Telegraphing

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TONY ASKED IF I was up to fight the cop, and I said, Yeah, sure. Why not? I was eighteen years old, just out of high school, away from home for the first time, and working as a pizza delivery boy. But whenever anyone from back home called and asked what I'd been up to, what I was doing in Colorado, I only talked about boxing.

I'd been training at the Poor Boys' Boxing Gym in Brighton for a couple months. The cop had only been there a week, but he was eager to fight. We were around the same weight, height, and build. A good match, Tony said. I'd sparred once before, that time against K., a seventeen-year-old who'd spent most of his life in and out of juvenile detention centers. K. had five inches on me, easy, so I tried to find a way inside so I could chop him with short, sharp hooks, but his long limbs kept me at bay. I caught him in the stomach, then later on the chin, but he outclassed me in every respect, never let me get too close. He tapped me in the nose, mouth, and gut but didn't get carried away.

Tony laced me into my gloves, greased my face with Vaseline and fastened on my headgear. He was a former super-lightweight contender, had once fought the champion John-John Molina. Now he looked after the amateurs. Less than five and a half feet tall, in his mid-thirties and only ten or fifteen pounds over his fighting weight when I first met him, he wore his hair cropped close to the scalp and kept an immaculate mustache. In six years he'd be dead.

The cop was already geared-up and banging on the heavy bag. He wound up, swung his right slow and wide, a haymaker, really. I knew I would see that

punch coming, and I would duck it, come up with a solid hook. The cop slid between the ropes and rocked from side to side while he waited in his corner. Open up, Tony said and slid in my mouthpiece. He patted me on the cheek. Remember to breathe, he said.

In the first round, the cop and I traded jabs, felt each other out. He moved across the canvas in only one direction: mine. I circled away from the ropes, out of corners. I tapped him in the face with my jab, and his head rocked back like it was mounted on a well-worn spring. I worked that jab, chased it with a cross whenever I could, until the clock ran down and we went to our corners. Good, Tony said. Better than last time. I filled my lungs, and the second round began. The cop rushed me, his shoulder cocked. He winged out those haymakers and I backed off, hoping he'd tire himself out. But he kept pressing, throwing his right. He swung, I ducked, and his arm swept over my head. I was going to put the soft pedal to him. I was going to come out of the duck and crack that stubborn bastard in the ribs with a left hook.

Who knew the cop had a left hook of his own?

I came out of the duck, and the cop caught me hard on the nose. My eyes welled, and I took a step back and circled around him. My nose throbbed. Keep going? Tony asked. I nodded, snorted blood, and got my hands up. The cop tried to crowd me again, and I clipped him with a right to his stomach, a left to his head. I kept him back with jabs until the bell rang to end the round.

I sat on a scarred wooden stool in the corner of the ring. My nose bled—slick, sticky streams running over my lips and onto my chin. Tony slipped through the ropes. He said that was enough for today, and I spit my mouthpiece into his hand. He wiped my face clean with a wad of tissue and then held it under my nose to catch the blood. I turned my hands palm-up, and he unknotted the laces of my gloves.

That wasn't so bad, he said. You got in more shots than he did.

And I got popped.

Everybody gets popped, he said and pulled the gloves off my hands.

I took the tissue from Tony and held it myself.

He unfastened my headgear, told me to tilt back my head. He drew his finger down the bridge of my nose. It's not broken, he said, just bleeding. You'll be fine. You get hurt; you heal.

I leaned against the cool steel turnbuckle in the corner, looked up into the rafters, and listened: a jump rope whooshed through the air; fists collided with the heavy bags, that hard, flat packing sound, the clink of chain; the speed bag banged against its platform fast as a hummingbird's heartbeat. I leaned forward, rested my elbows on my knees, and lowered the tissue. A few drops of blood dripped from my nose, but by the time the cop was out of his gear, it'd run dry. He came over and shook my hand. It's easy to be a gentleman once you've made someone bleed, but I appreciated it just the same.

