

Fisticuffs

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For those of you who supported, read, critiqued, edited,
philosophized, debated, talked, listened, punched, coached,
broke my heart, hated, and loved me unconditionally...
There are too many of you to name, but in my life I'll love
you more.

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Introduction

“...the “Fight Club” becomes stronger, cleaner, not just the record of one life, but of a generation.”

--Chuck Palahniuk

Chris died.

I was student teaching at the time, and the feelings of Chris’s death left me with a whirlwind of emotions.

At first, I tried desperately to write my thoughts down on paper. I wrote poem after poem but couldn’t adequately convey the thoughts that were spinning in my head. I knew what I was trying to write, and what I felt, but couldn’t find the words.

Eventually I found a form—the essay—that allowed me to say what I felt without telling what I was feeling. I wanted to capture in my writing Chris’s charisma, light heart, and warm personality, with the stupid things my friends and I used to do for fun. I decided on an egg war.

The essay fit this story because the war had been an actual event. The essay works as a vehicle to tell the story while examining the underlying meaning of the characters’ actions. To read an essay, the first thing that a reader must know is that it is non-fiction. This gives more weight to the story because the reader assumes already made that the events did actually happen. This assumption changes the writing from a “story” to a chronicle of history.

The fact that essays are non-fiction allows the reader to see how the narrator dealt with life experiences. This fact cannot be stressed enough because the story becomes an intimate dialogue between the author and reader. In fiction, although the situations may seem real, the reader already knows that the author used his artistic license to tell an entertaining story. With non-fiction, the author has to be true to the actual events. By sticking to these guidelines, the author creates a bond of trust between himself and his reader. This makes the emotion in the essay real and meaningful. On the other hand, if this trust is broken, the essay becomes merely a story where the author has to rely on other literary devices to draw in the reader. Scott Russell Sanders states, "The essay is distinguished from the short story, not by the presence or absence of literary devices, not by tone or theme or subject, but by the writer's stance toward the material" (337). While literary devices are apparent in the essay, the author's best tool is his truthful recollection of the past.

Essay also works as a confessional of sorts. As an essayist, the author is able to rethink past actions, deduce what other outcomes could have happened, and ask himself why he chose the action he did. Greg Lichtenberg states, "...perhaps it is instead the most effective tool yet for exploring those selves" (105). The essayist is forced to look back at past decisions and contemplate why he made the decisions that he made at the time. The essay works as a mirror into the author's own psyche.

While this idea may be disturbing, it is also a very useful tool for writing essays. Although you are not allowed to lie, you are allowed to decide the details that you add. On this subject, Sanders states, "...I picked and chose among a thousand

beckoning details; sure, I downplayed some facts and highlighted others; but I was writing about the actual, not the invented. I shaped the matter, but did not make it up” (336).

By stressing certain circumstances, and downplaying others, the essayist has the ability to shape the meaning, or thesis, of the essay. Because the event happened in the past, the essayist has the luxury of hindsight to see what the event actually meant to him.

Essay helped me get the feelings that surrounded past experiences down on paper, but I also wanted to explore more than my own experiences. I found that I was able to move into fiction in order to allow my characters to do things that happened only in my imagination. I could imagine someone a bit like myself, or one of my friends, driven to the extremes. What would he do? How would he think? “Divinity” was my answer.

Fiction follows a set of totally different rules. As with essay, fiction writers usually draw ideas from their own life experiences; however, the fiction writer has the liberty of shaping the events. This little nuance becomes a very important tool for the fiction writer. On the subject of human behavior, Diane Johnson notes: “As individuals we forget things, fail to think of the snappy response at a dinner table, are struck dumb at times we should strike back and so on” (317). The fiction writer is able to use memory, the snappy comeback, or articulately speak through his characters without any repercussion. This allows the writer to use the characters more efficiently through dialogue and actions.

On the surface, the use of characters seems like a minor detail. Daniel W. Lehman adds, “Characters in nonfiction have a presence that cannot be managed by the text; therefore, the ability of the narrator to know and report on the motivations of characters can implicate the nonfiction author in ways that rarely are faced as directly by writers of omniscient fiction. In fiction, an author feels free to relay the thoughts of characters and to reveal their motives; in nonfiction, by contrast, these decisions can be costly” (97).

While both fiction and nonfiction writers use dialogue and actions to describe characters, the nonfiction writer must search for the tone that was actually present at the time of the event. The fiction writer has the ability to create the words, and to shape the mood.

Since the writer is creating all of the characters, plot, setting, tone, etc., it would seem that it is easier to write fiction than nonfiction. The fact remains; fiction readers are more critical than nonfiction readers. With nonfiction, the reader is willing to let the writer digress, or note asides, because the reader knows that the author is drawing from real life and is building to a point. With fiction writing, the author has to find a way to include pertinent information while stimulating the reader’s interest. This means that there must be some sort of tension on every transition to keep the reader reading.

For this thesis, I decided to create a mix of fiction and essay pieces. I wanted to create a journey, from physical to spiritual, by using combat as a vehicle. Discussing fighting came natural for me. I’ve found, in my own life, everything is a

battle. Not so much a physical one, even though I've had my share, but a spiritual, emotional one.

I started the thesis with "Union Street." This is an essay about the loss of a close friend. To explain to the reader what Chris meant to me, I wanted to show a glimpse into our friendship. I wanted to explore this on a personal level and find out what this friendship meant to me. I didn't want to just make up a story about a dead friend. I thought of sledding trips, parties, and other situations from my past, but none fit as well as the egg war. This war, which would have made more sense if we had been drunk, shows the acceptance and creativity that can only occur around people that you love. I wanted to show that in an instant everything that is real and made sense in life can, and does, disappear. Chris's death created a battle inside of me that had taken years to wage. It seemed fitting to start the thesis with it.

"Divinity," like "Union Street," is a look at a teen coming to grips with his own ideas about mortality. I drew from many of my own experiences to set up this story, as well as my imagination. For this story I had to become "Bobby." While writing this story, I had to put myself into situations in my mind to see what could possibly make a teen go off the deep end and blow away his classmates. I didn't want "Bobby" to be written off as some psychopath, so I included the voice of God as his conscience. With "Bobby's" alienation and "God's" ability to see things that Bobby could never have thought of (like where to look for guns), I wanted to show how the internal fight of one person could have an effect on society.

“Dragons” is an essay, and it was the hardest for me to write. This essay chronicles the time from when fighting started to become more of a spiritual battle than a physical form. This essay was so hard to write because I allowed others to see my perceived weaknesses and openly discussed my biggest fears on paper. I have done this from time to time privately, but never for someone else to read. “Dragons” moves this thesis from a highlight reel of fights to a constant internal battle that happens inside all of us.

“One Night in Bangkok” is a fictional story that started as an essay. As an essay, it had its good points but there was always something missing. When I decided to make it a fiction piece, and create the scene, “One Night in Bangkok” grew into an actual fictional event in my mind. The story, again, is the battle within one’s self when meeting a love interest. But in this thesis, it serves as a transition from a teen to an adult.

“Spirit and the Flesh” is an essay that occurred when I was constantly reading in an effort to find the answers to all of my own life questions. This is a major step in my own life, as well as in this thesis, because it incorporates both my warring impulses and the influence of literature. Because of this dichotomy, “Spirit and the Flesh” became the heart and soul of this thesis.

“10:46” is a story I created as a chronicle of a whole life. I wanted to create a character that, on the outside, had the perfect life. But on the inside, a spiritual war raged rampant. This story, for me, was entertaining to write, but I also wanted to show the importance of the internal battle. I wanted my protagonist to face everything

he was scared to death (no pun intended) to face. I wanted to push the limits and not hold back. This story shows the importance of realizing your self instead of going through life blind to the truth.

Finally, “The Fight” is the essay that ends the battle—at least in the thesis. With “The Fight,” I wanted to show that I had grown physically, spiritually, and as a writer. I wanted to parallel the three to show that they are all one in the same. I have shown a brawling teen grow into a sophisticated adult. I wanted to give the effect of balance to the thesis.

Overall, I chose the setting of this thesis to be the field of battle. It starts as physical battles and moves to something more. I have explored the worlds of drunken brawl, to the formalized rituals of karate, to the governed sport of kickboxing. Fighting, for me, mainly started as a primitive, testosterone induced, way to mark my territory. Along the way I found karate. I joined for the sole reason to kick some ass, but found something different. I found that fighting really isn’t the answer. Knowing yourself is.

Karate taught me that your body is just a tool to sharpen your mind and spirit. By having complete control of the body, you can control your mind. I only joined kickboxing to push myself to the limits. I wanted to see what my body and mind were really capable of. Because of what I learned about myself from these experiences, I thought that the battle within was an excellent way to attack a project such as a thesis.

I wanted to show a sense of growth through this thesis. First, I wanted to show the physical growth. I wanted to let the reader experience adolescence to

adulthood. I wanted to show a physical maturing where the character was expected to act a certain way because of his age. After all, fighting is expected behavior in children, but is it really acceptable for an adult to get his nose broken in a kickboxing match?

Finally, I wanted to show a spiritual growth. I chronicled a time from when a person thinks that they are invincible until they realize that they are going to die. This is an important fact for me because I wanted to show the worth of life. The conscious choice to keep on living is the most basic battle we face. Thus, everything we do should be for the improvement of life.

As a writer, I have found the merits of both fiction and essay. I like the frankness and truthfulness of nonfiction but also enjoy the ability to create new worlds and situations with fiction. I cannot, and would not, say that one is better than the other. I'm not even comfortable enough to say that I personally have a favorite. But, for me, the two genres are not interchangeable. Using both allowed me to explore my own thoughts while creating a scene.

So how do I pick what genre to write in? The answer is—it picks itself.

When I sit down to write, I know the story that I'm trying to say. Most of the time, after the first draft, I am not happy with the end product. Then, during the revision process, the story lets me know what it wants to become. Patricia Hampl said, "Intimacy with a piece of writing, as with a person, comes from paying attention to the revelations it is capable of giving, not by imposing my own notions and

agenda, no matter how well intentioned they might be” (28). The truth is, I’m not sure how the end is going to look until after the first or second draft.

As I mentioned earlier, a couple of pieces in this thesis ended up totally different from where they began. When I started to write “Union Street,” it was a poem. It had a different name, tone, and an egg war was not even mentioned in any line. After about nine or ten drafts, I decided that I couldn’t describe what I was feeling by using this genre. I’m sure it can be done but, personally, I couldn’t make it fit. It wasn’t until I stepped away from Chris’s death, and really looked at his life, that I was able to describe him and what he meant to me.

On the same note, “One Night in Bangkok” was an essay. It started with a chess game that I had played on a computer with a girl I was interested in at the time. In the essay, I centered on the chess moves, explaining them with intricate detail, as a parallel to what was actually going on. The essay turned out daunting. The lines were filled with the game’s strategies but, during the original encounter, there was very little dialogue that supported the action. It wasn’t until I moved the game from the computer onto a board, out of my apartment and into a bar, and added dialogue that supported the game that this piece came to life.

While researching, reading, contemplating, philosophizing, drafting, and editing this thesis, many battles have been waged in my own life. Through these short stories and essays, I’ve given the reader a glimpse of the struggle. Now, the battle of writing a thesis has ended, only to stir new ones to life.

Union Street

Through the frosted windshield, the city's lights burned as fiery stars, reflecting beams of light through the falling snow. The car vents blasted heat into our faces while the below zero temperature outside kept ice frozen to the edges of the windshield. In Keith's heated Nissan Pulsar, we were safe from the numbing cold as we plowed through the snow-covered streets of Batavia.

Through the blurred windshield, I could make out an arm tossing an object out the passenger side window of the proceeding car. The small, circular object hovered like a spaceship as it rose into the air before us. Then, after reaching its peak, the object caught air and began to turn end over end, hurtling at us.

"What the fuck . . ." was all that Keith could mutter before the container crashed with a loud thud, depositing its former contents across the windshield.

"What the hell was that?" Keith yelled.

"I think it's chip dip!" Andy laughed from the back seat; as the three of us watched the milky white substance, which was now splattered across the windshield, freeze to the glass.

"We should get eggs. We should get eggs . . ." Keith repeated to himself, irritation clearly shown on his face.

"Just drive," I barked as I tossed a handful of multiple sized dog biscuits at the car in front of us.

Keith knew the rules. Chris adamantly stated that we couldn't use anything that could stain his new jacket he had received for Christmas. In short—no eggs.

“Incoming!” Andy yelled.

But it was too late.

With a thump, the window was coated with milk.

“Fuck this, we're gettin' eggs.” Keith growled.

