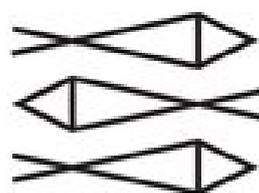


THE GLOVES

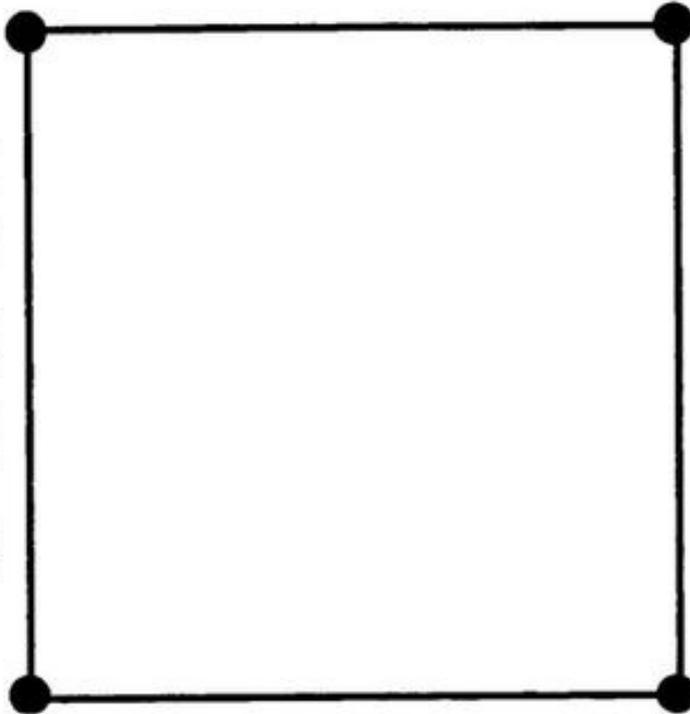
A BOXING CHRONICLE

ROBERT ANASI



**THE
GLOVES**

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CHRONICLE**

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Table of Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Epigraph](#)

[• 1 • - A WAY OF LIFE](#)

[• 2 • - DECEMBER](#)

[• 3 • - HISTORY](#)

[SAN FRANCISCO](#)

[MUNICH](#)

[PROVIDENCE](#)

[NEW YORK](#)

[• 4 • - SEPTEMBER](#)

[• 5 • - LAURA](#)

[• 6 • - HEAD SHOTS](#)

[• 7 • - NOVEMBER](#)

[• 8 • - BAYWATCH](#)

[• 9 • - JULIAN](#)

[• 10 • - THE SHOW](#)

[• 11 • - JANUARY](#)

[• 12 • - THE STRANGE CASE OF THE PROFESSOR](#)

[• 13 • - RESPECT](#)

[• 14 • - THE AMATEUR](#)

[• 15 • - FEBRUARY](#)

[• 16 • - KNOCKED](#)

[• 17 • - BLACK \(AND BLUE\)](#)

[• 18 • - THE FIGHT](#)

[• 19 • - THE OLD LION](#)

[• 20 • - SPRING](#)

[• 21 • - BOXING](#)

[POSTSCRIPT](#)

[ACKNOWLEDGMENTS](#)

[Notes](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

The male cannot bear very much humiliation; and he really *cannot* bear it, it obliterates him. All men know this about each other, which is one of the reasons that men can treat each other with such a vile, relentless, and endlessly inventive cruelty. Also, however, it must be added, with such depthless respect and love, conveyed, mainly, by grunts and blows.

—James Baldwin, *The Evidence of Things Not Seen*

• 1 •

A WAY OF LIFE

The gym becomes a way of life. Arrive on 14th Street at 5:30 P.M., and there might be a few fighters left from the first wave, the ones too young for day jobs, the ones who work odd hours or who don't work at all. You shake hands with your teammates (boxing culture requiring a certain formality) and take your gear into the bathroom. Off with the shirt, shoes, pants and, after a quick glance in the mirror to see how you're cutting up, on with the T-shirt, shorts and high-lace boxing shoes. Back in the gym, if no one else is around, Milton may be dozing. He lies on the upholstered bench, long legs bent off the end and touching the floor. A padded trainer's mitt is set over his eyes. He is only half asleep and will make lazy comments or stir to answer his cell phone. His energy ebbs and flows with the activity in the gym. If fully awake, he might have a hand in a packet of cheese curls or wrapped around a candy bar, interchangeable components of the toxic flow of junk food that sustains him.

You sit on the varnished planks of the wood floor and begin your workout, lengthening hamstrings, flexors, adductors, gluts and lats, the rubbery sheath of your skeleton. Stretching is somewhat abstract to Milton's fighters; some of the best seem to do without it altogether. Milton certainly doesn't emphasize it. Stretching isn't very street, isn't very ... *tough*. Stretching seems abstract, seems abstract until the day you step forward in the ring and have your quadriceps seize or you wrench your back and can't train for weeks. Perhaps Milton's best fighters know the limits of their bodies better than you (certainly they move with a loping looseness that you envy), or perhaps they don't and are putting bodies and dream careers to risk.

After ten minutes of floor stretches, you rise and begin to loosen your arms and back. A boxer needs flexibility in his waist, is always ducking, bending, rotating on the axis of his hips. The wall mirrors watch you as you twist, a presence doubling the scene so that you can follow whatever happens through the length and depth of the room. The mirrors knit the gym together; always scanning with some part of your attention, you are immediately aware when anyone enters. As you stretch, your body quickens to the rhythm of the music—hip-hop, generally, on the radio, old tapes or new CDs. Along with old school stuff like Wu-Tang and Biggie, this year's big sellers are DMX, Jay-Z and Nas, the harder the better for the young toughs, murder, robbery, shooting and looting while you bounce. The music is loud enough to make conversation difficult, loud enough to make Milton scream, "Turn this shit down!" The boom box bass dictates the boxers' rhythm. Those times a white person tries to slip on a rock CD the other fighters shake their heads and ask, "How can you people train to this shit?"