I came back to the gym the next day, and Tony said he would work with me on the mitts, but he didn't want me sparring for a couple weeks. He didn't want me to duck another punch, get popped again. That afternoon, I went through my routine: stretches, a few rounds shadow boxing in the ring, a couple on the speed bag, a few more hammering the heavy bag, the last two jumping rope. Each three-minute round seemed longer than the one before it; seconds stretched out like a yawn.

My legs were wobbly by the time the last round ended. I let the jump rope go limp mid-swing. It whacked my shins and came to a stop. I held my hands over my head, gulped air, and walked to the back wall where all the gear hung from pegs—hand wraps stiff with dried sweat; bag gloves like leather mittens; eight, ten, and twelve ounce gloves for sparring and fights; headgear; groin protectors; boxing shoes, the soles tread-worn; and a dented pair of punch mitts, the stitching coming undone. I hung the jump rope on its peg, tried to sneak in some time to catch my breath, but Tony had already slipped on the mitts and was in the ring. I pulled on a pair of gloves with my teeth and went in after him.

The regulars would be there soon. Smitty, who promoted all the professionals and prospects, came almost every day. He was a big, white-haired Irishman, his mouth packed with gold and silver teeth, a former bare-knuckle fighter. K. came back a few times after we sparred, but he'd since disappeared, maybe to another gym or back into the juvenile justice system. Tiny O. would bring the girl he was training. He claimed she was championship material, and she would be until she wasn't. Sometimes Tony's old trainer Denny would pull up, too. He had the cheeks of a bulldog and a Dramamine drawl. Words dripped from his mouth like sap. He spent as much time in the gym as he did in the parking lot

hunched under the hood of his old rattletrap, trying to keep that rusting hunk of American metal running just a little while longer. The cop might've come back, but I never saw him again after the day he caught me on the nose.

Tony had me work the jab for a little while, then he moved on to combinations, the odd numbers of the left hand, the even numbers of the right—one-two; two-three-two; one-two-one-two; one-two-three-four-three-two. Just the two, Tony said. I shifted my shoulders and cocked my fist, but before I could fling the punch Tony came down hard on my ear with the mitt. You're telegraphing, he said. I rubbed the side of my face with my glove. That was the first reason I'd gotten popped. I knew the cop would throw out those haymakers, but he knew I'd dip under his arm, that I'd come at him with a left hook. He'd been looking at least a move ahead of me.

Tony held up the mitts, kept calling out combinations. After a while, my arms ached and my hands began to drop. Whenever I left my face open, Tony swung at me with the mitt, made me remember the most fundamental feature of fighting: the other guy wants to hit you as bad as you want to hit him. Keep your hands up, he said. That was the second reason I'd gotten popped. I'd dropped my guard, gave the cop an opening. I threw a jab, reeled it in, and followed it with a right. Tony swung at me with the mitt, but my gloves were posted at each side of my head. Better, he said. You should have had your hands up yesterday. That was just sparring. It gets a lot uglier than a busted nose.

We finished on the mitts, and Tony told me how he'd lost a match in the Golden Gloves tournament. He'd let down his guard and his opponent caught him with a hook and fractured his jaw. My mouth felt like it would fall open, he said. I imagined him twenty years younger, standing in the ring, the only thing keeping him from going slack-jawed the strap of his headgear. I didn't think I'd recover from that, he said. Then he told me about the last night of March, 1973.

Muhammed Ali, "The Greatest," was at the San Diego Sports Arena, there to fight Ken Norton. Norton—an ex-devil dog boxer who'd gone pro, the man who'd served as Joe Frazier's sparring partner—was a five-to-one underdog. In the first round, he and Ali exchanged jabs—Ali smooth and graceful; Norton hunched over, his stance wide, scuttling across the canvas like a crab. In the final moments of the second round, Norton worked Ali into a corner and fired a jab that set the Champ against the ropes. He threw a right that broke Ali's

jaw and followed it with a left to the kidneys. Ali went ten more rounds with that broken jaw but lost the fight by split decision.

Even Ali could get his jaw busted, Tony said.