It was innocent at first, a boring Sunday night in the middle of January, 1994. The recent five inches of fallen snow kept most people off the road. But Keith, Terry, Chris, Vinny, Andy, and I had different plans.

Batavia doesn't offer much to do after the sun sets. The city is bustling with commotion during the day (only because it's the largest town within twenty miles) but, at night, almost seems deserted. Because Batavia, when compared to other cities, is relatively quiet, its nightlife mainly consists of drinking or going elsewhere. Each of us, not old enough to get into the bars, did not feel like sitting around indoors for the night. Instead, driving aimlessly through Batavia seemed a better option. It was only enhanced when Vinny decided, while shopping at the Batavia Tops, to have a war.

We created the teams by making the two drivers captains. The captains basically kept the same passengers in their respective cars for teams.

At Tops, we decided to split up and buy ammo. Keith, Andy, and I started in the bulk food section, wondering what the others would buy in different parts of the store. We quickly decided on bulk dog biscuits and M&Ms, believing that dry

ammunition would keep the damage to the cars at a minimum. We decided hastily because we were anxious to get started.

At first, the ammo sufficed, but after watching the wipers smear chip dip and milk all over the windshield, we knew that our artillery was lacking.

Keith pulled his car into the Sugar Creek where, after convincing the clerk that we were planning a scrambled egg breakfast for a lot of people, we bought ten cartons of eggs. But our new plan wasn't original. Terry, Vinny, and Chris greeted us with a bombardment of eggs of their own.

We drove for hours on the streets of Batavia. We steered away from the few cars traveling Main Street and headed to the southwestern side of town. There, the majority of time was spent playing chase—hiding at corners, waiting for Terry's car for an unexpected ambush.

Once in a while, we would pass each other on a darkened, deserted side street. Whenever this happened, Keith and Terry would make quick u-turns as we challenged each other to a jousting match. I hung out of the passenger side window as Andy leaned out behind the driver's seat as we egged Terry's car as it passed. The cars seemed to be equally covered with freezing yolk when we reached the north side of town.

On the corner of Richmond and Oak we spotted Terry's car coming toward us. Leaning out the passenger window, I heaved an egg in the direction of the car . . . but no splat sound . . .

"Holy shit, that went in the window!" Andy said, half yelling, half laughing.

All three of us burst into laughter. But in all of the commotion we lost sight of Terry's car.

We searched the side streets for about twenty minutes looking for the egg-stained car but there was no sight of it. We began to lose interest . . . until we started down Union Street.

"There they are!" Andy shouted.

"Where?" Keith asked, scanning the street.

"At the side of the street. There!" Andy exclaimed, pointing between us.

I noticed the car parked at the side of the road with all its passengers on the sidewalk.

"Turn around, Keith, turn around!" I pleaded as Andy and I reached for eggs.

Keith pulled the car into Vandetta Stadium parking lot at the end of the street, gave a quick glance to make sure we were ready, and pulled back onto the icy road.

They saw us coming.

But it was too late.

Bam Splat Pow

The three eggs hit their target.

"Holy shit, he's chasing us!" Andy gasped, as we drove by.

Keith and I looked back simultaneously to see Chris, in full sprint, pursuing our car.

"Can't this piece of shit go any faster?" I shouted at Keith.

"Too icy," Keith yelled back.

Chris was about twenty yards away when he pulled up and rifled an egg in our direction. The egg must have been going at least ninety miles per hour. All I could think was, "There goes a window!"

Keith tried to pull his car around the corner but all of a sudden . . .

BRANG!!!

. . . the egg hit a stop sign. The egg hit so hard that, within seconds, the windows of the once darkened houses along the street began to light up.

Before the residents could, undoubtedly, call the Police, we decided that this was a good time to end our war.

Keith, Andy, and I were the victors.

We ended up at Chris's house at about three o'clock that morning. Keith, Terry, and Chris tried to wash the egg off the cars in the zero degree weather; but, after an hour, decided that a little egg was better than frostbite.

Once we were all inside, the six of us spent the remainder of the night laughing about our newly created stories. Despite the many occurrences, most of the stories centered around the stop sign.

It seems that the egg I threw into Terry's car broke, spraying yolk all over Chris's new jacket. Terry pulled over on Union Street so Chris could try to clean his jacket off with the fresh snow. Chris, who really never lost his temper, was pissed. But, luckily, the stop sign was there to take the egg that was meant for Keith's car.

The stop sign is still stained with egg to this day.

I repeat this story, and countless others, in my mind on this cold March afternoon. I repeat this story while Keith, Terry, Andy, and I stand silently watching.

We watch as Vinny helps carry the coffin to Chris's final resting place.

Divinity

Bobby! What are you doin'?

Shelly?

Bobby ...

Do it now!!!

God I can't. It's Shelly ...

Shut the fuck up and kill the bitch, you spineless shit.

Bobby ...

Too beautiful. I can't.

DON'T ... Pleasse ...

How can you be a horseman of the apocalypse if you can't even kill a little preppy slut? You gutless little shit. I shoulda let you rot when you were born.

God ... can't. Please God, don't make me ...

SHOOT!

Guns seem to weigh more in an outstretched arm.

I was born with what my mom always called a 'weak ticker.' From what I was told, within hours after my birth, I had to have open-heart surgery to repair a faulty valve. I didn't know that other kids didn't have to visit the doctor's office twice a

year, or that the scar down the middle of my chest was abnormal. I thought that I was just like the rest of the kids.

That is, until one summer while playing with Shelly Webster.

Shelly was the daughter of my dad's partner, Officer Webster. I've known her so long, I don't remember not knowing her. The oldest memory I have of Shelly is sitting in a kiddie pool by our mothers, while the cops and Shelly's brothers swam in the big pool.

What's that?

What?

On your tummy. It looks like a zipper.

That's where my weak ticker is. Mommy says I had surgery.

What's surgery?

Well, the rest of the conversation was this pointless, but that's when I knew ... not every kid had had surgery.

This fact really doesn't bother me.

Dad doesn't have the same outlook, though.

Jealousy I guess.

Look at Shelly's dad. His sons play football, baseball, hockey, and lead normal lives. Hell, Billy Webster, the oldest, is going to Minnesota on a full hockey scholarship. What does my dad have? A gimp son.

I mean, it's not like I was never in sports. I remember playing baseball when I was ten. The sport itself seemed pointless to me, even at that age. But, Dad was proud of me then. That is also when I met my other father. He didn't talk to me, but I knew he was there.

It all started after one of the games.

Tommy Bacholak was a big kid. Partly because of genes and the other part is because he was held back in school a couple times. Although he was older than all of us, his parents wanted him to be in minor league with his classmates. That's horseshit. Not only was he better, he also made another sport out of pushing everyone around. Hell, it seemed like the coach was even afraid of him.

After this one particular game, I guess it was my turn to be the pickee. It all happened behind the dugout while the parents, while sitting motionless on the bleachers, talked with each other as if they actually liked one another.

So you're the shit with the scar?

Well, let's see it.

(No answer)

Where you goin'?

I'm not done with ya.

Leave me alone Tommy.

Leave me alone Tommeeee.

What you gonna do, tell your mommy?

Go tell your pig dad?

I'm shakin.

Let me go ...

My dad says if you get hit in the chest your heart will stop. You'll die. Don't believe him. Let's try ...

I don't know what exactly happened next. All I know is my hand hurt like hell. I broke it in three places.

Tommy's jaw was only broken in two.

Although I'm not exactly sure of what happened, I do know that I didn't throw that punch. God threw it for me.

Guns hurt when they jam into your crotch when you sit.

After the incident with Tommy, I had collapsed on my way back to the startled parents on the bleachers. At first, everyone thought that I was in shock from breaking my hand. At the doctor's, though, it was found that I had an irregular heart murmur. The doctor's said that it would be O.K. to play sports in moderation, but Mom thought otherwise. *Too dangerous*, she would say.

It's kinda funny; that's the last time that I saw Dad happy with me.

My summers became quite different after that. At first, I was stuck at home watching the 700-Club with Mom before she went to work. Throughout the day,

Mom left instructions with my Grandma, who watched me when my parents both worked, that I was only allowed to watch the Christian Television Network after my chores were done. I hated that idea but Grandma loved it.

Grandma always said *The problem with you kids is you don't know God* as she turned on the T.V. and sat down to watch next to me. We would watch Pat Robertson basically tell everyone they were sinners if they didn't vote for him, Jimmy Swaggert say that he could heal anybody now that he fully understands the strength of temptation and the devil, and, finally, we would end our fun-filled day watching back-to-back episodes of Davy and Goliath (those two claymation bastards were worse than the fucking evangelists).

I tried to make my chores last longer to avoid this torture by television. I once spent three days cleaning my room, which consisted of dumping my clothes hamper all over the floor when Grandma came upstairs. But soon, Grandma missed our time in front of the T.V. and said my chores could wait. This left me desperate to find another means of entertainment.

Do you know what your son did? my mom started.

What now? my dad impatiently answered, taking off his uniform.

With that twenty-two YOU bought him ... he shot a bird.

What did you say to him? Dad calmly answered.

He shot a fucking bird, Jack.

Christ, Sharon, he's a kid!

He shot a bird! my mom scolded, disbelieving her ears.

Boys kill things. When I was his age, I shot birds, rabbits, squirrels ... hell, whatever I could.

You don't even care? my mom antagonized, still not believing what she was hearing.

I care, but what do you expect with all that horseshit you're making him watch? Be glad he's only killing animals. Dad sarcastically answered.

He needs to be around other kids and do kid things. We've been over this, Sharon.

Fine, we'll do it your way. Talk to him though. Mom agreed.

To avoid over-shooting a target, always squeeze the trigger while exhaling.

My father had a long talk with me on how killing small woodland creatures was bad and how I might lose my twenty-two if I kept it up. Finally, he told me that he would take me to the Websters' in the morning to play while he was at work.

I was excited by the whole concept. If I had known this would happen, I would have killed more birds and left them on the doorstep weeks ago. After all, now I was free to see Shelly. Daily.

At first, Dad used to drop me off at Shelly's when he picked her dad up for work. By the end of the summer, though, I was riding my bike over there myself so I wouldn't have to deal with Dad's changing schedule.

Girls are different to hang out with.

Shelly is anyways.

I never felt the pressures to impress her. With the guys, it was always who was the craziest, which was the strongest, which was the fastest, or some other feat that impressed the others in the group. But with Shelly, I could just be.

All the way through junior high, Shelly and I were inseparable. I dunno what it was, but she really liked me.

Shelly never questioned my ability like the rest. Everyone, from teachers to the rest of the students, always treated me with kid gloves. I was always looked at as someone who couldn't handle anything because of my heart murmur. While everyone else catered to me out of what they thought was their obligation, Shelly pushed me to go further. In Shelly's eyes, I was normal. Strong.

We actually dated in junior high. We were as hot n' heavy as you can get in junior high. She gave me my first kiss, first feel of a breast, first time I got laid, Christ (sorry God), she was my first love.

Unfortunately the pressures of dating a gimp weighed heavily.

It's kinda sickening relying on your girlfriend to stand up to the few students that didn't care about my defect. But Shelly was strong. She didn't seem to mind, or maybe even liked, the fact that she had to stand up for me, protect me, to the point that I felt safe.

I didn't ask her, though. In reality, I resented it.

She was beautiful. With her angelic looks and easygoing personality, it wasn't long before others noticed her.

The summer before senior high, Shelly started to get a lot of attention from the upper classmen. They were older, cooler, and had cars. I didn't stand a chance.

Shelly and I still talked but it wasn't the same. She acted as though she still cared. But how can you care for someone you just left with nothing?

Guns leave a stinging red imprint if kept against your stomach too long.

Life after Shelly wasn't bad. I mean, I was, and am, an A student, into reading, computers, and all the things a "normal" teenager does ... but I felt alone. Even though Shelly never questioned me, everyone else did. I'm sure if I gave them a chance, they could know me for who I really am. But that's more of a chance than I'm willing to take.

I spent most of my time, outside of school, in the city. I liked museums, theatre, jazz clubs, and anywhere that people didn't know me. I was alone and happy, but that must not have been good enough. One September afternoon, during a stroll through the theatre district, a narrow four-lane street filled with society's refuse, He was there again.

As I exited the Mancuso Theatre, an old stage theatre turned into an independent movie house, I felt His presence. He said nothing. It was like two

invisible hands guiding me to the left when I wanted to go right. These same hands pushed me into the alley alongside the theatre.