Next comes the rope, slip-slap cadence of which takes at least a few months to negotiate (awkward leaps of novices as the rope tangles feet and limbs, as the plastic

band scalds bare skin). The rope for balance, for coordination and to raise energy for the workout to come. All sorts of pretty tricks come with dexterity on the rope: running in place, double passes under each jump, and perhaps most impressive, the crossover, in which the wrists cross as the rope goes beneath you, very smooth. Milton has his own warm-up drills as well, custom-designed to make the leadfoot fleet, for the good boxer dances as well as hits. You hop back and forth across a tapeline on one foot, back and forth along the hallway forward and back, then run crisscross up the tapeline and return backpedaling. After a few minutes of this, you step into the ring with a pair of dumbbells. You circle the ring in a fighter's shuffle while punching the dumbbells straight into the air, then circle rotating the weights before you, elbows bent, all toward a further dexterity in moving the hands and feet together. Next is Milton's patented "dunh, dunh-duh," his own waltz, two steps sideways and then a pivot off the leading foot to bring you back into stance and facing your opponent. "Dunh, dunh-duh," to get out of trouble and pivot on an opponent who may be following too close, to pivot and *counter* with a hook or cross. You move and circle, breath coming faster, the faintest dappling of sweat on your forehead and staining your shirt. The day grind, the coffee and greasy lunch burn out of you as you move. This evening, like so many others, you barely dragged yourself to the gym. A thousand obstacles, a million rationalizations presented themselves. You were up late last night. You had a headache. You wanted to go out for dinner instead, see a movie, you have a deadline at your day job As you climbed the stairs and dressed, those obstacles evaporated, and as you move now, their last traces break and fade in the air. The obstacles seem so insignificant, in fact, that if you even think of them, you can't understand why they so hindered you. You are alive in your body, now. Your eyes open wide. Looking around, you see the gym has filled, people in conversation clusters, in various states of dress. You leave the ring and shake more hands. With an audience present, Milton no longer dozes but is up and talking. Not just talking but expressing, directing, edifying, illuminating, the impresario of this shadowed room.

"Hey, Gumby! What is that? You're punching handicapped."

"So when I was in camp with Shannon Briggs, I told him, 'They have you standing straight up, fighting like a white guy. That's not what got you here. You have to start moving your head again and breaking at the waist.'"

"Hey, somebody get my phone. Hello, Supreme. Yeah, I'm here every day starting at eight in the morning, and we close at ten at night. So come on down and be our next contestant."

"Julian! Are you working out, or cutting out?"

The bell (bell in name only—not a bell but a buzzing electric clock) marks rounds, the base unit measure of gym time. Rounds last three minutes with a warning buzz at two minutes thirty and another buzz at round's end for a rest of a minute, work/rest, work/rest, work/rest. "I did five rounds on the heavy bag, five on the rope." "How many rounds have we been sparring?" "One more round!" From your gym bag you draw the length of cloth that will protect those most delicate of weapons, the hands. Scrupulous fighters always draw perfectly rolled wraps from their bags, wraps rewrapped after drying from their last use so that they will roll on smooth and unwrinkled, but you, maybe you threw yours in the bag after pulling them off and forgot about them until now. They come to daylight, crumpled cotton lengths white,

yellow or faded red, a little stiff with dried sweat, smelling of the same. A not unpleasant smell, you think, the salty must that permeates boxing, a combination of sweat with the glove leather it soaks. Boxers cultivate sweat, for sweat reduces them, makes them lean, symbolizes necessary exertion. All serious athletes sweat heavily, but in boxing sweat is the essential element, the sea in which the boxer is born and through which he swims.

After the rope and the warm-ups comes shadowboxing, the heavy bags, exercises and more shadowboxing. Milton may have you work pads with him as well, directing you to strike the oversize gloves on his hands while he shouts instructions and corrects your movement, using such choice idioms as “retarded,” “robotic,” “paraplegic,” “idiot” and “bullshit,” among others, punctuated with little smacks to your head. All this training, however, diminishes beside sparring. Sparring is the psychic center of the gym, as the ring is its actual material center. Milton’s gym is a fighters’ gym, not a health club or “fitness center.” Fighters fight. To prepare to fight, fighters must spar. “We’ll go with anybody,” Milton states as a point of pride, that’s how tough he believes his “Supreme Team” to be, and in point of proof, boxers, professional and amateur, come from all over the city to match up against his team. So sparring remains the center, and the other life in the gym revolves around it. People halt their workouts to watch. Milton insists that you watch (“That’s how you learn,” he says, “by imitation”). People come in just to watch. In the old days, tickets were sold for sparring sessions at the big gyms near Times Square or at the camps of champions as they prepared for title fights. Milton dreams of opening a streetfront gym to attract clientele.

“That would be the way to do it,” he says. “Have it behind big windows right on Fourteenth Street. There’d be a crowd watching us twenty-four/seven. Once they saw how you guys spar, we’d be getting new people walking in all the time, begging us to teach them.”

Your regular sparring partners have arrived and ask you if you want to work, or you ask them. “We’ll go light,” they say, or, “Just a couple of rounds,” or, “I’m sore today, so we’ll take it slow.” Whatever they say, it’s a decision of moment. A whole new set of excuses and escapes present themselves: You’re tired; you want to avoid a headache; you have a date; you’ve sparred too much this week already . . .