After that fight, Ali's jaw was wired back together. A relatively unknown fighter had beaten him, and the press reported that Ali was all washed up. Less than six months after that defeat, a rematch was scheduled at The Forum in Los Angeles: The Revenge Battle of the Broken Jaw. Before the fight, Ali taunted the press. There is a very great deal of interest in Muhammad Ali, he said. Is he through, or is he not? Is he still the fastest and most beautiful man in the world, or is he growing old and slow? The two men entered the ring. No bones broke in L.A., but Ali took back his title.

Tony had been hurt like Ali, and he'd healed like him, too. He told me stories like these, not the others. He didn't tell me about how his former trainer Denny had once been a light-heavyweight Golden Gloves champion with a twenty-four and O record, nineteen of those wins by way of knockout, a solid professional prospect until his head got caved in with a piece of pipe during a street fight. Denny couldn't take a punch after that, fighting career finished before it could begin. Tony didn't' tell me about his fight against John-John Molina in Puerto Rico, though it would be one of the last things on his mind before he died. Instead, he told me told about two fighters who returned to the ring with mended jaws, Ali to reclaim his title, Tony to turn pro and go on a nine-fight winning streak. These are the stories he told me; they're what we want to believe about boxing.

The regulars would be there soon. I hung up my gloves and thanked Tony for working with me. I told him I'd see him tomorrow and walked outside to my car. I would drive back to Broomfield where a friend's parents were letting me live in a room in their basement. I would take a hot shower and change, and I would spend the rest of the night delivering pizzas.

Late that spring, Tony took a last minute fight in Washington State against a kid in his early twenties. With only a few weeks to prepare, he didn't have time to train the amateurs anymore. He needed to get back on the bags. He needed Smitty to hold the mitts for him. And he had to cut weight.

When I came into the gym the place seemed empty. A gallon jug of water sat on the edge of the ring, and I knew Tony was there. From the small

bathroom with the weak-flushing toilet we weren't supposed to shit in and a cracked mirror, the silver backing chipped away, I heard the toilet flush. The sink ran and Tony came out. He wore sweats, his skin already leaking. I figured he'd been hitting the bags while he waited for Smitty to show up.

You run yet? he asked.

Of all the things I loved about boxing, roadwork wasn't one of them.

Come on, he said and pushed me out the door.

We took a bridge over Highway 85; cars sped by beneath us. We meandered through the neighborhoods—cracked concrete sidewalks snaked around single-story ranch-style houses surrounded with patches of grass, beds of wood chips, gravel—and came to the South Platte. Tony began to run as soon as we hit the river. His legs pumped up and down like pistons firing in an engine. I trailed him up the bank against the flow. The water was murky, choking on silt that had crumbled off the bank. Naked roots of trees crept over the ground like crooked fingers. Bare patches on the elms looked like bloodsucker bites. We ran a few miles upriver, the ground hard and cracked, like small continents separating beneath our feet. Then we turned around to go back the way we'd come.

When we got back to the gym, I slid through the ropes, collapsed in the corner of the ring, and tried to catch my breath. Tony stripped off his sweats. They were soaked and smacked against the floor like a wet towel. He stepped onto the scale and nudged the stingy, sliding weights. They never seemed to rest where anyone wished they would. Every year it gets harder to shed weight, he said. But it'll come off. He stepped off the scale, grabbed the jug of water, filled his mouth, and spit into a bucket.

Smitty showed up, and I tried to stay out of the way so he could get Tony ready for the fight. I worked the bags and watched Tony on the mitts. By the end he was slowing down. He'd bled all the water out of his body; his skin puckered. His legs were rigid and his feet dragged on the canvas. Even though he was wrung out and wizened, his punches were sharp, clean. He never telegraphed his shots, never dropped his hands. It was hard to believe he'd never been a champion.

