

Loose Change

Written by Peter M. Carvill
Saturday, 03 February 2007 19:00

Call it loose change. Every work of fact is a work of fiction. Most thoughts are memories. Show me your truth and I'll show you mine. This is my life as fact and fiction.

Call it loose change.

It was January 1st and I was stranded in York. There were no trains scheduled until the next day, and the battery on my phone had died at midnight the day before when I was seeing in the New Year. The city was cold and wet, and a sharp, cruel wind was blowing.

As I walked around the place I'd called home for four years, I became aware that I was heading back to the place where all this - this now, this writing, these obsessions – had begun. When I realised that I was coming full circle, I walked straight to where it was, where it had been. I discovered the place then as I'd discovered it all those years ago; hidden along a snaking, winding side-street neighboring a church. I had believed that it had gone, torn down and away.

I came down the side street, my boots clapping and scraping on the wet stones. The grilles that covered the windows were still in place, the wood that had long replaced the glass further enforced by the crisscrossed painted metal.

I came to the doors, and noticed they were still painted a thick, unblemished forest-green. Instinctively, I reached out, touched the brass handle and tried to push the door open. It didn't move. There was nobody there; everything had gone years before.

I took a step back, heard the rain patter against my coat and leaned against the railings that surround the church, a solitary security light illuminating the club doorway.

The white plastic sign, embossed with blue lettering, was still there: BOXING CLUB. I pressed my face against the crack between the two doors, pushing my nose deep into the recess. I tried to smell the gym. It came, a mix of decades-old testosterone and sweat, rotting corkboard and cheap paint left to stagnate. This is what boxing gyms the world over smell like. I stepped back again, making to leave, but everything had changed around me –lighter, milder, younger.

I had come back to my beginning.

* * *

It's a chill February evening and I'm stood outside All Saints' Boxing Club in York, shivering in equal parts because of the temperature and the fact that I'm about to go into a boxing club for the first time. I've cycled down, and locked my bike to the railings of the church whose shadow looms over this little club.

I shift my rucksack on my shoulder. I have bandages inside, two-point-five-inch white crepe rolls

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bought from Boots this morning. I have no gloves or boots and no gumshield. I feel ill-equipped and out-of-depth in my cheap shorts and cheaper t-shirt, and there are people walking in around me – guys, girls, teenagers – who look fitter and tighter and... better than me.

I go up the steps and into the building and realize that, looking in from the foyer, I'm standing in an old, re-used church hall. There's stone beneath my feet, a paving slab that serves as a doormat and, as I step from the stone to the cork flooring that ululates in depressions across the floor, I think about how this must be a hard place if the welcome mat is a stone.

I place two quid in an old wooden box, sign my name with a cheap biro on a piece of paper and mark down £2 next to my block-texted name. The trainer that's collecting money at the door looks me up and down, sensing my nervousness. This is Jim and he speaks in a hoarse rasp like a man wheezing and trying to catch his breath. His nose has been broken and I think that maybe the air that's blocked up there is making him sound like this.

"You're new," he says, "I'm Jim."

I nod, look around. "Leave your stuff back there." He jerks somewhere with his thumb. Little do I know but for the next three years he's going to get my name wrong and call me "Harry." I'm going to be confused at first and too polite to point out his mistake and correct him, and I'll eventually I'll begin answering to it every time he tells me to "lift that f---ing jab up off the floor."

I follow the direction of Jim's pointed thumb past the free weights and the broken speed-bag. There are twelve or so punching bags hanging in three rows like abattoir carcasses, and each of them is a work of rough beauty with flaking leather crumbling from the impacts of thousands of fists. Rusty chains suspend the bags in the air from the beams and rafters that cross-link along the ceiling.

I leave my bag in a small changing room out back, hanging it on one of the hooks and wondering briefly how safe it's going to be.

I walk out, a roll of bandages in each hand, and look at the others around me who are all warming-up in their own unique ways. Some are shadowboxing up in the ex-army boxing ring that takes up one end of the hall, some are skipping and some are shaking and stretching their limbs, transforming rigid muscle to rubbery elasticity. I know nothing so stand still, the plastic-wrapped bandages getting wet from the sweat in my palms.

One of the other trainers comes over. He doesn't bother with an introduction, running a hand through the greying bristles of his hair. "You know how to wrap those?" he asks, pointing at my hands and already knowing the answer. I shake my head. "Follow me," he says, taking me back to the desk by the door where he unravels the bandages, cuts a circular hole at one end for my thumb and slices the end of the other into two; this strange cut, not immediately obvious, is to tie the wrapping together on completion of the protected, covered fists.

Without pausing, Billy the trainer takes me to an old cargo box made of corkboard and flips the lid. I see that there's at least fifty pairs of boxing gloves in there.

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“Two weeks and then you buy your own.” I take a pair, mumbling my thanks and let Billy lace them. They feel heavy, more than I expected, and the years of people squeezing their hands into them has forced the stuffing back and moulded each glove into a circular shape not unlike a brown leather shell. My hands feel small inside and the gloves move on the pivots of my wrists, putt-putting when the air inside is squeezed, as the gloves move, from the back of my hand to the palm.

Everyone’s warmed up now and they step towards the twelve bags hanging from the ceiling. They look alike, all of them focused on the night’s work, and their stances are rough photocopies of a lost original – a hand drags in one place, someone’s feet are too close together in another.

Billy is wearing pads on his hands and is motioning to me; he wants me in the ring. I go up the wooden stairs and climb through the rough uncovered hemp ropes. Billy steps into a fighters stances, punches with his left arm and draws it back.

“Like that,” he explains, “That’s the jab.”

I nod ‘okay,’ still silent.

Billy holds up the pads. I shake my arms and try to mimic the stance he’s just shown me and, as I’m doing this, he pushes his pad-covered right towards my face.

I hit out with my left.

* * *

I was standing back outside the gym. I was old again, and it was a cold evening in January. I slid my eyes down from the door as the memory dappled away like the shockwaves from a stone dropped in water.

My right hand by my side ached along the back of the knuckles with probable onset arthritis made worse by the cold. I wanted to stay in the memory, see what would happen next.

It was cold, and it was raining. I turned back along the side-street and walked away in the shadow of the church, down along the streets where the reeds grow.

Nothing stays the same as time passes; even ourselves. We, and everything around us, change from second to second. We are lost at sea without anchors, and our only safety is that which we recollect.

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