Milton presses the issue. “Hey, you want to go in with . . . ?” A zeal for contact drives him. He wants more! Now! And will throw all willing or semiwilling bodies together, heavyweight and featherweight, man and woman. Milton seems to love his gym work best when it comes to the threshold of real combat, when he can stand with his arms on the ropes shouting instructions. “Two-three! Slip, then pull back! Throw more jabs. Sit down in your punches!” Or he jumps up and down with a hand in the air, his fingers semaphoring the number of the punch he wants thrown (to conceal it from the boxer whose back is turned).

Sparring alters the normal routine on the floor. Milton will advise you to stop hitting the heavy bag or to go easy with the dumbbells. You do not want to get arm-weary. To agree to spar is a momentous decision and is nothing at all. Simply life in the gym. After nodding agreement, you shadowbox a few rounds in the mirror, skip rope, shake out your shoulders. Milton wants the show to begin. “Are you ready yet? Come on. Today. Hurry up and get the gear on.” Finally, you accept that you are ready. Slip in

your mouthpiece, the molded plastic to prevent your teeth from slicing your lips. You pull up the groin protector, draw the headgear over your ears, slather Vaseline around your eyes, across your nose, cheeks, lips (not too good for the skin, that, but it keeps the glove leather from chafing). Someone girds you with the fourteen- or sixteenounce sparring gloves and you step through the ropes. The preparation has a ritual air; though it's possible to pull on your gloves and fasten your chin strap yourself, it's better to have someone else do it for you. The care sanctifies you, helps separate this activity from all others. You dance about in the ring, throw a few flurries, jaw with your partner until Milton commands, "BOX!"

Two opposed philosophies dominate sparring. One states that sparring should always be light, not combat simulation but a venue for excising flaws and polishing technique. The famous Irish trainer Brendan Ingle (whose pupils include such champions as Johnny Nelson, Herol Graham and, of course, "Prince" Naseem Hamed) will allow his students to throw only body punches, thereby protecting the tender, skull-cased brain. Signs posted on his gym walls read: BOXING CAN DAMAGE YOUR HEALTH. IMPORTANT, NO SPARRING WITHOUT SUPERVISION. FOR YOUR OWN SAFETY, GUMSHIELDS AND HEADGUARDS MUST BE WORN. This Ingle approach emphasizes such terms as "light" and "easy" and "work." The other philosophy states that the sparring should be hard (hard but not wild). Most trainers will claim to belong to the first school. Most trainers actually belong to the second. The reason for this duplicity, conscious or not, is the doubling that serves to cloak the realities of pugilism. Boxing is a combat sport, and fighters are directed to inflict, within the rules, a maximum amount of damage. This truth must be concealed to some extent. Few trainers will say to each other before their fighters spar, "I hope my guy kills your guy." Although they want exactly that: a demonstration of their students' prowess in the clearest manner possible. The trainers cannot make such a statement; the challenge would raise the stakes from sparring to a gym war. Instead they mention "good rounds," "going easy," "working with" someone. As in the romance around sex, the stereotyped, delicate language serves to cloak a more brutal reality.

As a trainer Milton stands completely in the second school. He will overmatch his fighters and watch as they sustain real beatings (one of his tricks is to turn off the bell near the end of the round so that the fighters' endurance will be tested). The result for you, in the first months, is headaches, bruises, pain. This sparring serves a purpose. Endure those first months and you will have little to fear.

When the bell buzzes, you smack leather with your partner by way of salute and then begin to circle. You are boxing. A thousand times you've done this and still the tension, pressing and binding. Moments ago you were talking to a friend about work and telling jokes. Now ... In the distortions of mouthpiece and headgear, your partner loses his human characteristics and becomes half monster. The first round moves slowly as you warm to the action, building up until, bang! A shot stings your face, ricochets from your headgear, crushes your lips. It's a goodmorning cup of coffee; you begin to accelerate, clear and rising. Now you will hit back. This is not your friend. The person facing you has become a series of problems to solve, a greater or lesser degree of intimidation. Things you try work or don't work. Depending on his mood, gym occupancy, activity on his cell, Milton becomes more or less involved. "Feint

two-three!” “One to the body, one to the body, then something else.” “Think out there! You’ve got to think!” “Use your defense!” You try to act on his commands and keep your eyes focused on the man trying to kill you.

When the buzzer ends the round, you take water, listen to Milton’s promptings and circle the ring, shaking out your arms. This continues for three rounds, or six, or ten. Sweat runs; sweat streams, flows, pools. You are an aquatic animal. Sweat drenches your brow, burns your eyes, renders your white T-shirt translucent and drowns your socks.¹ All your training does not prepare you for the ocean. You gasp but there is never enough air; your gloves become anchors dragging you to the bottom. As the rounds progress, you may gain confidence, put together combinations, slip and pivot like a pro, drive your partner back. Or your confidence may Hag; you may retreat, thrash the air with wild punches as thunderbolts split your head. The two of you may forget that this is “work” and tend toward murder. There is no fellowship then. Your partner is a thing to be broken. “Good hook,” Milton shouts, leaping from his bench as the action boils. The tension slows time. You must stay focused. Break concentration for an instant, and the result is not embarrassment (the other team scores, you lose the beat in music or dance) but pain. The tension frets your energy, erodes it. “Relax your shoulders,” Milton shouts. “Think!” The water rises over your thighs, your neck, your mouth.