During the weeks while he was preparing for the fight in Washington State, it was usually just the two of us in the gym. Tony had been nine-to-fiving it for a manufacturing plant, but he'd developed an aggressive allergy to plastics and

couldn't work anymore. He'd filed a lawsuit and was waiting for a settlement to come through. There wasn't enough daytime delivery to go around at the pizza shop, so I only worked nights. Neither one of us had any place we had to be, so we spent our days in the gym. We ran the South Platte, worked the bags, and I held the mitts for Tony when Smitty was MIA. The days ticked by, and Tony seemed in a constant process of transformation. He got faster, regained his finesse. He'd peeled off a chunk of the extra weight, had come a long way since he'd agreed to take the fight.

The week before he had to leave for Washington, we were in the gym. Smitty was a no-show that afternoon, so I climbed into the ring with Tony. He wore gloves and I put on the mitts, our roles reversed. He snapped out his fists, and I caught his punches. If I had tried to swipe at him, he could have countered and laid me out on the canvas. His jabs jarred my shoulder, and even the padded mitts couldn't take the sting out of his punches. His shots echoed in the gym like a string of firecrackers. He was a threat, a killer. He asked me how he looked.

Good, I said. Beautiful.

He threw a flurry of punches that sliced through the air. I think I got this one, he said. I really do.

The day before he had to leave for the fight, I met Tony at the Thornton Rec Center. He pulled into the parking lot in his muted-red Geo Prism. He'd told me he won the car when he bought a raffle ticket at a picnic. I'm a lucky guy, he'd said.

May was over, but it was still cool outside a lot of the time. The flag on the pole outside thrashed in the wind.

Inside, Smitty was at the front desk chatting up the receptionist. None of us belonged to the rec center, so we all forked over a few bucks for day passes. Smitty told Tony to take it easy. Just keep your blood moving, he said.

Tony and I jogged around the track for half an hour. Then we met Smitty on the racquetball court. I didn't understand what we were doing there until Smitty held the mitts for Tony. You could hear the pitch of every punch, the sounds louder and more explosive than they were in the gym. After they were finished, Smitty humored me with a few rounds on the mitts. From there we went to the locker room. Smitty put on his swimsuit, told us he'd be in the hot tub. Tony went into the sauna to sweat off the last bit of weight. I joined him,

but could stand the dry heat for only about fifteen minutes. Tony stayed in there drying out for I don't know how long, and when he came out, he headed right for the scale. He flicked the weights with his finger. When they balanced, he wagged his head. We changed into our swimsuits and went to soak in the hot tub with Smitty.

Smitty was hunched over the lip of the hot tub, staring out at the swimming pool, eyeing the young mothers in one-piece bathing suits teaching babies to float on their backs, their toddlers to swim. Tony and I settled into the tub, breathed the burn of chlorine, and soaked in the hot water.

How'd it go? Smitty asked.

Tony told him there was nothing to worry about. I've wondered what he was doing the night before the weigh-in, if he was in a hotel room in Washington wearing a vinyl suit, sweating, spitting, and starving to make weight. If Smitty was worried, it didn't show. He just nodded and turned his attention back to the young mothers in the pool.

We went to the locker room. Tony lay flat on his back on a bench; his arms and legs hung limp. Smitty and I got dressed, went out to the parking lot, and waited for Tony. It had warmed up but the wind still surged.

He looked solid on the mitts today, I said.

Sure did, Smitty said.

Tony came out, met us in the parking lot. Smitty told him to go home and get rested. He would pick him up in the morning for their flight. I'm feeling good about this one, Tony said. I told him he'd murder the kid in Washington. Tony smiled, slapped me on the back, and said me we'd catch up when he got home from the fight. He shuffled slowly to his car, scraping stray gravel under his feet.

I stood in the parking lot with Smitty. I really think he's going to win, I said. I believed that as truly as I believed I was going to dip under that cop's haymaker and crack him in the ribs with my left hook. I believed in it because I wanted it to be true. The flag churned. The halyard whipped in the wind, dinging against the post.

No chance, Smitty said.

They were bringing him out to Washington as an opponent, a journeyman. They were bringing him out to lose. Smitty told me this as though he was embarrassed I hadn't figured that much out, like it should've been as clear the sky

unfurling above us. I got into my car and began the drive home. I cut across 120th, headed west. There were no clouds and the sun hung above the mountains. Light glared against the spray of bugs splattered on my windshield.

