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There is a scene in the Adam Sandler comedy, *You Don't Mess With The Zohan*, in which Sandler, as a legendary Israeli counterterrorism specialist, surreptitiously goes to New York to become a hairdresser. He visits a countryman working in an electronics store that has a large sign advising passers-by that the place is going out of business. Except that it isn't; the sign is merely a come-on to attract shoppers foolishly hoping to find a bargain.

In a way, Bernard "The Executioner" Hopkins is like that electronics store that never actually closes its doors, or maybe Cher, who stages "farewell tours" that seemingly go on forever. Is he serious when he announces another retirement from boxing, or at least hints at it? Or is it a calculated move designed to keep fight fans on a yo-yo, forever guessing as to whether his most recent step toward the exit is genuine or just another feint to keep everyone off-balance?

It has been eight months since Hopkins tuned up the previously undefeated Kelly Pavlik in Atlantic City Boardwalk Hall, the latest in a string of near-perfect opportunities for the ageless wonder to bow out gracefully and on top. But, like Sugar Ray Leonard and Muhammad Ali, other lovers of the limelight who believed themselves to be somehow immune to the natural laws of diminishing returns, Hopkins, now 44, continues to be torn between milking the last drop from his still-formidable reserve of boxing talent and moving on to the next phase of his remarkable life.

Even Hopkins, a limited partner in onetime victim Oscar De La Hoya's Golden Boy Promotions empire, doesn't seem to be quite sure which path he will take when he arrives at that inevitable final crossroads. Try to squeeze in one more fight for legacy and profit? Or begin to enjoy life as a full-time husband and father?

In a rambling, stream-of-consciousness discourse – with Hopkins, getting his point across with a sentence or two never suffices when he can fill four legal-pad pages with quotes before stopping to take a breath – his ambivalence about his future was as evident as it was following his impressive victories over Antonio Tarver and Winky Wright.

If Hopkins' unanimous-decision thrashing of the 17-years-younger Pavlik is indeed his valedictory, can he be satisfied with that?

"I'm at peace," said Hopkins, for the moment the homebody weary of heading off to another training camp and another self-enforced separation from wife Jeanette and daughter Latrece. "People who see me now say I don't have the look on my face that I'm itching to come back. I'm facing reality. My last fight was one of my greatest performances ever. You couldn't ask for a better way to go out.

"Really, I am fine. I'm good. I've been at four piano recitals for Latrece (who will be 10 on June 28). I got another one coming up. We were up at Hersheypark (an amusement park) last week. You know how long it's been since I was at Hersheypark? I tell you what, I'm finding out that

having fun is a lot of fun."

But raging inside the tranquil Hopkins is that other B-Hop, the one who forever seeks out bigger, more daunting challenges, as a Hersheypark patron might head for the tallest roller-coaster, the one with the most hairpin turns. And that Hopkins is as evident at times as is the domestic version, the one who is almost giddy in speaking of the $6,000, after-hours birthday party he has arranged for Latrece and about 20 of her classmates at the American Girl doll store in midtown Manhattan.

"I need chaos," that more combative and defiant Hopkins said, suddenly emerging from the darker side of his nature. "I need an Adamek. I need a guy who's going to come in the ring at 200 pounds and I'm at a lean, mean 186. That's a threat to me. I need that at this stage."

A few weeks ago, Hopkins directed Golden Boy's CEO, Richard Schaefer, to offer IBF cruiserweight champion Tomasz Adamek $500,000 for a bout in which Hopkins would go for a title in a third weight class, to go along with those he captured as a middleweight icon and as a light-heavyweight. Main Events president Kathy Duva rejected that figure out of hand in the belief that Hopkins and Schaefer were low-balling her guy.

But so eager is Hopkins to test himself in a higher weight class, against an emerging star who is widely considered to be the best of the 200-pounders, that he recently told Schaefer to up the ante to Adamek to $1.2 million, a tasty carrot on the end of the stick for a fighter who has yet to earn a seven-figure purse.

And if Adamek doesn't bite, Hopkins potentially has other options. Carl Froch, the WBC super middleweight champion from England, is one. Froch knocked out Jermain Taylor, holder of two disputed points nods over Hopkins, in the 12th round of their April 25 bout to float onto B-Hop's radar. Hopkins also expressed interest in throwing down with the survivor of a proposed light-heavyweight matchup of Chad Dawson and Glen Johnson; Johnson was 32-0 with 22 wins inside the distance when Hopkins defended his IBF middleweight championship by beating him on an 11th-round technical knockout on July 20, 1997. Roy Jones Jr. is still hanging around, although the idea of Hopkins "getting revenge" against the man who outpointed him in 1993 might not catch on with the public, given the fact that Hopkins is still at or near the top of his game while Jones appeared to be a spent cartridge in his blood-soaked, unanimous-decision loss to Joe Calzaghe on Nov. 8.