The alley was small, littered, and desolate. The hands guided me between scattered programs, newspapers, and overturned trash cans, to a back corner. A corner piled with trash and stray cats. The alley was dark. The air smelled of spoiled meat. And the meows and hisses of the cats filled the silence.

The hands forced me to the trash pile.

I didn't want to be there.

The hands forced me to my knees.

I didn't want to be there.

The hands forced me to dig.

I dug slowly at first, sifting aside the newspapers and debris, but the cats attacked. They didn't want me disturbing their home.

I dug faster, hurtling bags of rotting food and aluminum cans over my shoulder. I dug faster until I found what I was looking for.

He must've been about thirty. Rough lines made up a face that showed a lifetime of wear. He looked peaceful, except for the pierce marks where the cats ripped away the flesh.

I kept digging.

After all's said and done, the man was literally skin and bone. The smell of rot was just starting to set in as I looked at the man. He wore loose pants, a wife beater shirt, and had a gang brand on his left shoulder.

Fighting off the cats, I flipped the corpse onto its stomach. There, in the small of its back, I saw a misplaced bulge, a sharp contradiction with the rest of the skinny body.

Take it.

The voice was deep, loud, and filled my entire soul.

I didn't question it.

I reached down, grasped the nine-millimeter by the handle, and quickly deposited it into my pocket.

Guns make a coat sag heavily if kept in the pocket.

Days after school became strange. I would go to the city for the sole reason of scavenger hunts.

God sent me to find guns.

At first, most of the guns were found on O.D.'d corpses, passed out winos, and in the gutters of gang battlefields. There was always urgency in God's voice. Almost domineering. I listened to God, never sure why but I always listened.

Now climb the fire escape ... Take a hold of the ledge ... Pull yourself up

...

I brought you up here to show you something. Come to the edge. Now, look over there.

Where?

Behind the Quartley's sign.

I looked just past the sign, past the low rent apartment buildings, and saw a black Cadillac pull up. A fat black man exited the car and ran up to a girl crossing the alleyway. The girl didn't seem surprised and stood still to confront the man.

After what seemed like a brief argument, the man pushed the girl into the alley. The man grabbed the girl by the throat, punched her repeatedly in the stomach, then let her fall to the ground.

As the girl lay there, gasping for air, the man pulled out a gun and pressed it to her head. The girl pleaded up towards him.

In an instant, the girl grabbed the man's hand that held the gun, pulled it towards her while her other hand grabbed a broken bottle from the ground and deposited the jagged edge into the side of his neck. The man staggered backwards, blood rhythmically spraying onto his right arm, and fell while the girl ran quickly out of sight.

What did you see?

The girl. She killed him.

Yes, but what did you see?

Wha ... I don't understand.

This isn't life. It's just life as you know it, Bobby. Death is a part of life that you will face. It's just a part of life.

God and I descended to the scene of the crime. Not a bad haul. I took the glock and twenty five hundred dollars off the dead man. In the Cadillac, we found two uzis, a brown duster jacket, and a sawed-off shotgun. Overall, it was a good day (other than the fact that I had just witnessed a murder).

I fully believed that I would cringe at the sight of death. The murder scene unfolded in front of me and I didn't even flinch. I was totally apathetic.

Did God do this to me?

Did I believe that this man had it coming?

What comforts me now is to think that he must've been an angel. He died to show me the way.

Look at how the people slow down to see the fresh kill. They pause to see the dead, then quickly scurry away to their families, jobs, or wherever. They don't stop to try and help ...

Why is this important?

They're too busy, Bobby. They don't want to get involved because they're afraid that being involved will be a burden. Remember, if it's not love your feeling, it's fear.

I don't feel anything now.

You're not supposed to. Your feelings are unimportant to our goal.

What goal is that?

Love.

Love?

A loosely worn duster can adequately conceal four handguns, two uzis, and two sawed off shotguns.

The trips into the city grew less and less. My arsenal consisted of two uzis, a shotgun, three sawed off shotguns, six hand guns, and a twenty-two that my father bought me. Other than the twenty-two, I kept the majority of my guns in a locked chest at the foot of my bed. This worked well to conceal my weapons because my parents are firm believers of respecting my privacy.

I spent many days in the woods behind my house. We lived in a heavily wooded area of suburbia where, being close enough to the city, people didn't ask many questions. My parents didn't mind me firing my twenty-two but I had to sneak different handguns out every day.

I found that low caliber handguns make almost the same sound as a twenty-two. I normally stayed out about two hundred yards into the woods to fire those. When I pulled the heavy artillery out, such as the shotguns and uzis, I had to go another half mile away from the house to fire them. The wall, a cliff that would reverb the sounds of discharging weapons away from the neighborhood, was a perfect spot to practice with my alternate guns.

I'd spend hours shooting, cleaning, and familiarizing myself with the many different guns. The uzis are fun to shoot, and I'm getting quite good with them. The

forty-four has a lot of power, but my favorite has to be the nine-millimeter. I guess my first acquired gun owns a soft place in my heart. The nine is quick to fire, reload, and never misses.

I'm starting to feel like those kids that the after school specials warn me to stay away from.

You should.

Like in Davy and Goliath, isn't your voice supposed to be reassuring?

That's television, Bobby, you'll only hear what they want you to. For example, remember the news this morning?

Yeah, what about it?

What did you think when that ten-year-old killed the eight-year-old with a baseball bat?

Well, I thought it was pretty stupid.

A knife would've been better ... or, better yet, a hatchet.

Precisely. The media wants you to suppress these thoughts, keeping them at bay and dangerous.

Media's the one that says that T.V. and movies are to blame for these violent acts.

Someday, they will know that love has to start within.

Are you saying that in our new covenant, people will kill at random?

I'm saying they won't have to. People will be able to express their feelings long before they become violent. Without fear, all there will be is love.

So why do you want me to be trained to kill in preparation of this new covenant?

Because you are sinless.

These people are weak; they need you to bear their sins.

By familiarizing yourself with your weapons, you lose the risk of jamming your fingers in a magazine or speed loader when reloading your weapon.

By this time, God and I went to the city mostly to buy rounds. We had to shop at many different stores not to raise suspicion; but, in the city, as long as you have money, none of the shop owners even raise an eyebrow.

For weeks, God and I went without any problems. That is, until the day we ran into Terry Moore on Eighth Street. Terry is a quiet, straight A, jock who thinks that he is friends with everyone. Terry and I never really talked but this time was different.

Bobby? Bobby Dravin! Is that you!?!

Hey Terry.

Cool jacket, man. Why doncha wear that to school?

Don't talk to him Bobby.

I dunno.

Hey man, whatcha doin? Didn't know you hung in the city.

Say nothin Bobby, he won't understand.

Just hangin' I guess.

Jus' hangin'? That's cool. Bunch of us ...

Bobby, leave.

LEAVE NOW!

Hey man, gotta jet.

Sure, where ya headin'?

LEAVE NOW!

Nowhere, I just ...

O.K. I'll ...

NOW!

Later Terry ...

Bobby, what's wrong? You look ...

Just leave me the fuck alone, Terry!

I left Terry standing there. He wanted too much ... he couldn't just leave me alone. Now he'll tell everyone. Now he'll tell Shelly. If only he could've left. But the damage was done.

With enough practice, you can learn to reload guns in less than two seconds.

The day after the encounter with Terry, people kept their usual distance from me in school. I was alone in the crowded hallways between classes. Almost made it through the whole day without talking to anyone. Everyone left me alone except for Shelly.

Bobby, Wait up.

Hey Shelly.

What's goin' on?

Nothin'.

Bobby, I'm not gonna beat around the bush. I just saw Terry Moore and ...

And what?

Bobby, what's the matter?

You've changed. You seem depressed.

About what?

I dunno. But, you don't talk to anyone anymore. You don't even try. Bobby ...

Shelly... I...

Bobby, DON'T!

It's O.K. Bobby. It's me.

She won't understand, Bobby. She can't.

What's the matter?

Nothing.

Shit. There's the bell. I'll see you at lunch?

No I gotta ...

Well, then I'll call you later. We need to talk.

O.K.

I'll call you.

The halls cleared. And I was alone. Again.

You can't talk to her Bobby.

You can't talk to anyone.

Someone just to ...

No one!

You're God. Couldn't I talk to a priest, rabbi, or someone?

No one!

Don't you see. I choose to talk to you. I won't talk to them. You're different.

In this world, differences are feared.

But in churches, they worship you.

Who? The Pope Fuckers?

Always filled with grief. Pain. Repentance. Guilt.

That's what I want?

I want a flock of sheep that can't do anything on their own?

So where should you go? The synagogue?

A bunch of self-serving kikes that believe that success is godliness.

Now where? The Rag Heads? Or, how about those bald bastards in the airports. With their pencils and flowers. I want to shove their gifts right up their pathetic asses.

They're all weak. They are not there to serve me. They are there to fill a void in themselves.

They do not believe. They fear.

What am I to do God?

The others are happy ... all I feel is pity.

You trust me. Have faith in me.

Bobby, their life is theirs. Yours holds a far greater purpose.

But they're happy.

You call this happiness? Look around you. Look in the corners ... security cameras. Happiness is true love. You call these security cameras love?

It's fear. All that fear leads to is hate. If this were love, there would be no precautions, there would be no security. There would be no need for churches, synagogues, or any other building, supposedly spreading my word.

How can you love when you're taught to hate?

You're teaching me to hate, aren't you?

You are the rock that I will build my new covenant on.

I believed him.

Shelly called.

Shelly called at least ten times last week. But I never answered. I couldn't tell her what was going on ... she wouldn't understand. I just couldn't talk to her.

Only God understands.

Squeezing the trigger gives you more accuracy than pulling it.

It's about that time, Bobby.

People are starting to notice the difference. Blind to the Divinity.

I know.

You know what you have to do.

Somehow, I always knew.

Thursday.

We made plans.

I'd stay home from school. At 11:45 am, during the senior's lunch I'd enter the main doors, just outside the cafeteria. It was almost too easy.

No matter how much a weapon is tested, there's always a chance of a misfire, jam, or pop with no kick.

You know what you gotta do, Bobby.

There's no turning back now.

We pull into the school parking lot.

I am wearing my black leather pants, two of my dad's shoulder holsters, his utility belt, duster, and a white T-shirt with a picture of Jesus's hand, nailed to a wooden cross, inscribed with the words 'Jesus Heals.'

We park.

I circle to the far side of the Caprice. Open the passenger door, and quickly suit up. Nine-millimeters holstered under each arm, forty-four in the small of my back, two glocks in the front, uzis holstered on both hips, and a sawed off shotgun, with a belt attached to the remainder of the stock, strapped under my left shoulder. I quickly shut the door and walk towards the school, clutching the front of my jacket shut.

Now, move quickly across the lot.

Don't waiver, you don't want to draw attention.

I pull open the door.

Walk through.

Cross the foyer to the crowded cafeteria.

I enter. Look around.

No one looks up. No one notices. No one realizes ...

SHOOT!

... that they are about to be slaughtered.

I let go of the front of my jacket.

Cross my arms to either side, gripping the handles of the two uzis.

I straighten my arms out.

SHOOT!

I squeeze the left trigger first while drawing the weapon across my body. I repeat with the right hand. Then alternate.

Students try to dive under tables. But most fall. Blood sprays. Blood squirts. And red puddles fill the floor.

I only pause to reload from my utility belt.

The cafeteria is motionless.

Screams fill the air.

Let's move.

I walk down the hall, spraying bullets into the backs of victims as they run. I cross my arms, riddling hallways and classrooms with bullets as I pass.

Bobby? What the fuck's wrong with you?

Coach Johnson. You said I had to stand up for myself against the others. *Only way they'll respect you*, you instructed.

SHOOT!

Coach Johnson falls to the ground, clutching his chest.

Greg Davis, you stole my lunch money in the second grade.

SHOOT!

Oops, your arm came off.

Bruce Kelly, Shelly's first boyfriend after me.

SHOOT!

Now reduced to a tattered corpse.

Bobby, why? WHY?

Mrs. Cartwright. I always liked you. One shot in the head for you.

I drop the uzis to the ground. Spent.

I pull out the shotgun from my left, fire off its contents into more fleeing victims, and drop it to the ground. I replace it with the glocks from my waist.

The halls are clearing, God.

Go to the right. There's more down there.

I throw down the spent glocks and reach for the nine-millimeter under my left arm. My first acquired gun.

Bobby!

I turn towards the direction of the voice.

It's Shelly. Tears drenching her face. One hand holding her throat, the other, stretched towards me.

Bobby! What are you doin'?

Shelly?

Bobby ...