Tony didn't win the fight. I wish he had, but this is not that kind of story. What I didn't know then was that, more than anything else, boxing is a sport about losing. You've heard of Mike Tyson, Sugar Ray Leonard, Oscar De La Hoya, and Manny Pacquiao, and for every champion there are the countless journeymen, the weary and rope-burned gatekeepers without whom the sport wouldn't exist. It's on their backs that hopefuls climb the ranks to become contenders, and that contenders battle it out to become champions. Tony never mentioned that he'd been the seventh fighter to fall under the fists of Floyd Mayweather, Jr. He never told me about the fight in Puerto Rico against John-John Molina. But Denny did.

After Tony returned from Washington, I was at the gym with him and Denny. I was sick of delivering pizzas, sick of living in a room in a basement. My father called and offered to help me go back to school. We'll get everything worked out, he said. Just come home for the summer. I told Tony I wanted to keep fighting.

If you can go to school you should, he said. He walked to the pegs on the back wall and began to reorganize the gear.

I put on a pair of gloves and whaled on the heavy bag. Denny coached me, told me to really dig in with the hook. Drive the punch with your hip, he said. Twist your toe like you're crushing a cigarette.

I don't smoke, I said.

Yeah? Good for you.

Tony scurried around the gym, putting everything in its place.

You used to be his trainer, I said.

That's right, Denny said. Then he told me about the fourteenth day of May in 1993.

He and Tony flew down to Puerto Rico to face the super-featherweight champion John-John Molina. Tony had been brought in just like he'd been brought in to fight the kid in Washington, as an opponent. Everybody expected him to lose. In the first round, he traded jabs with Molina, held his own. The bell rang to begin the second round, Tony stepped into the ring, and something

miraculous happened. He threw a right hook and split open the flesh above Molina's eye. For the rest of the round, Tony pestered the cut with his jab. The round ended and he went to his corner. He'd cut a champion, made him bleed, and could taste the possibility of a title.

I told him to be careful, to stay out of the corners and off the ropes, Denny said. The referees were looking for any reason to stop the fight, keep the title in Molina's hands.

Tony stepped into the ring for the third round. Molina pressed him against the ropes, suffocated him with a flurry of punches, and gave the referees a reason to step in and stop the fight.

TKO, Denny said. And that was that.

I went home, wasn't there more than a week before I set out to find another boxing gym. I ended up fighting in a rural town north of Houston called Cut and Shoot, home to former heavyweight contender Roy Harris, the man who'd lost a title bout against Floyd Patterson. One of his descendants, a little man named Monty who wore a beat up ball cap and thick glasses, owned a plot of land out there and had converted the old barn into a gym. He took me inside.

From the rafters hung a heavy bag. A speed bag was set up in the corner, and in the middle of the barn, standing about three feet off the ground, was a full-sized boxing ring. I spent some time on the heavy bag, and then Monty sent me into the ring to spar. The time I'd spent working with Tony showed. I didn't get popped like I had with the cop. I kept my guard up, threw sharp, clean shots.

We're having a smoker on Saturday night, Monty said. You should fight.

I said, Yeah, sure. Why not?

When I came back for the smoker, the fields around the barn were crowded with cars. People were packed around the ring inside. Monty stood next to a scale, a clipboard cradled in his arm, his fingers wrapped around a pen. I weighed in, and he set me up with an opponent. Then he handed me the clipboard.

Sign this, he said.

What is it?

Just a waiver. We can't be responsible if somebody gets hurt or killed.

He handed me the pen and I scrawled my name on the waiver.

Thanks, he said.

The kid I was fighting was a recent high school graduate from Cut and Shoot. I was sitting on my ass in the dirt when he came over with a few of his pals, shook my hand, and told me he'd try not to hurt me. It's easy to be a gentleman when you roll up on someone three-deep.

