

Autobiography of a Head Bully, excerpts

by Jon Davies

The way you enter the ring is this. You come out of the double doors on the right, jog down the alley. Some guy along the railing, some guy sitting about fourteen rows up, tells you you're going to be pulp, you're going to eat the floor. You give him the finger, and the folks around him laugh, say, "That's it. That's the way to go, Jerry." On Saturday nights, they dream of you. You are the gas station they can't own, the lottery they can't win. You are beating up their boss, giving him a headache that will last through Wednesday morning, keep him home half the week. You are the President of the United States of America and you are whipping a commie for the boys overseas. You are punching the teacher who failed them in fifth-grade science. You are punching that police officer who gave them a ticket last Tuesday afternoon for a stop sign only a telescope could see.

You are almost too big to squeeze through the ropes. You are Godzilla on steroids. You are going to fell some buildings. This man is nothing. He is a Barbie doll. Look at the way he wears his hair, curls and frills along the bottom edges, little ringlets on his scalp. Paste a ribbon on him and he'd be Miss Junior America 1973.

Your arms and legs won't stay still. You jump around the ring on the balls of your feet, knock your hands together, jab at air. Onetwothreefourfivesixseveneightnineten just like that, down. You punch the corner post, wrestle the turnbuckle. Your corner man tells you to turn around. The referee gestures for your body. You knock gloves with the sissy in the other corner. You go home, jump along the corner ropes, wait for the bell to ring. In five minutes, the referee will raise your right arm, and you'll strut about the ring like

a proud rooster.

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You know you are going to lose. You pretend you are invincible. You kid yourself you're going to retire before anything bad happens. But you don't. You can't. Fighting gets into your blood, and even more so, winning.

The first time you go down is like being shot in the back. You don't even know you're on the floor. You wake up, and you hear this man calling out numbers, waving a finger in your face. There is something on your back, something unfamiliar, something that is not supposed to be there. It is thick, like denim, but you have no shirt on. You know that because there is sweat running from your belly down to your back. You try to get up, not because you want to win, but because you want to prove you are okay, that all your internal organs are still there. Perhaps, you do get up. You are not ready. You never will be. You haven't felt this bad since your days as an amateur, your teenage years before you were in shape, before you were in fighting form. You know you will lose.

I am lying, of course. Losing should be so easy. No, it is not like being shot. It is like being terminally sick for fifteen years. You know you are going to lose from the first, from the moment you enter the ring, the moment you feel that first slug in your ribs. You want to turn and run, but you are scared of the crowd. You are scared of that man in the fourteenth row who said you were pulp, said you were going to eat canvas. And you are scared that you really are going to be pulp, that you really are going to eat canvas. You are scared of the gloves on the other man's hands. You are scared of the newspapers Sunday morning. You are scared of your trainer and the next decade and a half of your life. You are scared of the next fight and the one after it and the one after that. You are scared you will never win again. You are scared you will be the boxer other boxers

use to become twenty-one and zero. At least, it is over. But you fear waking up. You yearn for the one good punch that will end it quickly, send you sailing into the black forever, but you also yearn, try, to hold on, thinking, hoping, that maybe, the other boxer is as bad off as you, that if you can just take punches for the next hour, he will crumple from exhaustion. Victory by deterioration. You know that, one day, this will not happen, and one day, it doesn't. The black lights never last long enough.