Suddenly it ends. Either you quit or your partner quits, or Milton wants the ring for somebody else. The alien landscape that you sped through vanishes. You gear down and step through the ropes back to a gym different from the one you left. A fog obscures the room, even if you haven’t taken any shots to the head. You return to a lesser place, less vivid, less encompassing. Someone has to unlace your gloves for you. The boxer with gloves on is helpless for anything except striking. He must be fed water. He cannot scratch an itch on his shoulder and asks his trainer to do it. Your hands emerge, small and swaddled. You wander around the floor for a minute, acclimating. You wipe the traces of Vaseline from your face with a shirtsleeve, look in the mirror to see if you are scraped or bruised. You drop gear here and there across the room. Sometimes it’s not until days later that you realize your helmet and cup have gone missing and you return to the gym to find them hanging from pegs on the wall.

After another few hits of water, you pull on bag gloves and go to work on the heavy bags. You’ve thrown thousands of punches in your months at the gym but they never seem good enough for Milton. “You’re still punching retarded,” he says. Punching too high (“Who are you trying to hit, the Green Giant?”) or too low (“Stop hitting those midgets”). “You’re punching handicapped. Let your hands go. Let them be free.” Milton might not notice you for a week or more, but just when you think he has forgotten you, you’re laved by such words of love. Through the circuit you go: heavy bags and hook bags and the jumpy little double-end bag that snaps back after being struck. Then shadowboxing, the rope again and exercises: sit-ups, crunches, push-ups, dips and the little weight lifting fighters allow themselves. The muscle that comes from weights tightens the body, reducing range and speed. Boxers need to stay loose and quick; a good punch snaps at the maximum arm extension. “Power thrills but speed kills” is a boxing maxim; the faster man will beat the stronger man. Boxers also don’t want to add bulk because bulk is weight and changes one’s class. As you cool down, you say goodbye and arrange your next sparring session. You’ve been in the

gym for nearly three hours. On the way home, your body crashes, even after Gatorade and energy bars. Sluggish, sullen and starving, you're good for little more than television for the next hour or two.

• 2 •

DECEMBER

The first day I walked into Milton's gym I was afraid. Not because I didn't know what to expect, but because I did. I was the new boy. It would be like changing high schools at fifteen. Everyone already knew everyone else and New Boy would have to prove himself before a disdainful audience. To make matters worse, I had trained with a man who despised Milton and whom Milton despised in turn. New Boy had transferred from the crosstown rival and been caught the week before tagging the façade of his new school with obscenities. For a final demerit, I was old (thirty-two) and white (city indoor pallid) in a world dominated by the young and ethnic, the brown and tan. What else I knew of Milton brought no comfort. He was a sarcastic, hot-tempered man who had feuded with almost everyone in amateur boxing in New York. Milton knew me by sight. He had seen me at another gym and spoken to me a few times at a bar on the Lower East Side where he served as a maitre d'/bouncer. Some four years earlier he had tried, in desultory fashion, to lure me away from my trainer. Recently I had told him that I was considering a run at the Golden Gloves. Perhaps I'd been a little drunk at the time. Those unpleasant thoughts circled in my mind as I made my way from the elevator down the hallway to the gym.

I pushed open the door and stepped into the smallest gym I had ever seen. A puny ring swallowed two-thirds of the room. In the ring, a woman heaved punches at a crouching, weaving man.

My friend David, an actor who trained there, had arrived before me. He introduced me to Milton and we shook hands.

I know this guy already, Milton said, studying me, from down at the bar. And from Julio's too.

I agreed.

You never fought in the Gloves before, he said.

I shook my head no.

Milton and a half dozen boxers crowded what little space was not ring. In that strip of floor they attempted to train, hitting the one heavy bag and shadowboxing in the wall mirror. One or two of the fighters I recognized from other gyms in town. They too had left their trainers and come to Milton.

Milton LaCroix, the tall Puerto Rican with the French last name, was something of a mystery to me. I knew that he had once run the boxing program at the Pitt Street Boys' Club on the Lower East Side. Later, in 1996, six fighters from his Supreme Team had reached the Golden Gloves finals, and five won, an accomplishment for a trainer on the level of, say, winning the Kentucky Derby astride a Shetland pony. The style Milton taught defied every boxing truism. He turned his right-handed fighters southpaw and had them fight with their hands down around their waists. People

mocked this style, even as his team won trophies and titles. I knew that Milton had been barred from working corners at one point, a ban only recently relaxed. He had also been ejected from half the gyms in the city. (I imagined his disdainful manner played a role in this.) Now he had his own private gym on East 14th Street in Manhattan. I anticipated difficulties. Still, Milton specialized in southpaws, and I was naturally left-handed. And his fighters won, which was all that really mattered.

You trained with Julio? Milton asked.

No, Darryl, I said.

Darryl? Christ, even worse. How old are you?

Thirty-three.

And you want me to have you ready for the Gloves in two months? Milton shook his head. Well, go and get changed, and we'll see if you have anything left.

I left the little room and crossed the hall to the bathroom. As I changed, I examined my upper body in the mirror over the sink. At thirty-three, I had not let myself fall apart. I weighed approximately the same as I had in college and I wasn't soft; daily workouts, running and soccer kept me toned. My confidence rose as I put on my trunks and tied my shoes. Even though I hadn't been inside a gym for almost two years, I was far from green. I had boxed on and off since age twenty-five and had won fights. I still shadowboxed for hours every week to polish my form. The previous spring I had twice brawled larger men on the street, with encouraging results. Milton might even be impressed by what I had left.

Back in the pygmy gym, I stretched and then started to shadowbox. Warming up, I moved stiffly, and I knew the other fighters could see it. Milton didn't look at me directly, but I felt the pressure of his sidelong gaze as he spoke into his cell phone, directed students, commanded assistants—a combination MC/air traffic controller. As I shuffled around, my arms began to loosen. I snapped out my jab—pop pop pop—following it with hooks and straight lefts. I was proud of that jab; I'd been cultivating it for years. I shuffled and jabbed, double-jabbed and threw a left, kept moving, threw a left-hand lead. I was fast; I was slick; I was good. I slipped inside an imaginary opponent and threw combinations at his body. They had to see how good I was.