Do it now!!!

God I can't. It's Shelly ...

Shut the fuck up and kill the bitch, you spineless shit.

Bobby ...

Too beautiful. I can't.

DON'T ... please ...

How can you be a horseman of the apocalypse if you can't even kill a little preppy slut? You gutless little shit. I shoulda let you rot when you were born.

God ... can't. Please God, don't make me ...

SHOOT!

I squeeze the trigger. The bullet hits Shelly above her right eye and exits her neck, bouncing off a nearby locker.

Shelly dies before she hits the floor.

The hallway is clear.

I stand alone, over the remains of Shelly.

Looking down at Shelly, I begin to see her soul leave. Her vibrant eyes dull into a blank stare. A stare of disbelief. A puddle of blood starts to spread around her head. I watch the puddle expand until it reaches my boot.

What the fuck, God, why couldn't I have her.

Unimportant. Keep moving, the rest of these fucks are getting away.

Fuck you God.

Fuck me? You'd be nowhere without me.

I'd have Shelly.

Good for you. Can we move now?

It's you and me God. Right here. Right now.

What are you gonna do, kill me? I'm God!

I can.

I point the nine upwards, under my chin.

What are you going to prove with that? C'mon Bobby ... they're getting away!

No God. You coulda let me have her. I could've had Shelly. Now YOU have to die.

Think of what you're doing, Bobby. You can't kill me. I'm eternal.

You're wrong.

Bobby ...

By holding the front sight of the gun behind your teeth, the kick will send the bullet through the base of the brain.

Dragons

“Your decision to follow the path of the warrior must be made with the realization that you will find many enemies along the way. The greatest enemy you will find inside. Throughout your journey the dragon (enemy inside) will manifest itself in other people and situations. It is critical for you to see through the outward manifestation of the dragon and realize that the true battle is the one going on inside.”

Donald Green

The Buddha and the

Bandaid

* * Ki * *

The sweat poured down my back as I sat in the zazen posture. My shins were pressed against the cold wood floor as I struggled to keep my torso upright.

Exhaustion filled my muscles giving every thought, movement, or twitch a chaotic response in my mind.

“Let go. . .” the omnipresent voice of Dr. Green, filling the void behind my closed eyes, instructed. “Picture your head as a smoke stack. Let all the pain and tiredness flow out.”

I clenched my eyes shut and tried to release all the negative energy of the preceding class. But I could not find balance.

Dr. Green, sensing the unfocused energy, continued, "You are going to feel pressure. . . don't open your eyes. Just feel it."

As I sat, with my eyes closed, I could feel flesh set on the lower, center part of my forehead, right above my eyes. The pressure began to increase, almost to the point where I had to struggle to keep my head in place, as the bone began to spread the flesh into my forehead.

"I am leaving a thumbprint on your head. See the print as I press it in and focus on it."

I focused. I saw a reddish pink imprint, like a neon thumbprint, on the inside of my head. I focused on the curves, the outline, and the depth of this imprint. As I focused, the tension, excitement, exhaustion, hopes, regrets, loves, hates, and everything that hindered my body, mind, and soul faded. I saw this imprint and felt more than nothing. I felt relaxed.

* * Anticipation * *

I try to stare through them.

Emotionless. . . It's all a lie.

Each one of them has their weaknesses, but it's their strengths that worry me.

I mentally survey each of them.

Pat is an all around fighter. His punches and kicks are a little muddled, like striking through water, but can be painful.

Dave is huge, yet he's too solid and doesn't move well. If I get too close he's quick enough to punch the shit out of me and strong enough to hurt me.

Don will sucker punch me. He's very light and can be out-muscled. Yet, he's quick to get in and out while possessing deadly kicks.

Bob is older and seems slower. But with his meticulous demeanor, he can pick you apart with his blocks and counters.

B.B. is the total package. Light on his feet, quick, focused punches and kicks, and has no giveaways I have found.

As we approach each other, I desperately try to clear my mind.

To be still.

* * Anxiety * *

I make a beeline towards Dave for no apparent reason other than he is the closest. I throw a sidekick towards his mid-section. His block crushes my ankle between his elbow and thigh. That hurts.

In the corner of my eye, I see B.B. approaching to my right. In a split second, I feel two punches land on either side of my head. I need to get my guard up.

Don advances to my front, launching a front kick towards my stomach. I get a piece of it with my forearm while deflecting the remainder of the blow off to my side. I quickly counter with an unfocused back fist that does little more than piss him off.

Pat approaches to my right, but he's not covering his stomach. I fire a sidekick into his breadbasket and turn to my left to throw a right hook at B.B.'s head. The sidekick finds its mark. Unfortunately, the hook glances off of B.B.'s head.

They're too close.

I need to find room.

* * Fear * *

I try to back up to keep all of them in sight, but I can't find Bob.

I see a white flash. I open my eyes to see the world in an outline form with a red tint. Almost like watching a T.V. that isn't adjusted. I now know where Bob is—he hit me. With what, I don't know, but he hit me solid. I have a ringing in my ears to prove it.

They approach me in twos. I desperately try to counter and hit, but with no results. It seems like a stalemate because none of us are actually landing solid punches. I'm steadily retreating.

I'm backed into a corner.

* * Fluidity * *

I raise my elbows and spin into Dave. The others spread, leaving me a hole to dash through. I run to an open space and turn to find Don not too far behind. I launch a sidekick that finds its target on Don's stomach. His feet fly forward and he's deposited on his ass with a loud thud. That was pretty cool.

Pat and Dave are the next to come into my range. I throw a high hook kick, which stalls Dave's advance, and give Pat a shovel punch to the ribs. I straighten back up, sending Dave a right cross, which he blocks, partially separating my shoulder.

I quickly retreat, to make sure my shoulder's in place, and take a left-handed stance to face the onslaught. Bob advances with a left jab which I quickly block and counter with a back fist.

I spin to greet Dave with a right heel while grabbing Don and sweeping him to the ground. Back-pedaling to an open space, I fend off Pat and B.B. with a couple of lefts.

* * Exhaustion * *

My shoulder starts to ache, my head is throbbing, my ribs feel bruised, my hands are heavy, my kicks won't rise higher than my waist, and the air feels like tiny cold knives in my lungs.

B.B. advances first, landing a right on my nose. My mouth fills with a metallic taste as my eyes blur with tears. Dave and Pat grab me from the sides as Don lands a hard thrust kick into my stomach. I hit the floor with a loud slap.

I roll to a clear spot finding that my legs are no longer able to support my weight. I flail at the oncoming fighters but am hit from all sides. I try to block, but hit the floor again.

For a third time, I make my way to my feet and land a punch on Pat's jaw. In return, he sweeps me, depositing me back onto the wooden floor.

I kick at the five from the floor, trying to make my way to my feet. I want to stand, but it's hard to do when all I hear is my dragon telling me that I'm tired.

* * Dejection * *

It's over.

Pat and Dave pull me to my feet. They, along with the other three, congratulate me. Pat puts his arm around my neck and leads me to the center of the floor. The others come up and pat me on my uninjured shoulder. We all separate, bow to each other, then bow to our Sensei.

On our way back to the mirrored wall of the room, the members of the class that didn't participate congratulate me.

I don't want to hear it.

I want to do more and not be tired.

I want to go another round.

As I take my seat, I look at my in the mirror. A few new red spots inhabit my face, trying to decide whether or not to become bruises, but otherwise intact. The only remarkable features are my eyes. Instead of looking exhausted or peaceful, they appear wild, full of anger and fear. That's the funny thing about dragons. Even when the fight is over, you're constantly battling the one in your head.

* * Yin & Yang * *

I sit in zazen, trying to let the negative energy flow from me. I shut my eyes and see Dr. Green's thumbprint, staring at me from the inside of my skull. I quickly realize that I had lost the fight before I started it. I realize that as soon as I made a mental inventory of the situation I had lost.

I should have been ready and attentive. I should have let the match be a series of reactions instead of trying to control it.

As soon as I realize this, I let it go.

I let go of my anger and exhaustion.

I let go of my fear.

One Night in Bangkok

I grunt as I press my shoulder into the heavy oak door with a frosted window. I make my way through the shallow hallway into the upper bar area. “Nostalgia,” a renovated coffee shop (that was all the craze in the early nineties), is relatively quiet.

From the top of the stairs, I scan the bar’s dark interior. The lower level, only lit by hanging lights, adorned with mauve lampshades, is filled with the pseudo-beatnik (but wearing hundred dollar, faded jeans and eighty dollar, untucked dress shirts) crowd.

I walk past the stairs into the smoky upper level. The openness of the room accentuates the fact that there are only a couple of scattered tables, a short wooden bar, and a raised platform, where artsy grad students hover around on Tuesday nights to recite bad poetry. The scene, at first glance, is a group of young kids trying to keep alive hippie tendencies. But, in reality, the bar is full of a bunch of lost college student, souls living off their parents’ allowances. I walk across the stained green carpet to the bar.

“Hey! Burnie!” a voice yells from behind me.

I turn to see Jason making his way up the stairs. Jason looks like a football player, but with a “respectable” haircut. That, along with the fact that he is wearing a polo shirt and khaki pants, makes him stand out from the stone-washed, tie-dyed clad crowd.

“Hey Burnie, what took you so long?” he yells over UB40’s ‘Red Red Wine,’ blaring from the jukebox.

“Stuff to do,” I reply.

“She’s down there,” Jason states, motioning over the railing.

“Who?”

“You and your fucking games. . . you know damn well,” he replies with a laugh. “Whadaya drinkin’?”

“Blue,” I dryly answer.

He turns to the bar to order the drinks giving me a chance to survey the lower level.

I nonchalantly look over the rail and quickly spot her. Long, raven hair draped over her shoulders, wearing an azure sweater that enhances the color of her eyes. She’s breathtaking.

“Here ya go, man,” Jason offers, while nudging the beer into my shoulder.

“So you see her?”

“Yeah.”

“Whatcha waitin’ for?”

“In time . . .,” I reply, sipping the spongy head off my drink.

“In time, my ass. You’ve been fuckin’ meeting her here for two weeks, what’s the problem?”

“No problem . . . I’m just not sure . . .” I carefully choose my words.

“Not sure of what? She obviously likes you,”

“I’m not sure if she’s right.”

“You mean in the head,” Jason jokes, finding that I don’t think it’s funny.

“No, she’s fine in the head. It’s just that. . . I don’t know if she’s what I want.”

“Well, you’re never gonna find your perfect match. Doesn’t exist,” Jason states, stepping onto his soap box. “Might as well do with what you got!”

“You’re doing real well in that department,” I preach back. “Who’s it gonna be tonight?”

“At least I’m gettin’ some,” he replies, starting to get defensive.

“Well, you can keep what you’re gettin’ to yourself,” I joke, trying to relax him.

“Seriously, how will you know?”

“I’ll know,” I confidently reply as I feel a tug at my shoulder.

“Wasn’t sure if you’d show,” she exclaims.

I quickly notice her blue eyes fixed on mine as I turn to see her smiling face. She looked beautiful from afar, but up close she is magnificent.

“Of course I’d come, have a streak going,” I reply as she leans in to hug me.

“So confident.”

“You would be too . . . but . . . you haven’t beaten me.”

“YET,” she forcefully adds. “Well, shall we?”

I nod in agreement and follow her down the stairs.

The lower level is almost decorated the same as the upper, but darker. The bar is a bit larger than the upstairs and there are dirty, worn sofas crammed in the dark

corners. Other than that, the same JC Penney art hangs on the walls and tables that are scattered randomly. Another difference (and our destination) is a table along the far wall, with a chessboard carved into it.

“Quite the gentleman,” she exclaims as I pull her seat out for her.

“Not really, I WAS going to sit there!”

“Gonna take it easy on me tonight?” she playfully asks while setting up her pieces.

“Y’know, odds are in your favor that sooner or later . . . you’re gonna win,” I respond. She laughs.

I let her go first. It’s easier to play the defensive than start on offense.

“So’d class get out late?” she states more than asks, contemplating her first move.

“No. . . just had stuff to do.”

She carefully moves her king pawn ahead two spaces. She’s trying to set me up for a quick defeat. But I know her strategy. I already know her too well.

“So. . . what stuff did you HAVE to do?”

She calls my bluff.

“Papers and stuff. . . y’know.”

“Stuff. . . yeah. . . I got that.”

She didn’t fall for it.

“Move already,” I prod, trying change the subject.

She leans back and calculates each move. She appears calm at first glance, but the kicking of her crossed leg and tapping of her left hand suggests otherwise.

“So, what’d you do today?”