We were the second-to-last fight of the night. I sat through all the other matches trying to keep my head straight, trying to remember everything I'd learned at the Poor Boys Boxing Gym. Then Monty called me into the ring.

The kid from Cut and Shoot fought just like the cop. He bulled toward me, winging haymakers. In the first round, I held up my guard, took every one of his shots on my gloves. He rattled my head back and forth like a bell clapper, made a good showing. I couldn't get off a shot. The second round began and he was tired, worn out from swinging. He kept pressing toward me, and I saw him reeling his arm back to throw his right and I countered, popped him in the mouth with a jab. I leaned to my side, hit him with a hook, and he backed off. We went back to our corners. I filled my lungs before the third round began. The kid was tired, and he kept his distance. I stepped toward him, flung out my jab, and he backed away. I pressed him against the ropes, moved him into a corner, and thumped his face with my right. He countered with a haymaker. I ducked it and came up with a left to his ribs. His body folded to the side. He backed off again, but I gave chase, hammering him my right whenever I got close enough, until the bell rang to end the round. He retreated to his corner and crumpled on the stool.

Once we'd caught our breath, Monty called us to the center of the ring. He held us both by the wrist. He lifted my hand into the air.

When I got home that night, I called Tony and told him about the smoker.

That's great, he said. When's school start?

I moved to a small college town in Oklahoma that fall. I tried to keep boxing, found a place with a heavy bag hanging in the corner of a room full of free weights, but it wasn't anything like the Poor Boy's Gym. There was no Tony or Smitty or Denny. I called Tony on the phone a few times when I was drunk and lonely, mostly to tell him that I missed the gym in Brighton. He told me about his two-year stint in the army, his early years as a professional boxer in California, and the harder years after that.

You regret any of it? I asked.

No, he said. He never mentioned Molina.

Three years later I was out of school. I'd moved to Portland with a woman. We'd met one night at a bar. That same night I was arrested and taken to jail for being drunk and mouthing off to a cop. She bailed me out the next morning and took me with her when she moved to Portland. It was hard to make a living in that city, and I imagine it still is. College grads from around the country flood in every year, fighting for jobs as baristas and bartenders. I was working odd hours as a telemarketer, nights and weekends, conducting surveys about water quality, state lotteries, and hormone replacement therapy. People from back home or school would ask me what I was up to.

I'm a telemarketer, I'd say. It wasn't much of a step up from my old job as a pizza delivery boy. I'd hung a heavy bag hung in from the rafters in the basement, but I couldn't say I was trying to become a boxer anymore.

While I was in Portland, sitting in a cubicle, wearing a headset, and interrupting people's dinners to ask them if they had a moment to discuss their satisfaction with the electric company, if they could quantify their satisfaction on a one-to-ten scale, Tony was back in Colorado, and he was sick.

After he got home from Washington, Tony took nine more fights, traveled around the country: North Dakota, Arizona, Minnesota, New Mexico. He won against an old palooka at the Cloverfield Forum in Loveland. The rest he lost. The allergy he'd developed at the manufacturing plant had taken over his body. He couldn't control his weight anymore and grew from super-featherweight to welterweight to middleweight, twenty-two more pounds packed onto his small frame.

There was so much I didn't know. After his body turned on him, he quit fighting. After he quit fighting, he got depressed. After he got depressed, he took mood stabilizers. He sleepwalked at night. His wife left him. The fight against Molina was a wound that wouldn't close.

On the last day, he picked up the phone, called the police, and told them he was going to shoot himself. He called Denny, got the machine, and left a message. He said he was sorry he'd lost the fight in Puerto Rico, that their lives could have been different. After he hung up, he lifted a revolver to his head and fired a bullet into his brain.

I was on the seventh floor of an office building in downtown Portland when it happened, sitting in a cubicle, headset curled around my skull, microphone in front of my mouth. I was far away, on the other side of the divide, near the edge of the continent. A flat tone rang in my ears like a grade-school hearing test, and I waited for the auto-dialer to connect me. Soon the tone would go silent, and somebody would pick up on the other end of the line and ask who was there.