“Though the fury's hot and hard
I still see that cold graveyard
There's a solitary stone that's got your name on.”

~Elvis Costello, "Complicated Shadows"

“LISTON” was spelled out on the back of the heavyweight champion’s robe as he walked into the weigh-in before his second title defense. Behind the lettering was the image of a sun. A setting sun.

Sonny Liston had every reason to be confident on the night of February 25, 1964. He was an eight-to-one favorite to defeat Cassius Clay. “The loud mouth from Louisville,” declared the New York Times, “is likely to have a lot of vainglorious boasts jammed down his throat by a ham-like fist.” That was an echo of the opinion of nearly everyone paying attention. Even the Nation of Islam was reluctant to get too involved on behalf of their recent convert. Elijah Muhammad himself believed that it was “impossible” for Clay to beat Liston. Malcolm X did not, and offered religious-based counsel to the jittery challenger, and then defied Elijah Muhammad by attending the fight in Miami.

He didn’t know it yet, but Liston had already made the mistake common to legions of history’s strong men. The mistake was hubris. His contempt for the skills of Cassius Clay was as pronounced as his training was casual. He drank wine and snacked on potato chips. Liston was prepared only to go the two or three rounds he figured it would take to cash in on Cassius –no more, no less.

The Liston training camp revolved around the whims and moods of Liston. Everyone, including his trainer Willie Reddish, was told what to do and when to do it. Liston listened to no one except James Brown singing “Night Train”. The only exceptions were a Roman Catholic priest who befriended him in prison and the only hero he ever acknowledged –Joe Louis. Apparently, Louis never told Liston the story of his own lackadaisical training that brought about his first loss against Max Schmeling. Nor did the priest open the book of Samuel in Sonny’s presence. Had he done so, the champion may have remembered that it was a mere stone in the sling of a youth that felled Goliath.

No less was the speed of an arrow in the bow of a youth that slew Richard the Lionheart.

Liston looked at Clay and saw a mere stone in his shoe, expecting to parry his arrows as if they were shot by Cupid.

And so it went that a twenty-two year old upstart fought like a mighty archer on wheels; And Liston’s clay feet followed wearily as the rounds sailed past the third. The new old king learned the hard way that hubris blinds a man more than the astringent his corner may or may not have

put on his gloves before the fourth round. Liston refused to come out for the seventh round. That was that. Cassius Clay became the new champion, shocking the world and bouncing all over the ring proclaiming exactly that –as Liston sagged on his stool.

Barbarossa, one of history's great warriors, drowned under the weight of his armor in a shallow river. Liston's fall was just as anticlimactic. It was downright meek.

Disrobed of his invincibility, he went to St. Francis Hospital for X-rays on his left shoulder. Later a team of doctors confirmed that he had in fact suffered an injury that would be "sufficient to incapacitate him and prevent him from defending himself". Liston's corner claimed that the injury occurred during training and that they had to cease sparring earlier than planned. When asked why they didn't postpone the fight, the answer was "we thought we could get away with it."

A forgotten nugget of information is that the rematch was originally set for November 16, 1964 at Boston Garden. Sonny trained harder than he had since his peak in 1959 on the grounds of what is now the White Cliffs Country Club in Plymouth, MA –whipping himself into search-and-destroy shape at 208 lbs. Reporters swarmed and Liston's mood swung between sullen and surly, even worse than usual. Ten sparring partners became casualties and some ended up in the hospital. Liston didn't even have "Night Train" playing because the beat was too slow for a new pace of training. He was hell-bent on redemption. "When I catch him," Liston promised, "you'll know I'm bitter."

It wasn't all "meanness" with Sonny. He was known to be gentle with children and impulsively generous with the down-and-out. At times, he seemed to yearn for the peace his life and his choices never allowed. One evening at White Cliffs, Sonny noticed a beautiful scarlet sunset over Cape Cod Bay. "Look at there," he said to a reporter for Sports Illustrated, extending his giant hand and pointing to the horizon, "Isn't that the most beautifulest sight you've ever seen?"

He didn't know it yet, but the setting sun's appearance was inauspicious.

Friday the 13th was just a few days later and Ali was rushed by ambulance to Boston City Hospital for an emergency hernia operation. The fight was called off. Liston growled: "If he didn't carry on in the street the way he did he wouldn't have hurt himself." Ali was no less disappointed. "I was really in the best shape of my life as was Sonny. Now all that hard work has gone down the drain," he said. "Everything was set up. Now I have to sit back for another six months. It was such a letdown for me and for Sonny. All that work for a man his age."

A man his age. Liston dissipated. He was picked up for drunk driving in December and got into it with ten policemen who had to wrestle him into a cell. Reporters noticed that he was looking "heavier and haggard".

He spent Christmas in jail.

The infamous rematch ended up in a high school hockey arena in Lewiston, Maine. Ali came in four pounds less but was noticeably bigger than the previous year with inches added to his thighs, biceps, and forearms. Liston was simply older. Whatever fire he had captured at White

Cliffs was gone.