“I went to class!” I sarcastically answer.

“I meant, other than that.”

“Well. . . I finished a paper and went to the gym. What about you?”

“Nothing much. Hung out with Brett for a while.”

“How’s she?”

“Same. She’s right over there. Could call her over if you like?”

“No. that’s O.K., what’d you two do?”

“Watched T.V. mostly, she’s having problems with Mike.”

“Oh!”

“Something’s always wrong with those two,” she gossips.

Her chess moves suggest a defensive, safe strategy. So I try to up the ante. I advance my queen knight ahead and take her bishop.

“So. . . what are ya doin’ Saturday night?”

“Mike’s frat is having a rush and Brett asked me to go,” she states as she takes my knight with her queen. She’s so cold.

“It’s probably going to be pretty fun. What about you?”

“Nothing much,” I state, as I castle my king and rook.

“You could come, that is, if you don’t mind being rushed?” she asks, moving her pawn ahead, leaving her queen defenseless.

“Sure, I’ll go,” I state, taking her queen.

“Shit. . . I didn’t even see that! Let me have it back!”

“Once you take your hand off. . . your rule.”

“You’re the one who hasn’t lost. . . how about a little empathy?”

“Have to keep the streak alive!”

She leans back and stares at the chessboard. I move my chair around to the side and gently caress the back of her neck.

“Does this distract you?” I smugly ask.

She laughs as she takes my knight with her pawn. I didn’t see that. Maybe touching her is too much of a distraction for me.

“Hey Burnie,” Jason yells over the jukebox’s playing of Murray Head’s “One Night in Bangkok,” “headin’ to Flaharty’s. . . goin’?”

I look to find her staring back, waiting for my reply.

“Naw,” I yell back to Jason, “I have her on the ropes.”

“Well, when she gets off the ropes, you know where we’ll be.”

We watch Jason disappear back into the crowd.

“You could go and keep your dignity,” she states as we turn to view the board.

“You’d like that. . . then you wouldn’t lose, it would at least be a draw!”

“I think you should consider that possibility more than I.”

I scan the board and realize that she is right. She has a considerable advantage over me. My control is quickly receding.

“Let’s just see who’s in trouble here,” I nervously state, taking her knight with my queen.

“Why’d you do that?” she asks, taking my queen with her bishop. “Check-mate!”

I stared at the board in disbelief, desperately trying to find an escape.

“You must’ve wanted to catch up with your friends,” she playfully adds.

“This isn’t over yet,” I state, still scanning the board.

“Face it. . . you lost. I BEAT YOU!”

Unfortunately there are no escapes available. My control is gone. The funny thing is, I don’t seem to mind.

“Another game?” I suggest.

Spirit and the Flesh

“The dual substance of Christ—the yearning, so human, so superhuman, of man to attain God or, more exactly, to return to God and identify himself with him—has always been a deep inscrutable mystery to me. . . My principal anguish and the source of all my joys and sorrows from my youth onward has been the incessant, merciless battle between the spirit and the flesh. . . and my soul is the arena where these two armies have clashed and met.”

Nikos Kazantzakis

*The Last Temptation
of Christ*

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If you're going to fight at a wedding, you shouldn't fight the groom.

A fellow guest can be overlooked; someone in the wedding party may cause some bitter feelings; but the groom, you're just asking to be thumped.

I quickly realized this as the chain link fence formed an imprint on my face.

I felt the hands pushing my shoulders into the concrete and fence.

I saw flashes of light as each fist pounded into the back of my head.

I heard, “mother fucker;” “ass hole;” and “piece of shit.”

There were at least twenty wedding guests. But the groom was nowhere in sight. He had started the fight. And I was unable finish it.

* * *

“Most guys are at fight club because of something they’re too scared to fight. After a few fights, you’re afraid a lot less.”

Chuck Palahniuk

Fight Club

* * *

Other than being a little winded, I was feeling pretty good. I had fought Pat and Dave before, and today there were no surprises.

Pat and Dave were both big, each weighed in at over two hundred pounds. But their fighting skills were broken down (like with anything else—you have to break down the bad before you can replace it with the good). As in the past, I was able to hold my own in, and sometimes dominate, the matches by mere street fighting.

Now, standing in the gloomily lit studio, I awaited my turn to spar Dr. Green. As with Pat and Dave, I had sparred Dr. Green a couple of times before, but had

always felt he was holding something back. I always knew that he was a superior fighter but I didn't know his true skill until I sparred him on this day.

Right from the start, I figured that I would street fight him as I had done with Pat and Dave. I lunged at his head. He spun effortlessly, deposited a back-fist to my ear, and dropped me to the floor.

Lying on the cold wood, I was quickly aware of a piercing ringing in my right ear, along with a warm trickle down the back of my jaw. Dr. Green crouched over me with an outstretched hand. "Go take your seat," he exclaimed, as he pulled me to my feet.

I quickly realized how bad I was.

* * *

"I was an outsider who seemed more interested in attacking what was being taught than learning from it."

Robert M. Pirsig

Zen and the Art of

Motorcycle Maintenance

* * *

The gym was dark, except for the fluorescent lights above the ring. This was a modern building, but the homemade brackets which held the bags and the solid metal dip bar gave indication of a rough past.

The ring was only about 12'x12'. It wasn't flashy or elaborate. The only things remarkable about it were the bloodstains on the canvas. Resting in the corner, I awaited my first sparring match.

As the electronic bell rang, I looked across the ring to see blue eyes staring at me from within the contrasting red color of my opponent's headgear. He wanted me to make the first move.

At that point, I remember thinking to myself: "Maybe I could start with a jab . . . Maybe a quick one, two . . . Or, maybe I could work to the inside and fade out with a hook to set up a roundhouse . . ." I now realize that I had already lost. Without throwing a punch, I had analyzed my way into looking totally helpless in the ring.

My opponent was able to set me up wherever he wanted. I threw a couple of combinations but they were all ineffective. I had lost control and let my anger--mainly towards myself for looking so bad--take over.

My ego had no room for learning.

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"Lightning strikes the earth about eight million times each day and kills a hundred and fifty Americans every year. I don't know how many die from exposure

and hypothermia, but it must be at least a comparable number. As for bears eating people who sleep inside steel trucks, I haven't been able to find that figure. It made no sense to fear a bear coming out of hibernation in such weather to attack a truck. Yet I lay a long time, waiting for the beast, shaggy and immense, to claw through the metal, its hot breath on my head, to devour me like a gumdrop and roll the van over the edge."

William Least Heat-Moon

Blue Highways

* * *

"I could take anyone here," Chris exclaimed, tearing off his shirt.

Chris, at first glance, looked like a big kid. He was well defined, with little fat on him. In reality, Chris was about five feet, six inches tall. He may have looked big, but he was no stronger than any of the taller patrons at this party.

"Jeff's upstairs . . . so it's MY party," Chris yelled over the radio while the rest of us carried on with our conversation. No one really cared, he was always spouting off about something.

"I gotta piss," I announced to Keith and Andy, cut from the conversation, and made my way to the back door.

I walked outside, across the soggy, early spring grass to the fence and went about my business. Upon my return, Chris, who was still shirtless, greeted me at the door.

“Party’s over. Everyone needs to leave,” he announced to the crowd.

I tried to squeeze past him to get Keith and Andy, who drove to the party with me.

“And Donny Burns is the first to go,” Chris added to his request, barring my way to the living room with his arm:

“O.K. Chris, Let me get my friends,” I replied as I pushed past him towards the front room.

“I said you’re the first to go,” Chris retorted, shoving me in the back.

I turned to face him but kept my distance (I remembered that he was a wrestler in high school). “I said I was outta here. Let me get Keith and Andy,” I answered.

I was becoming annoyed but remained calm.

“I said you’re leaving now, Chris yelled, pushing me backwards onto the stairs leading to the second floor.

After a brief fisticuff, Chris ended up pressed against the wall with my hand wrapped around his throat. “Let me get Keith,” I said slowly and distinctly in the direction of Chris’s reddening face.

By this time, a crowd had gathered to watch the spectacle of two drunks about to fight. Chris started to gasp for air when I heard, “What the fuck you think you’re doin’ Donny?” Followed by a punch across my cheek.

I turned to see Jamie, a wannabe hockey goon, at my side. “What the fuck you gonna do, Jamie?” I replied with a smile. Jamie quickly realized that his punch didn’t hurt me. I could tell by the look on his face that he was scared. Jamie tried to throw another punch but, with my free hand, I pushed him back into the kitchen.

“Let him go,” Andy exclaimed, grabbing my shoulder.

“Fuck you,” I replied, “he started it.”

Andy continued, “C’mon guys . . . you’re both my friends. Don’t wanna choose sides.”

I looked around. The guests must’ve sensed the action was over and began to disperse. Jamie, who was now at the other side of the kitchen, peered at me like a scolded puppy.

“I should kick your ass,” I yelled at Chris, who was past wanting to fight. Now, he frantically tried to pry my fingers away.

“Let him go,” Andy repeated forcefully.

“You done?” I asked Chris, trying to decide whether or not to trust him. He sheepishly nodded his head as I loosened my grip. “Let’s get outta here,” I stated to my friends as Chris sulked off to the front room. The others nodded in compliance as we walked out the door.

I was pumped up with pride over the fact that I could have beaten the both of them. But, in reality, it didn't really matter.

* * *

Robert M. Pirsig's book, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, is a story of a cross-country motorcycle trip that Pirsig took with his son, Chris. Although the story is based on the trip, Pirsig brilliantly blends past experiences and philosophy with the events currently taking place to tell an implicit story of how he became enlightened.

To begin with, long before the actual trip, Pirsig was a college professor. While teaching, he became obsessed with the concept of quality. Pirsig realizes that concepts, like quality, are vague so, with a scientific point of view, he tries to prove his system of truths. While trying to prove his views, he attacks the socially acceptable system that modern thinking is based on. He attacks this system with such vigilance that the society he lives in believes him to be insane. As a "cure," Pirsig receives shock therapy, destroying his scientific thought process, which enables him to re-enter society.

From the beginning of his trip, Pirsig is haunted by the ghost of his former self whom he calls Phaderus. Pirsig is content to see his old friends, who knew him as Phaderus, and believe that he is "cured." But nightmares of being separated from his family and subtle hints of his former talents (such as his scientific method for

troubleshooting motorcycle malfunctions), make him believe that he may relapse into the socially unacceptable Phaderus.

On the surface, Pirsig believes, along with his friends, that Phaderus is bad. On the contrary, while discussing his old self, Pirsig seems to miss Phaderus.

The trip, set up as a metaphor of being chased by his old self, is long and grueling. As it nears its end, Pirsig feels Phaderus overtaking him. At first, this saddens Pirsig because he feels that his only recourse is to check back into the hospital. But, when Phaderus finally “catches up” to him, his thoughts on the subject change. Pirsig states to his son, “It’s going to get better now. You can sort of tell these things.”

Throughout the book, Pirsig was living a lie. He was not comfortable with himself because he was living the way society wanted him to live, not by how he wanted to live. Living as Phaderus, he crusaded for his own truth no matter how it affected his social standing, health, or mind-set. Living as the father, taking a trip with his son, he was afraid of his old, calculating self because he was told it was wrong.

By the end of his journey, Pirsig realizes that running from Phaderus was futile. It would bring him the understanding of others who knew his old self, making him feel that he was beating insanity, but he wasn’t being true to himself. Like it or not, Pirsig is Phaderus. And accepting this is the only way he will ever be happy.

Pirsig does realize the places where Phaderus went wrong, but he also sees the places where Phaderus was right. Pirsig gains a better understanding of himself by

merging Phaderus and Robert Pirsig into one person. By understanding himself, Pirsig finds enlightenment.

* * *

The musty smell of the hockey helmet drowned out the aroma of the freshly built basement. I was careful to keep my hands away from my face because the stench of dried sweat permeated every fiber of the hockey gloves that I was wearing.

A lone overhead fluorescent light bulb was the only light source on the storage side of the basement. And we stood in a clearing of well-worn clothes and once-loved toys.

Terry, wearing the same protective apparel as I, quickly advanced. After a few exchanges, Terry threw a punch that damn near took my head off. As I hit the ground, Keith, Chris, and Jeff let out loud cheers of approval.

“You still wanna go?” Chris asked, helping me to my feet.

“My ears are ringing.”

“We’re up Keith,” Chris responded, helping me take off my gear.

For hours, I sat back and watched the fights. Keith took on Terry and Chris in two different fights. And Chris and Terry had a locker room fight that is still talked about today. By the end of the night, the ringing in my ears was starting to cease.

