dressed like an umpire, black suit and shirt, but no cap.

Ogilvie was startled. “Jesus Christ! Who the hell are you?”

“Don’t worry, I’m not here to harm you,” promised the stranger as he turned off Don’s TV.

Don paused and tried to collect himself. “Okay, who are you and what are you doing here? And how do you know my name?”

“I’m here because you asked me to be here,” was the straightforward answer. The stubby man sauntered over to the breakfast bar and grabbed a stool. He put it directly in front of Ogilvie and sat down. “Don’t you have any other chairs?” He surveyed the apartment and said, “You know, it wouldn’t hurt to hang a picture or two in this place.” He paused, then said, “I’ll tell you who I am and how I know your name in a minute. I want to talk to you about Roberto.”

That cleared Don’s head enough for him to ask, “How do you know about Roberto?”

The stumpy little man sat back on the barstool with a toothy, Cheshire-cat grin. “I know all about Roberto. I know all about you too.” His thin, raspy voice had a distinct New York accent.

Ogilvie was now awake. He was also a bit worried. The stranger didn’t act threatening. Still, he noticed that although the man was dwarfish, he was powerfully built. You couldn’t be too careful these days. Cautiously he said, “You’re gonna have to tell me who you are or I’m going to ask you to leave. I don’t want to call the police.”

The man in black was fast to answer. “I assure you—you won’t need to do that. My name is Drummond, Doctor Drummond. I’m here to give you a chance to save Roberto’s life.”

Ogilvie was confounded by the whole idea. *Why would a doctor come to my apartment at three in the morning? he wondered. Shouldn’t he be at the Alvarez house? What do I have to do with this?* All he could do was repeat some of what he heard. “You’re a doctor?” The reply wasn’t what he thought it was going to be.

“Well, not exactly. I guess there’s no easy way to say this. I’m Death—or the Personification of Death,” said the baffling trespasser in a business-like way. “Yeah, I’m Death Personified. Death Incarnate. Death in the Flesh.”

Now Don knew he was in trouble. Some nut from the local loony bin must have escaped and broken into his apartment. But how did he know about Roberto? He figured he could find out later. “I think you better leave,” he said firmly.

Instead, Drummond began reciting facts as if he were reading from Ogilvie’s dossier, with editorial comments thrown in: “Donald Alan Ogilvie. Born: April 7, 1948, Claremont, California. Mother: Margaret Rebecca Simpson. Father: Stephen Donald Ogilvie. Married June 6, 1946. Now retired and living in Bishop, California. You haven’t talked to your parents in over a year. Sister: Mary Anne Ogilvie, born July 23, 1951. Married to Ronald Dean Hansen, June 20, 1978. You were best man. Two children: Robert and David. Whole family lives in Sunnyvale, California. You haven’t spoken to your sister, brother-in-law, or nephews in over two years. Would you like me to go on?”

All the information was accurate. Don was puzzled. He came up with a new theory. He thought, *I’m dreaming. That’s why this guy knows all this stuff. It’s all in my own head!*

Drummond began speaking again. “No, you’re not dreaming—and no, I’m not an escaped nut. I’m Death. Death Personified. Get used to it.”

Don let out a nervous chuckle and said, “Did I say that out loud? Whoever you are, you can’t be real. I’ve got to be dreaming.”

Drummond didn’t pursue it. “Fine. Think what you want. Just do me a favor and humor me. Listen to what I have to say. If I’m a mirage, then you have nothing to lose, do you?”

Ogilvie felt he had no choice. This guy wasn’t leaving, and he was in no condition to make him. If he was dreaming, he was curious to see where the illusion might lead. “Okay, what do you have to say?” he asked, playing along.

Drummond swooped in like a used-car salesman smelling a quick sale. “I’m here to make you a proposition. You offered to exchange your

life for Roberto's. You remember, out there in the street just a couple of hours ago. You were yelling, "Take me! Take me!" The squatty man mocked the drunk and distraught hitting coach. "Maybe we can work something out. Do you believe in second chances, Ogilvie?"

"No—never had one," was his cynical reply.

"Good, because you're not getting one now. But your best friend Roberto is," said Death Personified.

He continued. "Of course, you do get a chance to do something noble with your miserable life. You get a chance to die! You get a chance to trade your life for Roberto's! I know it's hardly an even trade, but you do have to win a contest first—or, a 'challenge,' as I like to call it."