Then I heard David say, Come on, you guys. Stop giving him a hard time.

It wasn't me laughing, Milton laughed. It was him.

He pointed to one of his lieutenants, a black fighter I recognized from my last gym. I saw the smile on his face. They were laughing at me.

Come over here, Milton sighed. I'm gonna show you something your old trainer, Stupid, never did.

As I stepped through the ropes in a rage of shame, I already regretted coming to Milton. While I had anticipated his attempt to break me, it felt worse than I had imagined. I asked myself why I had returned. I was too old to stand being humiliated in that way. Thirty-three years old in a sport where the average professional's career is

over in a few years. Old age was the reason I had told myself I was leaving the sport two years earlier. At twenty-nine I had planned to enter the Golden Gloves, the foremost amateur tournament, amateur boxing's glory and grail. As I trained then, I discovered that I couldn't plane away the pounds. No matter how much I sweat, or how many miles I ran, I could not reduce to my fighting weight of 132. Someone had told me that you put on weight as you grow older, ten pounds a decade, they said; I imagined this was happening to me. Everywhere I looked, there it was, my peers rounding (and balding) on the road to thirty. And I never had enough time for the gym. To train seriously took time, and I wasn't a schoolboy with student leisure. I had to work. I had to plan for my future. I was educated and ambitious; my future certainly wasn't boxing. The beatings had caught up with me as well. It took days to recover from four or five rounds of hard sparring, my back and neck braided with pain. At twenty-five, I hadn't felt anything the day after, no matter how many right hands I took.

On the floor, Milton instructed me with a pleasant blend of insults and commands as I stood sullen before him.

All right, get into your stance. More sideways. Sideways! Step up to the mitts. I said step! Don't skip. Who do you think you are, Peter Pan? All right, hit the mitt with a jab. You call that a jab? Stop standing like that. Relax, goddammit, relax! Let your jab snap out. No. Let it go. Like you were snatching money out of my hand. Reach out and grab. Okay, watch this. Milton reached into his pocket and extracted a five-dollar bill. Now I want you to grab this handsome fellow out of my hand.

I reached out for it.

No, don't reach. Grab it like you fucking want it. Snatch it.

I snatched.

All right. That's how I want you to throw your jab. Like you're stealing my fucking money. Do you understand?

I did not but nodded that I did. My humiliation continued.

Grab. No, lamebrain, *grab*. Like you ... like you want to tear my fucking face off! Stop cringing. What the hell is that? Throw your left. No, your *other* left. Jesus Christ. Did you ever fight before? You did? You fought? And you won? Oh. Who did you fight, Stevie Wonder and Ray Charles? Show me your three. That's not your fucking three. Your hook! You call that a hook? Throw it like you're stirring a bowl of soup, moron. Faster. Wrong. Nope. Wrong. Like you're stirring a bowl of soup. No. You expect to go in the Gloves in January? You should be here six months ago already. Give me the three. Will you just do it? Relax, for Christ's sake.

And on it went, a torment in which I could do nothing right. It was the first week of December, but the little room was not ventilated and soon my clothes were sodden. In his frustration, Milton sometimes cuffed me with a pad. The Gloves would begin in January. I had intended to pop into the gym for a few months, scrape away some "ring rust" and be reasonably prepared for the tournament. Here Milton was going back to the beginning, treating me like a novice who had never worn a pair of gloves in his life.

All right, stop, he said in disgust, just stop. You want to learn something? Okay. Look at her.

He indicated the woman still chasing the man in the ring. The woman threw hooks

and rights; the fighter blocked and dodged.

Do you see that? Milton asked. Look at how she lets her punches go. She throws harder than you do.

I disagreed but said nothing. Speech would only ensure further abasement. I looked at the way the woman swung her hook. She wasn't a boxer, but she did have power. Her punches boomed against the man's raised gloves.

Milton put me to work stepping along a tapeline in stance. I marched back and forth, back and forth, poking out my jab, clumsy from his attentions. I did this hundreds of times, with Milton glancing over to proclaim my flaws ("Will you stop skipping, for Christ's sake?").

If I felt Milton was being hard on me, however, I soon received a preview of much worse to come. While I stumbled and lunged, a white kid, seventeen perhaps, walked in. Milton greeted him and asked him if he was there to spar. The kid said yes.

Victor, get ready, Milton said to the fighter who had laughed at me but had since sat off by himself with a scowl on his dark face. His name was Victor Paz. Since I'd last seen him at Kingsway he had put on a great deal of muscle around his shoulders and chest. The two donned the requisite gear and stepped into the ring. Milton grabbed my shoulder to stop me.

Watch this, he said, and learn something.

In the first minute the white kid rushed straight at Victor and threw wild overhand rights. Although Victor dodged most of the blows or caught them on his gloves, a few heavy buffets dropped flush upon Victor's head and drove him backward. The white kid had power.

Be careful, Victor, Milton said. This guy hits pretty hard.

Into the third minute of the round the dynamic shifted as Victor began to evade the assault. Every wild miss slewed the kid off balance, and Victor would step in before he recovered with a two-punch counter, *cross-book* or *hook-uppercut*, a deep thump-thump of solid contact. By the second round, steady punishment had taught the kid caution and he no longer flung himself forward. Victor then began to pursue, freezing the kid with feints and hitting him as he stood frozen. I knew how the kid felt, faltering between anger and fear. Whenever Victor scored, anger won out and the kid lurched forward again. Victor had timed his predictable attack, however. Now when the kid swung, he almost never connected or would receive three blows to his one. His face reddened and his mouthpiece bulged from his panting mouth. A hook to the rib cage dropped him to one knee. He stayed that way for a few seconds, gasping. Milton asked him if he wanted to continue. The kid mumbled something, rose and chased Victor until the bell.