“Burns, you gonna go again?” Keith exhaustedly asked.

“Why, you wanna go?”

“No, go with Chris.”

“Hey, Jeff hasn’t gone yet!” Chris exclaimed.

Jeff sank back into the corner.

“You gonna go?” Terry asked Jeff, handing his equipment over.

“I don’t know. . . I . . .”

“C’mon, stop being a wuss,” Keith bluntly stated.

After further pleading, Jeff agreed to go a round with me. As we suited up, I sized Jeff up. Jeff was never really sure of himself so I figured I would take an offensive strategy.

As soon as the fight started, I began a ferocious attack. All Jeff could do is cover up. Most of the shots were muddled, and probably none of them hurt much, but I was in a sort of trance. The only thing that I thought about was to hit Jeff in the head.

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In his novel, *Fight Club*, Chuck Palahniuk describes a world not much different from ours, where celebrities are treated like gods, gap jean commercials stress conformity, and people give themselves up to ill-fated jobs waiting for the only certain thing in life: death.

In the world of fast food, grocery stores, shopping malls, and technology, human beings forget that they are animals. Humans still derive pleasure from

“primitive” things even though the make-believe world of television tells them that they are evolved.

Through Tyler Durden, Palahniuk creates a society where acting on these primitive impulses is accepted (better yet, encouraged). Through Tyler, fight club is established.

Fight club is a place where men flock to be their own gods. Alone, shirtless, shoeless, and without any protective gear, each man stares directly at an opponent. There is no outside help and no retreat. Here, in the center of a darkened basement, each man relies on his own instincts, making victory or loss only an experience.

Along with attending the fight club, Tyler gives each participant a homework assignment. These assignments, which usually involve random acts of mayhem (such as starting a fight with the sole purpose of losing it or setting off all the air bags of cars in a parking garage), are to show the fight club members that they have the power to control history. Each of these assignments is designed to make the participants noticed. No matter how small they felt at their jobs, by standing up to the societal system, they are important.

Tyler created an “art of war” (a term associated with Chinese warrior/philosopher Sun Tzu who believed that through conflict, one can reach enlightenment) showing his followers that true enlightenment comes from knowing yourself. Furthermore, the only way to know yourself is to push yourself to the limits of your abilities.

Fear brought the men to fight club. A fear, which tells the combatants, that they will never become movie stars or rich. Tyler taught them that they are not what the world portrays them to be. They are not their jobs or how much money they have in the bank. Instead, they are living, breathing souls that have the ability to control their own destiny. With each fight, the fear dissipates, with contentedness filling the void, bringing each man one step closer to enlightenment. The contentment makes each man able to love himself and accept who he is, not what society tells him to be.

* * *

“You’re the big tough guy now. . . show me some moves,” Reggie insisted.

“What? You wanna know how to throw a punch?” I replied.

“No. Show me something I can use. You know. . . like in bars!”

My first thought was that he’s a twenty-nine-year-old father worrying about bar fights.

I stood just beyond the doorway of the lamp-lit cabin. Anxious to get into the center, where the wood stove heat was the greatest, I had to go through Reggie in his crack-enhanced personality. Usually, especially when sober, Reggie was easy to get along with. While high, he was pushy, distrusting, and quick to fly off the handle. Now, Reggie obstructed my entrance into the cabin.

“Really can’t show you anything useful,” I stated, annoyed with the conversation. “Could show stuff. . . but you really couldn’t use it.”

“Show me what to do if someone comes at me. . . like this,” he replied as he advanced towards me.

“Step out of the way,” I retorted, side-stepping by him towards the middle of the cabin.

“C’mon. . . what happens if I throw a punch.”

The conversation was exhausting. No matter how much I tried to change the subject, Reggie was relentless. Reluctantly, I gave in.

“Throw one,” I instructed.

He repeated his advance, followed with a punch. I performed a basic sweep but caught his skeletal body before he hit the ground.

“That would work,” he exclaimed, “show me again!”

We slowly repeated the process, pausing at each step for me to explain each move.

“Well. . . what happens if I have a knife?” Reggie inquired.

“I’d run.”

“No, really. . . what would you do?” he insisted.

I was at a loss for words. “Look, I really can’t show you in a few minutes what I really don’t have a grasp on myself,” I replied, turning away and, again, trying to drop the subject.

“I’ll tell you what I’d do. . .” he exclaimed, with a warm smile spreading across his face. “Before the fight, slip off into the bathroom. . . smoke crack, take

coke, whatever you got! You'll feel like you have the strength of twenty guys. Heart starts racing. . . the adrenaline really takes over!"

With that, I sat on the wooden bench of the picnic/kitchen table. I quickly realized how different Reggie was from what I remembered. We were far from being the equals, or better yet friends, as we were a few years prior. Instead, Reggie had become everything that I feared would become of me.

* * *

William Least Heat-Moon's *Blue Highways* is basically a travelogue, kept by the author, of events that happened while traveling the United States' back roads. Most of Heat-Moon's accounts are as a spectator, watching life as it happens. But, during different events and scenarios, he becomes a bit philosophical.

His journey was a spiritual one. While at a low point in his existence, Heat-Moon, feeling he had no real direction, looked to the road to find himself. Although, in the beginning, he thought he knew all the answers, Heat-Moon found that life's obstacles could change the thinking of the most stubborn man. One such change occurred during his crossing the Colorado Mountain range.

During his trip north, through the western states, Heat-Moon believed his mid-May drive would be an easy one. In his van, he battled the weather while traveling up the mountainside. He taunted nature, not noticing that the conditions were getting worse, and soon found out that the weather made the roads impassible. Not able to

advance or turn back, he decided to spend the night on the frozen mountainside until the weather broke with the morning sun.

Heat-Moon, during this night, diligently braved out the weather but also believed that he was confronted with death. He wasn't afraid of lightning or the storm because they were acts of nature. Instead, Heat-Moon was afraid of being eaten by a bear.

Heat-Moon's use of the bear is a brilliant metaphor. The bear, as shown in many forms of Taoism, symbolizes one's ego. During this trek, Heat-Moon could have taken an easier passage to the north. But the mountain was an ornament. He decided to climb it in his van just to say he could. Only when Heat-Moon is stuck, nearly freezing to death, on the side of the mountain does he realize that ego kills more humans than nature.

Although Heat-Moon looked outward on the lost highways of the United States to find himself, in the end he found that true self-knowledge occurs when you look within. No matter what obstacle you find, or great threat you may face, knowing yourself and being true to yourself can overcome many of life's hardships.

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It had been a week since the headaches began. They mostly occurred during the night, waking me with a piercing pain, but during the day they left me in a constant state of nausea.

Lying face down on the mat, waiting for my head to pound, I quickly realized I shouldn't have been sparring.

"Get up!" tunneled its way to my ears from the corner.

I had every intention of getting up, but my body wouldn't respond. I pushed myself up to a knee but fell back to the mat on my face.

I felt disconnected from my body, seeing it from above. What I tried to do and what happened were two totally different things.

I finally pushed myself up on all fours, and rocked back onto my feet, as Larry grabbed me from the outside of the ring and pushed me into the corner.

"You all right?" Larry repeated, trying to see if I still knew where I was.

"Yeah. . ." I answered, swaying on my feet.

"You wanna get out?"

"I'm fine," I answered, trying to focus my eyes.

I couldn't quit. I wanted a spot in the upcoming bout Mountain Storm was having a couple of months down the road at the ESL Arena. I willed myself to continue sparring with Dan, the gym's owner and future North American champ, but couldn't muster any kind of technique. The rest of the round I stumbled around with Dan yelling, "Come at me!"

That night the headaches became worse.

I reluctantly withdrew my name from the upcoming fight card.

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In his novel, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, Nikos Kazantzakis puts forth the idea of strengthening your own spirituality to change the world. Kazantzakis uses the character of Jesus Christ to show that change has to occur inside yourself before you can change your surroundings.

Kazantzakis gives Jesus three major steps of change. Love, violence, and sacrifice. Jesus begins the novel full of hate. Being a carpenter, unable to consummate his love for Mary Magdalene, Jesus turns his hatred against the world in an attempt to injure God, his father. He decides to build crosses for the Romans to crucify the prophets but he doesn't feel peace until the Holy Spirit fills him with love.

The idea of love is powerful because you cannot be truly happy until you love yourself. When Jesus meditates in the desert, he begins to understand God's spirit and lets the spirit show through him (metaphorically speaking). By acting, according to what he believes just and good, Jesus becomes happy with himself.

The violence stage Kazantzakis gives Jesus is basically non-violence. God gives Jesus the "axe," physically as well as symbolically, to enforce his laws. Jesus rallies his followers to storm the temple. But, to his follower's dismay, the "axe" is Jesus' conviction, not true violence.

The violence that Jesus shows is the ability to stand up for one's own beliefs. The "axe" is a decision to go along or rebel against any situation in life. Although the violence in this story is not overt, it is apparent in Jesus' decision to stand up against the Pharisees.

Finally, the idea of sacrifice is Jesus' crucifixion. After showing conviction with the "axe," sacrifice is the follow-through. By being crucified, Jesus shows his followers that they have to be true to their beliefs or they will be miserable in life.

By dying in this way, Jesus shows his love for himself and his followers through his selflessness. The only way Jesus could die on the cross was if he truly believed that his actions were just.

In *The Last Temptation of Christ*, Kazantzakis shows that change has to occur within. Change must occur with an unbiased spirit, not troubled by hate, fear, or an ego. Change can only occur with love for one's self and the world in general.

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"You're on my team," Monica impatiently shouted over the music as I handed her a Coke.

The light above the nearby pool table illuminated her face, but the smoky darkness of the rest of the bar's dance floor surrounded her. As I positioned myself at the foosball table, I reached across to hand Rusty and Rod their beers.

"How'd I get stuck with you?" I replied.

"Luck, I guess."

I picked up the hard ball and rolled it around in my hand. "You guys ready?"

"Just drop the fuckin' thing," Rusty snarled as I dropped the ball into the center of the table. The ball zigged, zagged, and spun around the table, all the while

being batted by everyone. As it settled in front of me, I dragged my hand off the handle, spinning the players ferociously.

“Take that!” I exclaimed as the ball sailed past the goalie.

“Hey! Play Wisconsin rules! Keep your hand on the pole,” Rod instructed.

“Yeah. We’re not in New Fuck!” Rusty added.

“Well, don’t count that one!” I retorted.

We traded goals for a while. None of us were that good at the game. We were just content at swiping at the ball as it neared our plastic players. I had the biggest disadvantage because I always had to be aware that my hands were on the controls.

“You’re in my fucking way,” a growl erupted from behind me.

I turned to find a fat, ZZ Top looking, fifty-year-old biker staring me down at the pool table. I quickly realized that I was standing in the way of his next shot.

“Sorry man, take your shot,” I replied, as I stepped aside.

The biker, not taking his eyes off me, returned to the pool table. Under his breath, he muttered, “Ass hole,” as he bent over to make a play on his ball.

I stepped back and we, the foosball players, resumed our game.

“Get the fuck outta the way!”

I turned to see the not-so-slim biker again staring at me.

“Stay outta my way, pretty boy little fag,” the biker snorted.

I turned to Rusty and Rod and exclaimed, “Let’s move this.”

We picked up the foosball table and moved it a couple of more feet from the pool table.

“Ass hole,” the biker repeated as we resumed our game.

We played for about a half an hour and quit only when Jeff made his way down from the bar to join us.

“Burnie, I was waiting for you to hit him,” Jeff claimed as he approached us.

“Why would I do that?”

“I would’ve. He was asking for it!” Rusty interjected.

Looking back on the situation I realized that I had never felt any sort of fear or danger.

“You could’ve taken him,” Rod added.

“Well, I came out to have fun. Not to fight.”

“He’s a wuss. I would’ve fought,” Jeff stated.

“Maybe. But if I fought, I would’ve lost,” I replied.

10:46

There are no real colors.

Red seems to dominate but, as soon as I recognize it, it changes to a different hue altogether. What I consider the center is the brightest. Almost white, the colors fade into a red exterior.

Sharp white blurs and black patches inhabit this space. These contrasting entities float about aimlessly, with no apparent pattern.

The colors are so bright that I can't see anything else.

I can't feel anything else around me. I can't decide whether I'm standing, sitting, or floating. I feel as if I'm falling in a dream but can't seem to startle myself awake.

Everything is silent.

I feel myself scream but I can't even hear my own voice.

Where am I?

You're already up?

This familiar voice fills the silence. A voice so large . . . like you would imagine God's.

You dressed all by yourself . . .