Don was caught off-guard by the tangled direction of Drummond's plot. He warily asked, "What do you have in mind?"

The stocky little umpire's eyes lit up. "A baseball game. Actually, the best of seven games, like the World Series. You get to pick your own team. Anybody who's dead. If your team beats mine, you get to die instead of Roberto."

Again this was not an answer Don expected. He didn't anticipate a contest for Roberto's life. He asked Drummond, "I could trade places with Roberto?"

"Yeah, something like that. Anyway, the kid will be one-hundred percent fine, no strings attached. You just gotta beat my team first. Pick any dead Hall of Famers you want," said the dumpy man who resembled a human bowling ball.

"Why do they have to be dead?" Ogilvie questioned. He felt stupid as soon as the words left his mouth. Drummond stared at the floor and shook his head. Naturally, Death Personified would only have jurisdiction, so to speak, over dead ballplayers, not live ones.

Don then decided to ask, "So I could pick Ruth, Gehrig, and DiMaggio?" He found the whole idea bizarre, yet intriguing.

"Anyone you want, as long as they're dead as of today—July 17, 2000. Except for Ty Cobb. But anyone else. And by the way, you might find Ruth is more trouble than he's worth."

"Wait a minute, wait a minute," Ogilvie said, actually thinking out

loud this time. “Let me get this straight. I get any dead Hall of Famers, except for Ty Cobb. Cobb’s on your team, huh?”

Drummond nodded.

“If my team wins a best-of-seven series, then you let Roberto live?”

“Yes. But you’re leaving out the most important part: I get to take you in exchange.” Drummond tried to reassure Ogilvie by adding, “Don’t worry. Your death will be quick and painless.”

Don laughed. “You can have me, Buddy! I just want to make sure about Roberto.”

“That’s the deal,” said Drummond.

Death’s use of the word “deal” reminded Ogilvie not to be too trusting, particularly of a delusion or dream. He wanted more questions answered first. “If I do say yes, how do I know I’m not making a deal with the Devil or something?”

Drummond gave a crooked, Mona Lisa smile and said, “Believe me, we don’t need to have the whole Devil-God conversation. First of all, you or any other human doesn’t really know if such things exist. No one can prove it. People have ‘beliefs’—only with me, Death, you don’t have that problem. Everyone knows I exist. I prove my existence thousands of times every day. All I ask is that you make an agreement with something that you know is real. Death is as real as it gets, Pal. I’m not asking for anybody’s soul—especially yours. I’m asking for your life in exchange for Roberto’s. You just have to earn the privilege first.”

Drummond added, “You know, if I were the Devil, I’d have to be giving you something for your soul, which in this case would be Roberto’s life. Our deal is very different. If you win our Hall of Fame World Series, Roberto lives and you die. If you don’t, everything stays the same, which means the kid dies. Nothing’s guaranteed. That’s the sport of it! The Devil, if such a thing existed, would have to guarantee Roberto’s life in advance. Pretty boring. Everyone knows the outcome. My way’s more exciting, don’t you think?”

“Yeah, but something still gives me the feeling you could trick me,” Don said.

“No tricks. You can call it off any time. Cross my heart and hope to die.”

Seeing Don's blank reaction, Death Personified chided him. "Haven't you ever heard of gallows humor? Perhaps my delivery is too deadpan for you. Lighten up a little bit, Ogilvie! I'm giving you an opportunity not even the greatest Major League managers get. And, you get a shot at trading places with Roberto! I don't know what else I can do here. By the way, you'll notice that you're completely sober. I did that so I can have your real consent. By tomorrow morning, you're still gonna have a helluva hangover. I wouldn't want to deny you the fruits of your fermented cortex."

It was true. Don hadn't even noticed. He felt clear-headed. This convinced him more than ever that this dipsomaniac episode was an apparition or hallucination. He'd passed out before and could remember dreams where he'd acted perfectly sober. This time seemed so real though.

One of the earlier thoughts that had been in the back of Ogilvie's mind finally came pouring out. "So who else besides Cobb is on your team? Some superhuman ringers or something?"

"No—just Cobb and one other player you've never heard of. Believe me, they're both just as human as you are."

"But they're dead, right? I mean Cobb's been dead for decades."