One more round? Milton asked. Both boxers nodded.

At the beginning of the third round, the kid lunged after Victor with his head down. I had been in the same position many times, enraged at the punishment, wanting to hurt back, frustrated that I could find nothing to hit. Hours seemed to have passed; I wished they would stop. It finally ended when the kid, stumbling forward, caught an uppercut on the chin and slumped to the canvas. He stayed there on all fours.

All right, Vic, Milton said. That's it.

Victor removed his gloves and spit his guard into his hand. You ducked right into it, he said to the kid by way of excusing himself. Victor then removed his headgear and

returned to his seat and scowling silence.

I did pretty good, right? the kid asked, intoxicated from his beating, a double dose of epinephrine and enkephalins.

Well, Milton said, unlacing his gloves, you got plenty of heart, but you're getting hit with everything. We have to get you to start coming down here and doing the drills.

In the following days, bad did become worse for me. While aware that Milton taught an unorthodox, even bizarre, style, I had no interest in learning it. My previous trainer had mocked it sotto voce as we had watched Milton's fighters spar.

You ever seen that before, Bob? Darryl asked. Every fighter is a southpaw, and they all keep their hands down. And look at those hooks they throw. It's crazy.

He was right. Milton's style violated the rules of conventional boxing, and I planned to ignore it. I thought so little of his style, in fact, that I had prepared a speech to set him straight on where we stood. "Now, Milton," I would say, "I know you have your way of doing things, and of course I respect it. I'm sure it works just fine for your guys. However, there just isn't enough time for me to learn your way, so if you could concentrate on improving my style—you know, sharpen my defense, get me some sparring—I'd appreciate it."

Although I had boxed through my late twenties and even won matches (against opponents who were not blind musicians), I still hadn't entered the Golden Gloves. One year, I was out of the country; another year, I missed the physical; another, I was injured. Behind those reasons loomed the suspicion that I wasn't a real fighter, that the Gloves for me would issue in a dreadful thrashing. This year, though, I was resolved. There were other tournaments but none as essential as the Gloves. To fight amateur and not do the Gloves would be like going to Cairo and not seeing the pyramids, not even leaving the airport hotel. "And you went there ... why?" Adding pressure was the fact that the year marked the end of my amateur eligibility. Miss this Gloves, and that would be all. For the rest of my life I would look back and know I had blinked. I had trouble explaining why this mattered so much to me. In fact, I found it somewhat ridiculous. Yet there it was.

I first encountered Milton at Julio's Boxing Gym on East 12th Street. Milton had appeared with a group of fighters he had developed at the local Boys' Club. Friction between Milton and Julio, a monosyllabic Puerto Rican, led to Milton's ejection. Julio, ostensibly the owner of the space (located in the subbasement of a senior center), had then circulated a petition among the boxers to ensure that Milton never returned. Although Julio's English vocabulary contained about forty words, his petition began, with florid gravity, "We the athletes of Julio's 12th Street Gym, wish to debar the continued presence of Milton LaCroix from our environs, for the sake of our current peace and continued future happiness." A few weeks following his ejection, I found Milton standing outside Julio's.

Hey, he called, come over here.

I walked toward him.

Do you know how to read? he asked.

I allowed that I did.

Oh, you do? he said. Good. Well, then, I want you to go out and get this week's

Village Voice. There's an article about what a rip-off artist Julio is. He shouldn't even be able to charge people to use that gym. This week's *Village Voice*. Can you remember that?

I nodded my head and walked away, smiling.

The *Voice* article questioned Julio's title to the subbasement and noted that the space had originally been established as a recreation center for local youth. Julio, it seemed, was no more the owner of the gym than I was, and the minimal maintenance he did gave him little domain. Years later, after I joined his team, Milton told me that he had instigated the article by calling everyone he knew who might have had political influence (he received the best response from a letter written to the mayor's wife). According to Milton, Julio had established himself in the space by paying kickbacks to the manager of the senior center upstairs, a practice that repercussions from the article brought to an end; the repercussions brought an end to the gym as well.

I had anticipated Milton's assault, but that didn't make it easier to bear. How do you prepare yourself for the firing squad? By day three I had discovered that according to Milton, I didn't throw any of my punches correctly, didn't have any defense and moved like an Erector set robot.

Let the hands go! he said. You're punching to yourself. Stop cringing. What the fuck is that? Four! I said. Four! Turn the wrist over! Stop punching up. Who the hell are you trying to hit, the Jolly Green Giant?

After having me hit the focus pads (oversize gloves that resemble a baseball catcher's mitt with a bull's-eye in the center), cursing my technique and giving me the occasional disgusted shove or caricaturing my movement, Milton had an idea.

Let's try something, he said. I want you to turn around like you're right-handed.

He had me punch from the "orthodox" stance—that is to say, leading with the left—rather than my usual "southpaw" stance. Suddenly he liked what he saw. He liked the extension of my jab and the power in my left hook.

That's it! he shouted as my left smacked the mitt. Do you hear that? Do you feel the difference? That's a punch. That could do some damage.

Then and there, Milton decided he was going to "turn me around," although I was a natural southpaw and had trained left-handed since I'd started boxing. My prepared speech remained unspoken.