The haze shifts, turns, and swirls into the form of my mother. The background fades and my old bedroom on Ross Street appears behind her. She looks young. Her

face is smooth, without a wrinkle, and her long black hair pulled into a ponytail. She moves forward and places a gentle hand on my shoulder.

What a big boy. Bet you're in a hurry for school, huh? My big boy.

I can feel myself standing there, smiling like a deranged lunatic. I try to yell out, 'Mom, help me. I'm in a dream and can't wake up,' but the words don't form.

I'm stuck here as a spectator.

Mommy's very proud!

She leans in to hug me but never makes it. As quickly as she formed, she disperses back into the watery colors. Her voice vanishes into the surrounding silence.

You crying?

The new, masculine voice startles me as it breaks the silence.

What'd you do, The voice of my father asks.

Dad, where are you?

As before, the haze shifts and stretches to reveal the hard features of my father. His face appears over me first. His body forms next, along with our front porch on Ross Street, but all I focus on is his face—disappointed, as always—looking down at me.

Hit a tree with that sled . . .

I look down at my lap. Exposed flesh shows between the torn, blood-stained, fabric of my jeans. I reach down, trying to cover the gaping gash in my with my hands.

Stupid kid.

I look up to see the back of my father's balding head as he walks towards his car. He pauses to yell over his shoulder:

Your mother'll clean ya up.

Again I try to yell, 'Dad, I know . . . I wasn't thinking . . . I'm sorry,' but, like before, I can't make a sound. Instead, I remain sitting on the frozen concrete, watching my father pull away in his pale blue Omni as the colors run back together into the bright haze.

It's not a bad cut, honey, you'll be o.k.

My mother appears in front of me. She talks to me over her shoulder as she digs through the bathroom cabinet, which is appearing behind her, for a bandage.

Now stop that crying . . . Momma's gonna make it all better.

I start to feel cold again and quickly realize I'm sitting on the closed, freezing toilet seat in my boxers. My leg starts to sting, and I quickly notice the pink stain of disinfectant around the cut.

Just have to keep pressure on it, my mother exclaims as she turns to me with the bandage. She places the end of the white, stretchy cloth against the back of my thigh and wraps the bandage around my leg snugly.

See . . . Not so bad . . .

I want to tell her that I wasn't crying because of my leg . . . but I don't even try.

Go put your sweats on, is the last sound I hear as the silence hits again. I watch as my mother fades. Again, I'm left alone and feel nothing around me.

C'mon son . . . watch it into your hands.

First I feel the soft grass under my feet. A horizon line appears across the haze. Dark blotches turn into distant houses, separated by a chain link fence that surrounds the field. I quickly realize that I'm at Van Detta Stadium football field as I watch the football, which I was supposed to catch, bounce towards the goal line.

I turn around to see my father, in shorts and tee shirt, as I hardly ever saw him: happy.

Well . . . get the ball!

It's not that he was an unhappy man, for the most part he never was in a bad mood, but he never really showed his emotions. But on the football field, he seemed to let his guard down. I could tell by his walk, voice, and whole demeanor that he was enjoying himself. Because of this, the countless Sunday morning games of catch at the stadium made up the happiest memories I have of my father.

Thatta boy. Now throw it to your ol' Pop!

He catches my pass with a gleam of excitement in his face.

Great throw boy, he exclaims as he, the fence, houses, and horizon quickly dissipate. The silence is only momentary this time.

I know it's late . . .

As my dark bedroom forms around me, I groggily roll over in my warm bed to see my mother crying.

But I have to tell you something.

She has her winter coat on. As she brushes my hair back from my eyes, I can feel the cold coming off her jacket. I ask, 'why are you crying?'

No . . . no, don't worry about Momma, but . . .

No, please don't tell me Ma . . .

There's been an accident.

Please don't tell me.

God does things for unknown reasons, but . . .

Don't tell me!

Your father's in heaven with Grandpa now.

Stop it now!

CLEAR . . .

A blinding light burns the scene away. I feel a shot of fire course throughout my body—from the ends of my hair to the tips of my toes—which disappears as quickly as it was ignited. My body feels cool for a moment, but soon returns to normal.

As my eyes readjust, I notice the haze is now smoky. The black and white spots still are present but the haze itself has changed. Instead of vibrant colors the view is now wispy.

I am not sure what just happened and I want to think it through. But I can't get my father's death out of my mind. I try to yell, 'Dad, don't go,' and 'Mom, where are you,' but the silence strangles all my words. I float, pleading for anyone to come help me, until the silence is broken by another familiar voice.

You're the man of the house now . . .

'I can't, I can't live up to him,' I try to yell but, again, the smoke starts to shift before me. A desk forms first. The smoke swirls and shapes into the form of Coach Johnson, my high school football coach. I recognize his usual Polo shirt with windbreaker pants and sneakers attire. He walks up to the desk and flops into the bucket seat of his chair.

Make your father proud, he exclaims as he adjusts his glasses, then pulls down on the brim of his baseball cap. He leans closer to me as he continues, resting his elbows on the wooden desktop.

You have a special gift, son. If you don't give up drinking, smoking grass, and chasing ass around the mall, you're gonna shit it away, boy.

I don't look him in the face. Instead I stare at his name plaque.

You have to stay focused.

I now wonder why the black background fell out of the inside of the O's in his name.

That's the only way you're gonna make it.

I want to grab and shake myself. I want to yell, 'listen to him you little shit,' but I am stuck as an observer.

The smoke overtakes the room but sifts quickly. As it clears, I find myself on the Van Detta Stadium practice field.

Pull the ball back and release it in a straight line.

Tony, our top wide receiver, darts past me as I release the ball. I place the ball perfectly over his outside shoulder.

No. Leave your arm out. Like you're gonna shake the guy's hand.

I stand there, on the field, and listen to Coach's words but never hear them. I yell, 'Listen to him!' but I still stand there with what has to be a comatose look. I can't get my past self to listen. I become enraged and yell past myself, 'Coach, I know . . . I did everything you said. I need help now . . . Help me wake up!' But he just looks at me. He must know that my mind is not there.

You'll learn, he exclaims, as the bright August sunlight turns dark with smoke.

The silence is broken this time by the murmur of a crowd. The stadium lights illuminate the cool November night where I find myself prone on the wet grass. Pain pierces my left arm as the team doctor pulls me to my feet. My eyes, shrink-wrapped in tears, focus on Coach.

Don't worry kid, casts are cool.

He approaches and throws an arm around my neck. The chill from his jacket seems to cool and dry the back of my neck. He leans closer and whispers . . .

You'll get a lot of tail with that thing . . .

As he releases his embrace and swats me on the ass with his clipboard, my head is spinning. The team doctor leads me to the bench. I want to yell, 'I'm injured, Coach, not hurt. Help me.' But instead, I sit on the icy metal bench while the radio blares . . .

That's a tough break for the kid. One thing's for sure, with a twenty point lead and five minutes left in the fourth, he led them to their first state championship in fifteen years.

As the announcer continues, the scene fades.

I am alone, again, in the fog. I think I'm crying but can't feel any tears. I float here, not knowing where I am or able to help myself, forced to relive the past but unable to change it.

Michigan's the big time boy.

Coach is standing behind his desk holding his clipboard.

You did it.

He circles around and stands directly in front of me. Coach extends his hand towards me.

You would've made your father proud, he exclaims, grasping my hand.

Hell, you made me very proud, he chokes out, pulling me towards him and smothering me in an embrace.

Know I always thought of you as a son.

He squeezes me around my shoulders once and quickly releases.

Enough of this girly horseshit. You go out there and do great things.

He turns to walk behind the desk again, sweeping up his clipboard as he passes.

I know you'll excel as you . . .

His words fade as the fog overtakes the office.

Honey . . .

'Mom, where are you?'

I'm so proud of you.

The fog shifts and swirls to reveal my mother, sitting on the arm of the easy chair, hugging me as I watch the T.V. I turn and look at her. Her hair is down, now cut shoulder length, and her face is starting to crease with age.

Wish your father was here for this.

I look and truly see her. A devoted mother, who, while working on her own, gave up a lot so I never had to want. I want to hug her back and tell her, 'I see all you have done for me and appreciate it more than you could ever imagine,' and, 'I love you.' Instead, I sit there and truly believe that all this attention is mine and mine alone.

He's watching, though. And I know he's very proud!

I can't take this anymore. I try to scream, 'Don't just sit there like an asshole, do something you stupid shit.' But I sit there, convinced that I am that person that my friends, college scouts, and newspapers tell me I am: a celebrity.

The silence breaks quickly.

I know how much you loved him . . .

No . . . I know what's next . . .

The fog lifts to show the dorm hallway where I am standing at the pay phone, pressing the receiver to my ear.

Last night . . . Coach Johnson passed away in his sleep . . . it was a heart attack.

Noooo . . .

CLEAR . . .

The light returns, blinding me momentarily. Again, my whole being burns with the light but, this time, the fire doesn't extinguish as quickly. It takes ten or fifteen seconds for my body to cool.

As my eyes readjust I realize that dark smoke now seems to pulsate from some point behind me, which I can't turn to find.

My body seems cooler this time. I feel chills course through me that I can't shudder away. I panic. I thrash around in my blanket of smoke and lash out into the darkness. But nothing warms my body.

The smoke pulses away from the center of my vision like black curtains at an old time theater.

Football may have gotten you to this school . . .

The scene, again, appears in front of me but this time it's grainy. As I watch my wringing hands form in front of me, I feel as if I'm looking through a dirty screen.

But your grades are much worse than last semester.

I look up to see Mrs. Cochran, my college advisor. I try to explain that I'm trying very hard and have bad teachers but she waves me off with a flick of her hand.

You won't be able to play if you keep this up.

I can feel the dejection well up in my young self.

Is there something the matter?

I look at her. There is a genuine look of concern in her eyes.

'I dunno,' I hear myself utter like an idiot. I try to scream, 'tell her you're an idiot and aren't even trying. Tell her you need her help. Tell her I need her help!' Instead, I can only feel the shadow of myself becoming more and more impatient. I just sit there and periodically glance at the clock.

You can talk to me, I'm more than a teacher, you know . . .

Mrs. Cochran's voice fades as the smoke overtakes my view.

You're goin' to have to come up with sumthin' more original than that.

As the smoke opens, I see red. I immediately smell cigarette smoke, stale beer, and sweat, as blaring dance music fills my ears. Then I realize to whom I'm talking.

You're probably gonna ask me if I come here often, aren't you?

I can feel myself acting smug, like her words don't matter. But, in reality, I am excited, nervous, and a bit sick.

Do you dance?

Her dark bangs are matted to her forehead while the rest of her long, straight locks flows down to her shoulders. Her shirt clings to her body, which lets me see that she is put together extremely well.

Only when you're drunk . . .

She repeats my words sarcastically.

You look pretty lit to me, she exclaims as she grabs my arm. She pulls me away from the bar and through the huddled masses to a clearing on the dance floor. I can feel my excitement building but am more concerned about people seeing me dance.

As we sway to the music, a rather heavy blond drops like a load of potatoes behind my dancing partner knocking her off balance. I quickly catch her around the waist and pull her towards me.

Hey! Slow down tiger. We just met, she jokingly exclaims as she looks up at me. I can tell she's embarrassed by her uncontrollable smile. I even think I can see her blush even redder than the glow from the dance floor lights. But looking into her brown eyes, I quickly realize that she doesn't pull away.

I'm Kim, I hear her state as the dark smoke strangles the red hue.

I quickly realize that I have been in some sort of trance. I just now try to yell out to her but realize that the scene has already changed to my college dorm room. It's dark as the blaring ring of the phone cuts the silence. I groggily roll over in bed and reach for the receiver. My mind is cluttered from my dream as I listen to the receiver but don't hear a word that's being said. I quickly snap into reality when the voice solemnly states . . .

It's about your Mom . . .

No. Don't tell me. Mom, I need you. I need you to hold me and tell me that everything's going to be all right.

I'm so sorry. I know she was very proud of you. She was a great lady.

CLEAR . . .

An excruciating pain accompanies the burning light. I can feel my veins course with fire, my eyes burn from the light, and my heart pound acid, but my thoughts lie with my mother. I scream, 'It's not fair. Not her. I need her!' but there is no answer.

After a minute, which seems to be an eternity, the pain subsides and I feel cold. I feel little knives of ice stabbing me all at once. I scream for help but the silent blanket of fog absorbs everything.

'Mom, make it go away. I'm cold,' I plead as Kim's voice breaks the silence.

It's not silly . . .