"I said 'human,' not 'alive'."

"Well, aren't these guys gonna be a little too old to play? Most of them have been gone a long time."

"What do you think? I'm gonna give you a bunch of decayed skeletons? They're all coming from a time when they were alive and in the pros."

"Wait a minute, wait a minute," Don said again, trying to understand the setup, "how many do I get?"

"A twenty-four-man roster. Whoever you want, as long as they're dead," and then Ogilvie and Drummond said in unison, "... except for Ty Cobb."

Tyrus Raymond Cobb, nicknamed, "The Georgia Peach," born in Narrows, Georgia in 1886. Died 1961. Played Major League ball for twenty-four seasons. Set all kinds of records for hitting, fielding and

base stealing. Cobb was considered the best all-around player of his day and probably of all time. Credited with setting the standard for the modern ballplayer, he was also the fiercest competitor and hardest player. Bar none. He was, by far, the meanest baseball player to have ever taken the field—and he was just as mean off the field. Many would say psychotic. When Ty Cobb played, he wasn't playing at all. He was dead serious. He played for keeps and didn't take hostages. He died old, wealthy, deranged, bitter, and alone.

Don Ogilvie thought if this was a dream, it was definitely an original. Then he said, "Well this sounds too easy. I get twenty-four dead Hall of Famers and you get Cobb and some other guy."

"Don't worry," said Drummond, "it's not going to be nearly as easy as you think."

"Well, who's the other guy? It's gotta be a pitcher, right?"

"Very good," said Drummond like a teacher praising a student.

"He's a pitcher all right. The best pitcher you never heard of—Clarence 'Hillbilly' Higgins. Died in 1947 at age twenty. Train ran over him near his home in rural Tennessee. Too bad. Major League baseball was just about to discover him. If the train hadn't been late that day . . . who knows." Drummond stopped himself from digressing further. "Anyhow, that's another story. You can't have him either."

Ogilvie's main concern at the moment had nothing to do with choosing Hillbilly Higgins for his team. More important questions were starting to pop up in his mind. "For the sake of argument, let's say you are who you say you are. Why give me this chance? You must get requests like this all the time."

"Not as many as you would think," answered Death Incarnate. "Not genuine requests, anyhow—and hardly any from people who aren't relatives. Those are the only ones I consider. Otherwise, every mother or father with a sick kid would be all over me. Besides, I don't do this very often—and only if it's not going to change history or the future. You don't need to worry about that. That's my job, and everything has checked out just fine. So whatta ya say?"

Things were still moving too fast for Don Ogilvie. He had more

questions swirling around in his head. He started with one that wasn't too deep, "Look, all this seems a little crazy. What's with the umpire getup anyhow?"

Drummond was again eager to answer. "You were expecting a hooded black robe and scythe? The 'Grim Reaper' thing isn't in this year. You dressed me this way—you gave me this whole short-and-wide look. This is what your pickled brain came up with. I need you to take me seriously without scaring the shit out of you." Drummond looked himself over. "Apparently this is it."

Ogilvie was apologetic. "Sorry I couldn't come up with something better."

"That's okay," said Drummond. "It sure beats last time. I had to be a ten-year-old girl in a pink tutu. Really makes no difference to me. Death has no ego."

Ogilvie was prying. "Well, how do you do this whole 'personified' thing?"

Drummond appreciated the query, but replied, "No offense—it would be like explaining Einstein's Theory of Relativity to a chimp."

"No offense taken," said Ogilvie. "I like monkeys. Might make a good mascot for the right team."

Before Ogilvie could say anything more, Drummond started talking again. "Look, I'm very misunderstood. I'm not 'evil.' Every living thing eventually dies. Sometimes I bring relief when old people are suffering. Sometimes I take the very young like Roberto. There's nothing personal about it. It's business. It's my job."

Ogilvie said, "Yeah, but it's not fair when you take someone like Roberto."

"In a way, it's very fair," said a straight-faced Drummond. "The whole system is on 'automatic pilot.' Normally I don't get involved. You know, just 'let the bodies fall where they may.' That way no one gets special treatment. So if I were really going to be fair to everyone else, I shouldn't be doing this. That would be fair. That would also mean Roberto dies. So you can see what a unique opportunity this is for you—once in a lifetime."