I left the gym in pieces. I had been dismantled as a boxer and, thereby, as a man. Milton's decision to turn me around said he considered me so tainted with bad habits that it was hopeless to train me as a southpaw, that it would be better to start from day one, wipe the slate, return to go.² I had been boxing for years. I had won fights. I couldn't believe that none of it mattered. Milton's criticisms fed upon my deepest insecurities as a boxer, the fears that lie within every boxer's frangible, adamant ego, fattening upon the smallest disappointments. I had always questioned my ability. For one thing, I was hit too often. I couldn't understand why: Was I too slow, too old or just too stupid? The punches erupted in my face and I slogged witless through the carnage. There was always something missing for me, always the fear that I played at being a boxer.

At home that night I decided to quit Milton. I hated his profane tirades and sarcasm. I was tired of being called Peter Pan while the young fighters snickered. I couldn't raise my right arm or move my neck from the pain. And now he wanted to turn me around, two months before the Gloves. I would find another gym. I would leave after the first month (I'd already paid, after all. After some haggling, Milton and I had agreed on the lavish sum of a hundred dollars a month). Then I would enter the Gloves as an unattached fighter. I'd have a friend work my corner.

The relationship between trainer and boxer is perilous: Boxers' egos are large and tender, and ego abrades ego in the pressure of the gym. Every trainer needs to impress a new fighter and begins by delivering some version of "You're good, kid, really good, but you'd be even better if you did" this, that and this. The trainer needs to be needed, after all, and if the fighter weren't incomplete, he wouldn't have gone to the trainer. Of course, the trainer must be careful not to be wholly negative. As he wins the fighter's trust, he must also build his confidence. "I am showing you what you do wrong," the trainer implies, "so that I may show you what to do right." Trust binds the trainer and fighter: In the minute between rounds, a boxer often needs to adjust his strategy and has only the voice of trainer to help him. After many lost fights, the fighter who lacked trust in his manager will acknowledge that he should have listened. The trainer encourages his fighter as he faces one of the loneliest situations in the world. The phrase "to have someone in your corner" underscores this bond. A good trainer convinces his fighter that if he follows the proper regimen and shows calm, courage and intensity, he can defeat any comparable fighter. This requires the trainer have an ego of a magnitude equal to that of the fighter.

To build confidence, my first New York trainer used psychology. As his fighter hit the bag, Darryl would approach a bystander.

Look at my kid, Darryl would say. Look at how hard he's throwing his hook. Look at that combination. Look at how he's slipping. You remember him a month ago, right? All that in one month.

The observer, of course, would nod and say, Oh, yeah, he's looking better. One hundred percent better. No doubt about it. This dialogue taking place within earshot of Darryl's assassin-in-training.

A few days later Milton paired me with the white kid Victor had demolished. I looked him over. His eyes were clear. Nothing appeared broken. Milton had the two of us stand in the center of the ring and trade three-punch combinations. Three punches: a hook to the head; a straight right to the head; a hook to the body (punches numbered three, two and four). Milton also demonstrated various methods of either diverting the punches with gloves and arms or avoiding (slipping) them. The movements were simple and effective and I wondered why no one had taught them to me years earlier. As we grew comfortable, the kid and I began to punch harder and faster. On the tenth or twelfth combination, I froze at the second block and suffered all of the kid's right hand. I shook off the punch.

Are you okay? Milton asked.

Sure, I smiled.

A few cycles later I made the same mistake with the same result: a hammer to the cheekbone. I cursed and returned to the drill.

Bob, you're pretty tough, Milton said.

You're pretty tough, he repeated, and then qualified himself: For a white boy.

A few passes later it was the kid's turn to balk and eat my right hand. I tried to hide my satisfaction; Milton was less delighted.

Could you guys take a little off your punches? he said. You're both on the same team. This is practice, for Christ's sake.

Fair enough, I thought, but he hadn't cautioned us when the rights were clanging off my head.

Milton next had us spar, with the constraint that we punch with our lead hands only (jabs and hooks). After the first exchanges, the kid's body language became hesitant and stiff. It was subtle but enough to encourage me as we circled, a power shift in my direction. After we finished, the kid had to leave for work, and I mentioned his indecision in the ring to Milton.

Well, he was a little rattled by that shot you landed, Milton said in irritation. He's new at this. He's not used to being hit. You're more experienced. I guess you had to learn *something* in all that time you been training. Tomorrow I'll give you some real sparring. Laura's getting ready for the Gloves too, and she's about the same weight as you. Just wait until you see her.

I was tough! Those few words of praise from Milton meant more than anything else he could have told me. If he had said, "You got fast hands," or, "You're hard to hit," it would have mattered, yes, would have stroked me, but it still would have lacked the savor of being called tough. I'd treasured that word since childhood. When an older boy blindsided me in a football game the February I was ten, I soared through the air and bounced headfirst off the frozen ground.

Are you okay? he asked as I jumped to my feet.

I'm fine, I said.

You're pretty tough, he said, and I inflated with pride. Throughout my childhood, when I crashed my bike or sprained my knee or caught a baseball with my face, I shook it off and heard that same murmur of "a pretty tough kid" and felt the same senseless joy. Twenty-five years later it still mattered, more than it should have. If I had to choose between a six-figure salary or being tough, I'd pick tough! Winning a Nobel Peace Prize or? Tough! No question. Any day. Anything. To be tough!

Toughness, or "heart," figures enormously in boxing. I once held a dismal job schlepping furniture and objets d'art for a shipping company in Long Island City. On a slow morning in the warehouse, I started talking with the company carpenter, Anthony. Anthony, just on the good side of forty, wore a graying ponytail. He built the packing crates for the putrefied relics we handled. As we talked, we quickly discovered that we both boxed. There is joy in meeting another fighter (a member of the same cult, with its special handgrip and secret knowledge). "You used to box? Well, so did I." Where, when, how, the flood of detail and anecdote, the discussion of the great historical fights. "Duran had great interior defense." "Didn't he, though?"