Still another possibility is Felix Trinidad, whom Hopkins stopped in 12 one-sided rounds on Sept. 29, 2001. Tito's promoter, Don King, is talking up a Hopkins-Trinidad II fight and he's prepared to toss some serious money around to make it happen, given Trinidad's continuing popularity with his large and dedicated fan base.

"Richard talked to King maybe a month ago," Hopkins said. "I haven't heard anything since, so I consider it dead in the water until further notice.

"Tito probably needs to win a fight with me to really secure his legacy. Everywhere he goes (in Puerto Rico), you know they're asking him about if he's going to fight Hopkins again. It's

probably been driving him crazy for eight years."

There even was some talk of Hopkins attempting to move all the way up to heavyweight, but that was when a belt-holder he deemed to be beatable, Russia's Oleg Maskaev, was the WBC titlist. But Maskaev was dethroned by Samuel Peter on a sixth-round TKO on March 8, 2008, and Hopkins, who normally dares to dream big dreams, was obliged to face reality. David might have slew Goliath once, but there are scenarios in which even the most gifted little man wouldn't want to press his luck.

"When (David) Haye fell out against (Wladimir) Klitschko, I heard people say, `Let Bernard fight Klitschko. He always said he wanted to fight for a heavyweight title,'" Hopkins said. "But Klitschko is what, 6-6½ and, like, 245 pounds? That's crazy. That's suicidal."

Of the names Hopkins has bandied about, the most likely candidates for sharing a ring with him in the near future are Froch, who has publicly expressed an eagerness for such a scrap, and Trinidad, whose thirst for settling a score with the first man to defeat him apparently is unquenchable.

So who is the real Hopkins? The doting daddy, or the gnarled, old warrior forever on the prowl for another battle?

Just as Sugar Ray Leonard, whose ambivalence about retirement led him to leave from and return to the competitive arena so often that it became something of an ongoing joke, Hopkins often is at odds with himself.

Consider the scene after he gave the favored Tarver a 12-round thrashing on June 10, 2006, in Boardwalk Hall before an audience of 11,200 that included basketball legend Michael Jordan.

In a *This is Your Life* moment, Hopkins' wife, three sisters and nearly every important person from his past entered the ring before the opening bell, a signal that some sort of important announcement might be forthcoming.

And when Tarver had been vanquished, Hopkins confirmed the rumor that it was indeed time to hang up the gloves and march off into a future that did not include people trying to punch him on that already-irregularly-shaped nose.

"I'm done," Hopkins said at the postfight press conference. "There's nothing else to do. I've heard some people say, `What about this? What about that?' Let's keep it real, y'all. I don't need to risk anything else. What am I going to do, go to cruiser? Heavyweight? There's nothing else to do.

"I want to be able to see my daughter. I want to be able to know who her teachers are, because I'm not home half the time. I'm in camp. So now family is more important than boxing.

"I'm humbled, but I'm proud that I got a chance to go out on top. How many fighters go out on top?"

Jeanette Hopkins said her husband's decision to quit the ring was fine with her. In fact, it was more than fine.

"This is the perfect farewell," she said. "Me and Latrece have been waiting a long time for this to happen. We've been begging him to stop. This is it. It has to be."

Contrast those statements – which HBO officials apparently took to heart, insofar as they later held a lavish retirement party for Hopkins – with those made just 13 months later, after Hopkins had schooled crafty southpaw Winky Wright in a technical matchup of old masters.

"If I wanted to – and I don't say this to be bragging or boasting – I could fight another four years," Hopkins said. "I am cut from the cloth of Jersey Joe Walcott, Ezzard Charles and Henry Armstrong."

So Hopkins, who once promised his since-deceased mother, Shirley, that he would retire by his 40th birthday, soldiers on in a world where he has yet to reconcile his desire to go to piano recitals and amusement parks with his need to continue turning back dangerous dudes with padded gloves on their fists.

When your memories of a hardscrabble childhood include the brushing off of a roach from a piece of bread because that was the only thing he had to eat at that time, can you really blame a man still possessed of a special talent to leave before he's good and ready?

"I think maybe it's time for me to be retired," Hopkins said, "but it won't be forced on me by the industry."