Don Ogilvie decided right then that he couldn't afford to take the

risk that he might be wrong. What Drummond was saying was starting to make sense. If this was a dream or only an escaped nut—what did it matter? Roberto would die anyhow. Even if there was just that one in a billion shot, why not take it? He so badly wanted to trade his life for Roberto's that he nearly gave his permission at that moment.

Death Personified stopped him by again speaking first. "Before you say anything, I have to warn you—if you're able to win our little World Series and you have to give your life, you may not feel the same about it then as you do now. I'm not just talking about the actual dying part. That'll only take a second. I'm talking about how, after going through this 'challenge,' you might be changed. You might value your own life a little more. It might make it tougher to go. And it only gets worse if you lose. Then Roberto dies anyhow, and you get to live out your life knowing you didn't save him. You'll have to watch him die. You may want to stop living yourself."

Don listened carefully to what Drummond said. He couldn't imagine anything that could possibly change his mind about giving his life for Roberto's—or at least trying. He knew what Drummond said about losing would probably be true. It would be harder to see Roberto die and then have to keep on living. He may not want to keep on living himself. Then again, that was pretty much the way he felt now. He looked directly at Drummond, sober and forewarned, and said, "I'll do it . . ."

Drummond hastily replied, "I don't think you really understood my warning. That's okay, because no one really does until the end. However, I do agree to your acceptance of my modest proposal."

"Wait a minute!" Ogilvie objected again. "You didn't let me finish. I'll do it . . . on one condition—that nobody finds out I'm trading my life for Roberto's. Especially the Alvarezes, and especially Roberto. They can't know." He wasn't so much trying to be heroic. He just knew little Roberto's parents would never go along with such an arrangement, no matter how magnanimous.

"I figured you'd feel that way. I can do that," said Drummond, "only it might be difficult because they're gonna be with you the whole time. I figure you want Antonio as your assistant, and Roberto's gotta be there so the players can see whose life they're playing for. And if Antonio and

Roberto are there, you can't leave out Maria. It wouldn't be right to break up the set."

Drummond was several steps ahead of Ogilvie. When he thought about it, he agreed with what Drummond was saying. He was fragile, a broken-down old alcoholic the Alvarez family had somehow managed to prop up and keep on going. There was no way he could do this without all of them being there. He thought he could make up a believable tale to feed them.

He told Drummond, "You're right. I'm going to need them there—and not just for the players, but for me. There's no way I can do this without them. They still don't have to know that I'm the sacrificial dead guy. You just tell them that they've been given an incredible break. I'll take the rest from there, okay?"

Drummond was smiling again, his toothy Cheshire cat grin, and said, "Okay, Pal, you won't hear anything from my end—but you better come up with a convincing story on yours, because these are not stupid people."

"Don't say anything or the deal's off, all right?"

"Fine with me," continued Death in the Flesh. "Then it's your problem. If they don't buy your story, it's your fault. Any other requirements you might have before we get this show on the road to the River Styx?"

Don felt sober, but his head was swimming. Drummond kept moving things along faster than he liked. "Wait a minute," he complained once more, "I still have a few questions, okay?"

Death Personified sat back in his throne-like roost, gave a sweeping gesture, and said, "Ask away."

"So where are we going to play these games?"

"Oh, don't worry about that," Drummond said confidently. "I've got a real nice ballpark called Drummond Field. We'll be playing in a place I call Limbotown. You won't find it on any map. You'll get to see all of it when you wake up tomorrow morning."

Ogilvie took this in and surmised, "Sounds like we won't be at Disneyland anymore, Mickey."

"Well, just think of Limbotown as a 'Never-Never Land' for dead people."

“I guess that makes you either Captain Hook or Tinkerbell,” Don said, going along with the analogy.

“And you Peter Pan, which most ballplayers are anyway,” said an acerbic Death Personified, now sorry for drawing the parallel in the first place. “Let’s put it this way,” he continued, becoming pensive for a moment, “Limbotown is a place I can bring both the living and the dead together without one world getting too mixed up with the other.”

“Kind of sounds like *Field of Dreams*,” mused Ogilvie.

“You’re really starting to piss me off here, Pal,” grouched Drummond, plainly annoyed by the comparison. “We’re here to play serious baseball, not just goof around playing exhibition games. And your life or Roberto’s is at stake.”