Suspiciously, Liston was installed as a nine-to-five favorite.

Ali began round one bouncing and shifting and flicking shots. He landed one hard right hand and Sonny reacted as if it were a caress. Liston was moving in when Ali's back was near the ropes, he threw a left jab and Ali came over with a right hand that was far more innocent than the previous one… and Liston went down. The fiasco that followed is incidental. Liston's performance was anything but.

There are those who believe that Liston's first round knockout was on the level. Others meet it halfway and consider the knockdown legitimate but assert that his refusal to get up suggested something else. Sonny himself spoke of it before the California Boxing Commission and stated that the knockdown was indeed real but that he refused to get up because Ali was standing over him. This doesn't fit the film. Sonny was too busy trying vainly to make it look like he was hurt. He wasn't even looking at the big butterfly fluttering about.

The fact is Liston had an exceptional chin. Mike DeJohn proved it. Cleveland Williams proved it. Cops did too –with hickory nightsticks. After Marty Marshall landed the right that broke his jaw, he said, "I never knew he was hurt. You hit him with your Sunday punch but he don't grunt, groan, flinch or blink. He don't do nothing; he just keeps coming on. He's discouraging that way."

Ali landed a flicking punch thrown with his legs out of position and no leverage. His first response to Liston's going down was outrage and it is memorialized in perhaps the most famous boxing photograph ever snapped. "Get up you yellow dog!" –Ali's shout at the horizontal Liston is frozen in time. It was only later that Ali and company came up with his "anchor punch" spin for posterity's sake. It's understandable. Dives taint both fighters, but a first round KO of the impossibly strong Sonny Liston after previously stopping him is a fitting aftershock for the world.

For all Floyd Patterson knew, everything was on the level. He went to Liston's dressing room after the bout. Liston sat there alone, staring at something far off with that permanent scowl that wasn't a scowl. Floyd said, "I know how you feel. I've been experienced this myself." Sonny didn't acknowledge him. Finally, Floyd went to walk out and Sonny ran up, put a hand on Floyd's shoulder and said "thanks".

Liston became a persona non grata after the fiasco. He fought on against mostly nondescript opposition in Sweden and then returned to fight a 6'4 truck driver named Bill McMurray. By this point it is not unlikely that Liston was forty years old, although he still had the strength of ten men. With Ali stripped of his title and out of the picture, Sonny was fixing his sites on Joe Frazier by 1968. Emboldened with a fourth round KO of McMurray, a new trainer in Dick Sadler (who would also train George Foreman) and Sammy Davis Jr.'s interest in his career, Liston was feeling upbeat. "I'll beat [Frazier]," he declared. "I won't have to chase him. It'll be like shooting fish in a barrel."

Henry Clark was ranked ninth by Ring Magazine when Liston faced him four months after

McMurray. Liston won every round behind a jab and became the first man to stop him. Amos Lincoln was his eleventh straight KO since the Ali rematch, and Lincoln ended up draped over the ropes for three minutes while his handlers tried to revive him.

The old ex-champion was coming on, straight for Frazier, and the boxing world was buzzing. It couldn't last if the word on the street was accurate though, and the word was that Liston was boozing it up regularly and addicted to heroin. It couldn't last because Liston was Liston. Leotis Martin put an end to Liston's redemption delusions and brought the sheep in with a right hand, followed by a left hook and another right. Liston fell hard and didn't move. There wasn't much doubt that this was his only legitimate knockout loss.

Liston's last bout was held in Jersey City in June 1970 against Chuck Wepner. A strangely silent guest appeared at the back of the armory where the fight was held: it was Muhammad Ali. Ali remained confused and fascinated by his predecessor for many years after their bouts and admitted that Liston scared him. He once went so far as to privately claim that "Liston was the Devil." Either way, Liston was applauded as he entered the ring against the 6'5, 228 lb challenger.

It was a brutal fight; and Liston wins those.

Wepner, stopped after nine rounds, was in shock for three days after the bout with a broken nose, a broken left cheekbone, and seventy-two stitches to close his face. Sonny had hopes that this, his 50th victory, would qualify him for a bout against Jerry Quarry. It was not to be.

The Grim Reaper showed up instead, tapping him on one of those massive shoulders. Sonny Liston died alone, probably on December 29, 1970, and apparently from a drug overdose. No one really knows. Black daisies sprang up in the bedroom where his body lay for days before anyone found him.

It was a brutal life; and no one wins those.

Information concerning Malcolm X and Elijah Muhammad derived from Alex Haley's "The Autobiography of Malcolm X" and "New Muslims", a publication by the Islamic Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (ISESCO). "Liston was the Devil" comment found in Nick Tosches "The Devil and Sonny Liston", p. 219. Unless otherwise acknowledged, information for this article was also derived from contemporary editions of the New York Times. Gregory Toledo can be contacted at scalinatella@hotmail.com