The fog sifts and lightens just enough to make out my dark dorm room. I see Kim lying under me on my bed.

It's just three little words . . .

I hear myself reluctantly tell her, 'I love you,' and I scream, 'Stop being an asshole. You love her. Tell her. Kim, I love you. Now and forever.'

I love you too. Come here . . .

She reaches up to me and pulls me close.

It's just you and me tonight.

She kisses me passionately, which makes me forget about everything in both worlds.

Forget about the Rose Bowl, forget about the team, forget about the classes .

I pull her in close to me.

It's just you and me . . .

Oh Kim. I love you . . . I LOVE YOU . . .

Holy shit, that looks uncomfortable . . .

The scene quickly fades and shifts. I quickly feel myself on my back at the Rose Bowl. The little knives dig deeper into my right knee.

Kid, we got the splint on you, now we're gonna lift you to the cart.

The trainer looks down at me smiling as I bite into a towel. They set me onto the cart in a sitting position. The pain subsides a bit so I pull my hands from my eyes to see my teammates around the cart.

I know that must've hurt. Your knee bent ninety degrees in the wrong direction.

As I look to the concerned lineman, I quickly realize his knack of grasping the obvious.

CLEAR . . .

The light consumes me. The fire takes hold of me and, while burning every ounce of me, keeps its hold. The fire attacks my entire being and, without any remorse, rips away violently.

As my body cools, I start to lose feeling. My fingers and toes feel numb. The numbness spreads up my legs and arms. I try to thrash but I can no longer feel myself move.

Darkness surrounds me. If the smoke is still present, I can no longer see it. I labor to scream but, again, I am stuck, invalid, at the mercy of my visions.

You're still an A student.

I hear Mrs. Cochran's voice.

Everyone is still here for you.

I see her outline forming by little pixels of white and red. The colors start to form but they don't seem to distinguish themselves from the other colors. It's almost like I'm looking through a fine piece of tracing paper. The color red seems to pulse in and out of the scene making me feel as if I'm about to pass out.

How's Kimberly doing?

Through the white, I can see Mrs. Cochran's smiling face. She was always the first to encourage me through bad times. I hear myself answer, 'All right,' but I try to plead, 'I need help . . . so cold. Where's Kim?' But, of course, she can't hear me.

She's really good for you, ya know.

'I need her, I hurt all over,' I plead as she begins to fade. Before the scene completely dissolves, the colors run together into a white flash. I see Kim in front of me . . .

Yes! Yes! Yes!

The background forms the shape of Cinderella's Castle, at Disneyland. Kim holds her hand out towards me.

I love you so much . . .

'I need you Kim, I can't do it alone,' I plead to her.

Yes, I'll marry you, silly . . . Yes!

I reach out and slide the diamond onto her finger. I see it but can no longer feel it. 'I can't feel a thing. So numb,' I plead. But she can't hear me. In a flash, I am in my first apartment with Kim. I am in the bedroom, undressing, as she enters.

You did it, honey, she exclaims, as she throws her arms around me. I gently push her back.

If the State of California Bar Association has trust in you to be a lawyer, what's the problem, she asks, looking puzzled but still smiling. In an instant, the scene again jumps. This time I'm in the kitchen of our first house. Kim is still in her work clothes but the sleeves of her blouse are rolled up. The snapping of breaking spaghetti fills the air as I watch her drop the hard rods into the boiling water.

How'd the case go? Well?

I tell her we'd won.

I can't believe it! I told you . . . You're the best in that firm.

She turns and throws her arms around my neck. I see myself hold her but I can no longer feel it.

It's time to celebrate! I love you so much!

She pulls me in tight. I can almost smell her hair when the scene flashes to our master bedroom's bathroom.

I have something to tell you . . .

I look into the fogged mirror as she continues.

Remember the day we played hooky from work . . . well . . .

I turn and see she's still in her bathrobe.

We're gonna have a baby!

As I reach out to hug her, the colors rearrange again. 'No! you're going too fast!' I yell. But the colors arrange themselves into Mr. Crenshaw's office at the firm. 'Kim I need you. Please don't leave me' I plead.

You've shown great progress over the past ten years.

As he continues, my mind is elsewhere. I think of Kim.

. . . *Bill Mathews has retired* . . . , I hear him interject as I realize what's happening. 'No!' I gasp as I realize . . .

. . . *the new partner of the most prestigious law firm in California is you, if you accept* . . .

. . . that my time is coming to an end. 'Bring me back to Kim,' I yell as Mr. Crenshaw shakes my hand. 'You're going too fast. Let me see Kim,' I plead as the scene shifts.

It's a girl!

I'm in the hospital delivery room. 'Jenny,' I sigh.

Yes, Jennifer Marie. I love it!

I struggle to focus on Jenny over Kim's shoulder. She's small, delicate, and struggling to cry out. She's beautiful.

Well, Jennifer Marie, what do you think of your parents?

I look at Kim. Her hair is matted to her forehead with sweat. She looks totally exhausted. She looks beautiful. 'Oh Kim, Jenny . . . I love you two so much,' I choke out.

We love you very much, you know!

'Oh Kimmie. Jenny. Don't leave me!' I plead.

I think we're looking at the first woman president. What do you think?

I look at Kim's big, brown eyes waiting for an answer. I know there's pain where my heart once was but I no longer feel anything. I am only thankful that I can't feel myself cry. 'Don't leave,' I sob out.

The colors flash. 'Bring me back to Kim . . . to Jenny. Going too fast!' I scream. But the colors rearrange themselves into the form of the board office at the firm.

You've been here eighteen years.

Mr. Crenshaw states, staring at me behind the mahogany table.

The best lawyer I've had the privilege to work with.

I can't focus on his words. I just want to be back with Kim and Jenny. 'Time's too short! Bring me back!' I yell as Mr. Crenshaw continues.

. . . I know it's unprecedented but it's time for me to retire . . .

'I need you Kimmie . . . Jenny . . . don't go!' I plead.

. . . The other Partners and I have met . . .

'Bring them back. Damn you, bring me to them! I need them!' I yell.

. . . We're ready to offer you the position of Senior Partner!

The scene flashes to the front hallway of our home. Jenny, excitedly, rattles off her experiences at kindergarten earlier in the day as she hands me a paper. It's a crayon drawing of a stick figure family.

. . . and this one's you Daddy!

I hear myself say, 'I love it,' as her face lights up. All of her teeth showing in her enormous smile. With her dark hair pulled up into a bow, I am amazed at how much she looks like her mother.

I love you Daddy . . ., she exclaims as she throws her arms around my neck. I see myself lift her off the floor, in my arms and make my way to the kitchen where Kim is cooking. She turns and sees me. A smile instantly appears on her face as she crosses the linoleum to hug us.

How was your day, she asks with her arm around my neck. 'Need you both in my life,' I plead as I hear myself tell Kim the day's happenings. 'Need you both so much, don't leave!'

The scene flashes to the front door. I see the man in the blue uniform turn and face me at the door. I hear myself ask, 'What's the matter, officer?' But this man, not much older than twenty, hesitates before he speaks.

Sir, I'm Deputy Roth with the L.A. County Sheriff's department . . .

The deputy glances down, as if looking for strength. 'No . . . don't tell me. Please, don't . . .' I plead.

There's been a terrible accident.

'No, don't continue . . . Kimmie . . . Jenny . . . don't go! DON'T GO!' I yell as I clench the door handle for strength.

A drunk driver ran your wife and daughter off the road, and . . .

I'm sorry, sir, if there's anything I can do . . .

CLEAR . . .

The flash comes and goes.

This time I feel no pain.

I see no memories.

I just see a dim haze, floating away from me as if I was looking through a tube.

'Oh Kim. Jenny.'

'Need to hold you, I need . . .'

'I love you.'

I put all my energy into remembering a picture on my desk.

Crisp and clear, the picture, without a frame, appears before me. Kim is smiling with her hair pulled back as she holds Jenny close to her. Jenny, four at the time, is dressed in a ruffled pink dress with her arms pulling her tight against her mother. Their cheeks are pressed together. Jenny, like her mother, is smiling at me.

I want to reach out and hold them but feel nothing.

So dark. So cold.

'Kim . . . I . . . LOVE . . .'

With a click the picture, and all light, disappears.

That's it, that's all we can do.

Cause . . .

Overdose.

Time . . .

10:46.

The Fight

His name was Peter Della Serra.

I wasn't sure of this until a couple of hours before. But looking across the ring, inside the darkened arena filled with about two thousand screaming spectators, I realized that his name wasn't important.

The adrenaline pumped.

The rage surged.

The fear dissipated.

This fighter and I were about to go toe-to-toe and my mind was completely vacant of thought. As soon as the referee signaled for the fight to begin, the instincts that I have forged within the past year and a half took over. In my memory, nobody was in that arena except for Peter and me.

I was what you would call a lazy writer. I could sit down and write interesting stories but they lacked sophistication. And I lacked the motivation to change them.

I didn't see why they were wrong. Writing came easily to me without much effort. I didn't even take the effort to look at other people's work. Just as quickly as I wrote a story, I moved on to the next.

I, literally, trained myself into the ground for this fight. I lifted until all my muscles would spasm uncontrollably, punched and kicked the bag to the point that I

had to work just to move, ran until my veins pumped acid, and sparred so much that there wasn't a part on my body that wasn't sore or bruised. I pushed myself to every preconceived limit and then pushed some more.

I was told that every writer has to read.

It was unavoidable.

I was stuck in the notion that reading was something you had to do for school. You had to read a book, or find out what happened from your classmates, just to pass a test. In the summer of '99, I finally decided to pick up a book and read it for the sole purpose of enjoyment. I labored through it.

I first learned that I was going to fight a 180-pound fighter that lost the only fight he'd been in. This was a perfect match for my amateur debut. I was shadow boxing wherever I went, excited about the upcoming event. But, considering that his size and experience was all I knew of him, the unknown filled me with dread.

My training became labored.

My focus was off.

I became sluggish in the ring, taking hard punches and becoming prone to injuries. The closer the fight came, the more I hurt. I came to wonder why I was fighting in the first place.

I told myself that I enjoyed reading while forcing myself to read through books. I did enjoy many of the stories, concepts, and ideas that I read but found television shows and movies a more satisfying source of stimulation. Then, after watching the movie *Fight Club*, I read Chuck Palahniuk's novel of the same name.

I couldn't put it down.

I decided that I was getting soft.

I forced myself to stand up to whoever I was sparring. If my opponent was off-guard, I had to throw a front leg roundhouse. If my nose was smashed, I had to return three punches to wherever was open.

I willed the fear out of my body.

I started to want the fight more than the air I breathed.

I searched bookstores for anything by this author. I heard Tyler Durden philosophize about life and stardom, I was there when Brandy Alexander showed his sister the true meaning of self perception, I know why Victor rationalizes his impulsive actions, and I was there when Tender Branson found his true purpose in life.

My tastes in literature began to evolve.

I was there when Robert Jordan overcame his cowardice and sabotaged the enemy's only road to support a battle. I was alongside the Star-child when he returned to earth, and I felt Jake's anguish and longing for the love of Brett.

Through these books, and more, I went through a gamut of emotions that took me to a new level in my own writings.

Walking into the ESL Sports Arena, I didn't know whom I was going to fight. The "perfect match" backed out two nights prior and I was left with only two possibilities: to fight a weak fighter or a tough one.

The tough one was the only one that panned out.

His name was Peter Della Serra. I heard he'd fought anywhere from two to five times before and he weighed ten pounds more than me.

I was told to watch his punches because they were quick and hard.

I was told to stay on his outside.

I was told to relax, focus, and let my training take over.

I became addicted.

I couldn't pass by used bookstores without entering. I filled my bookshelves with Hemingway, Poe, Clark, or anyone I had ever had an inkling to read.

I started to read anything that had words on it. I found out that the milk I was drinking had no fat or cholesterol but a high amount of calcium and vitamin D, I found that the pasta I ate was "low fat, sodium free cholesterol free food," and I found that the majority of my shirts were made from 100% cotton.

My new love for the written word translated directly to my writing.

I am well aware that there is much practice that still needs to be done; however, I now know the importance of finding the right word.

I now know the importance of rhythm.

I now know the importance of detail.

And, I now know that it is impossible to be a writer without loving all types of literature.

The fight barely lasted the first two minutes. I was TKOed in the first round. I was told that I was winning the round until he caught me with a vicious right that connected with my already injured nose. After another thirty seconds, my trainer called the fight because it looked as if my nose had been broken.

I lost, but it didn't matter.

I learned more about myself during those long two minutes than I had in my previous twenty-six years.

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