“How much time do we have to get ready?” asked an apprehensive Don Ogilvie.

“Plenty, by baseball standards. You’ll have eight weeks with your team before the Series starts. That’s two weeks more than your average spring training.”

“Yeah, but what about picking my team?” Ogilvie wondered.

“When you wake up tomorrow, you’ll be in the visiting team’s clubhouse at Drummond Field, Limbotown. Waiting for you will be Antonio, Maria, and Roberto. You’ll have until midnight, Limbotown Standard Time, to pick a team of twenty-four players. Anyone you want, as long as they’re dead . . .”

Ogilvie joined the stout umpire by saying again, “. . . except for Ty Cobb.”

Drummond finished by adding, “Your players will be there the next morning.”

As Don began to think about it, he asked, “Where are the players going to stay?”

“Don’t worry about that either,” said Drummond. “You’ll find that Limbotown has everything you need. There’s a hotel, restaurant and, of course, a bar. We even have a movie theater. And don’t worry about umpires, equipment or anything else. Drummond Field has it all; including video cameras and radar guns. I know what you’re thinking and, yes, the umpires are honest. They’re dead Hall of Famers too.”

“I guess you’ve thought of everything,” Don concluded.

“I think so,” smiled Doctor Drummond, pleased with himself. He added, “You also need to know one more thing. You’ll be the only one to remember any of this when it’s over.”

Ogilvie was stumped. “What do you mean?”

“Let me explain,” offered Drummond. “Today’s Monday, July 17th, 2000. You’ve got eight weeks to prepare for a seven-game series that might take another nine or ten days, if it goes all the way. The Alvarez family is going to be with you. I’m not going to have all of you just disappear for eight or so weeks and then suddenly reappear. But that’s part of the beauty of Limbotown. You can spend a couple of months there, and when I deliver you back to San Bernardino it will still be today, July 17th, 2000. No one will even know you’ve been gone, except for you. Antonio, Maria, and Roberto won’t remember a thing that happened in Limbotown, or that they were even there. I’ll see to that.”

Don was quick with a reminder: “Yeah, but if my team wins, Roberto goes back cured and I guess I get to go with you.”

“That’s right,” said Death. “The Alvarezes still won’t know what happened, only that Roberto will be miraculously cured, and you’ll be discovered dead from a heart attack right there in your easy chair. First you have to win. If you don’t, you get to go back with the Alvarezes to watch little Roberto die; and you’ll still be the only one who remembers anything about Limbotown or the Series.”

Drummond continued: “Like I said, you’re going to have to come up with a good story for them when all of you wake up in Limbotown tomorrow morning. They won’t remember anything when they get back, but they’re going to have a lot of questions when they show up.”

“I’ll take care of it. You just don’t tell them I’m trading my life for Roberto’s,” Don hammered home again.

“I’ll live up to . . . well, I’ll hold up my end of the bargain,” said Death in the Flesh, trying not to make any more bad puns. “Remember, you can call the deal off any time you like, but then Roberto dies. Anything else you want to know?”

“Yeah, where are you going to be?” Ogilvie asked.

“I’ll be there every day. I’ll tell the Alvarezes everything, except

about you trading your life; and the same thing when the players show up. I can't promise anybody will believe a word I say, especially in the beginning. They'll all have to make up their own minds, just like you're trying to do now. Eight weeks or so in Limbotoon should be convincing enough for everyone. The rest is up to you. Anything else?"

Don wasn't sure why he felt compelled to ask, "Do you have a first name?"

Death in the Flesh leaned forward on his barstool and said, "You already know it. I told you. It's 'Doctor.' You can call me 'Doc' if you like." Doctor Drummond then cautioned the suddenly familiar hitting instructor: "Let me give you some advice, Pal: Don't try to get too chummy with Death—there's no future in it."

As if ignoring a third base coach's "stop" sign, the unsteady and unsure minor league minion stared Death in the face and barreled through, declaring: "I'm ready as I'll ever be. Let's go!"

Drummond let out a resounding, "Good! Now close your eyes, Ogilvie—I'm putting you under. When you wake up, you'll be in Limbotoon. We're gonna have a great series."

As he began to fall asleep, the dazed batting guru couldn't help thinking, *Death must be a baseball fan*. It seemed whimsical—but then, death can be that way.

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