A serenity mantled Anthony, the same that surrounds many former fighters. After the fire, calm. He told me he had started boxing twenty-five years earlier, right there in Long Island City because he "always wanted to be like the brothers," and had gone on

to have four pro fights. He talked about the fast life he'd led in Los Angeles in the late seventies, a lifestyle that helped terminate his career. Although shorter than I, Anthony fought as a lightweight (130 pounds).

Most guys try to lose weight, he said, but I was always trying to gain weight. I used to eat the heavy stuff to get big. Binding foods. Food that would really stick with you. I was a straight-ahead fighter. One direction: forward. That was it. I never took a step back. Which wasn't always a very good idea. In my last fight it got me beat up pretty bad. But I already knew that I was reaching the end. I didn't train right for that fight. On the day of the fight I came into the weigh-in hungover. See, I'd been running around with this crazy actress and—

The brevity of his four-fight career mattered little beside the words "I never took a step back." What a beautiful phrase, what stupid glory. Spoken quietly, with laconic bravado. Boxers rely on understatement. "I had a few fights." They'll shrug, meaning ten or two hundred. Or, "They used to think I was pretty tough." All subtlety there in the qualifier.

Three days later I collided with Laura. I had seen her measure me as an opponent in those brief intervals when we shared the gym, as I left and she entered (she worked late). We were roughly the same height and weight. Milton never stopped praising her.

Just wait until you see how she boxes, he said. You won't believe it. She doesn't fight like no woman. When you guys work, you'll get a good idea of our style. You should have seen her win the Gloves last year. I'll show you the tape. She beat this black girl from ringpost to ringpost. It was an execution.

Laura was another refugee from Kingsway, but as with Victor, we had never spoken there. I remembered her, though. She was a striking woman, strong-featured, her blond hair jagged against olive skin. The most remarkable thing about Laura, though, was her physique. She was braced, packed, ripped like a muscle magazine model, veins a blue tracery over solid muscle. Amazon warrior out of mythology, falcon, cheetah, all long muscle and sinew. Milton boasted of how the officials reacted at her first weigh-in.

You should have seen the look on their faces when she took off her shirt and stepped on the scale. They were like, "What the hell is this?" Their jaws were on the floor.

Certainly Laura was more toned than I was (or anyone else not eating steroids like M&M's). I had never fought a woman champion, and I wondered how Milton expected me to behave in the ring, if I was supposed to go light with her. Laura intimidated me slightly. She had won the Gloves after all, and her arms were thicker than mine. While I had moved with women a few times at Julio's, they hadn't been any good. I had played patty-cake with them and worked my defense.

I shouldn't have worried about ring etiquette. Laura's first jabs shoved me backward, and a straight left whiplashed my neck (Milton had turned Laura around as well). Woman no more, Laura was an enemy to kill. Unfortunately, this proved difficult, as she slid beneath my lunges or stepped smoothly out of range. If I waited, she pushed the fight to me, flicking jabs and throwing lead hooks that always landed. As the round passed, I became angry and awkward. My punches left me off-balance

and vulnerable. My hands didn't draw back quickly enough to block her counters. When it was her turn to attack, she confused me with jabs and then smacked me with crisp double hooks. It didn't occur to me that step by step, we were reenacting Victor's demolition of the white kid.

Sweat saturated my clothes and burned my eyes. I ran, backpedaling, dashing left and right, stumbling over my own feet. About halfway through the second round, Laura distracted me with a jab and hit me flush on the temple with a solid left. I suffered a frozen explosion of darkness, great black shock through my brain. Now she had to die. I backed her against the ropes and scored a few times in a flurry of wild punches. When I sprang away in fear of a counter, Milton shouted instructions to Laura on how to handle my rush.

Slip and then come back with something, Kielczewski. He's leaving himself open. Make him miss, then hurt him.

The bell rang and I stood breathless and dazed. Laura remarked on her brief difficulty against the ropes.

Milton glared at me. This isn't a tournament, Bob. Don't go crazy in there. Try to think.

I wanted to whine about how badly she was abusing me but simply nodded. In the next round I tried to control myself. This had always been where I failed as a boxer, in that place between fury and fear. I gasped through a third round, a three-minute thousand years. My lungs burned and my hands drooped; I wanted to quit. Instead I ran, avoiding contact until the bell.

What did you think of her? a smiling Milton asked as I stepped between the ropes.

She hits hard, I said with bravado. Harder than guys in bars.

Did you hear that, Laura? Milton laughed. He said you hit harder than guys in bars.

Well, I work as a bouncer, Laura said.

Now you see what we can do for you in here, Milton said. When I got Laura, she was retarded, just like you.

You remember Kingsway, she said. All they teach you is jab-jab, block-block.

We'll work on your defense in the next few days, Bob, he said. We'll work on everything. Still, for an old man, you can really take a punch. This sparring is good for you.

By the way, Bob, Milton said, looking at my feet, do you have boxing shoes?

No, I said, are these shoes bad for the ring?

The ring requires special shoes, high-laced, flat-soled shoes that will not scuff or tear the canvas. I wore my indoor soccer boots, virgin to soil and street.

No, Milton said, but I have some boxing shoes to sell, and I'm Puerto Rican.

He laughed in self-delight.

After the beating, I soldiered on for another week. In the morning mirror, I looked ten years older, creases like hatchet marks on my drawn face.

You look like shit, my boss said. Have you been on some kind of drinking binge?

No, I said sullenly, not drinking. I've been training.

Three weeks into December, I realized that I wasn't ready to fight. Milton kept