Brockton, MA. A man and his son stand outside of what appears to be an abandoned building on Petronelli Way. Yellowing classifieds roll by in the breeze like tumbleweeds. The son shifts on his feet and throws three shots in quick succession; his chin is tucked in, elbows close to his ribs, his right shoulder hunched up –a southpaw. His father's watchful gaze fixes there and then returns to the street. A pedestrian staggers by in an old duster towards Dunkin Donuts.

Empty buildings loom, the cracks in their windows cataracts in dimming eyes that saw Brockton as it once was, back when it was the shoe manufacturing capital of the world. Back when Rocco Marchegiano, aspiring world heavyweight champion, plod through Field Park dreaming of the day when he would walk into the Stacy Adams Shoe Factory on Dover Street and retire his father. By the 1960s only ten factories remained and the city soon dissipated and depressed. Then a single mother named Ida Mae arrived in Brockton with her children out of the riots in Newark, NJ. In the early 1980s one of those sons, by then a fearsome champion, would pass beneath these empty sentinels with a gym bag slung over his shoulder. He walked into this red brick building for the last time in 1987, through the same door where this new southpaw jabs and slips shadows.

Within minutes, Goody Petronelli, half the team that trained and managed Marvelous Marvin Hagler to the middleweight throne, parks his gray Dodge 4x4 and walks down the hill. Blue eyes twinkle as he greets the man with a handshake and pats the boy on the back. He's aging well. The only thing bent about him is his nose. "Nice to see you," he says while reaching into his pocket for keys. Goody holds the door open and gestures to the man and his son –a trainer and his charge. Upstairs is the legendary Petronelli Brothers Gym.

…Close the door behind you. A time machine is taking us to the future of the Sweet Science, a future where the ghost of a murderous body puncher named Tony Zale is conjured up, where Sugar Ray Robinson demonstrates how to feint a jab and throw a candy cane to the kidney on old VHS tapes, and an elderly man in a convalescent home teaches how to counter it. We're going to a place where old-fashioned values and old school ring tactics are dusted off, polished, and presented on a platter to a novice with skyward aspirations. At the center of this is his father, a 34-year old boxing trainer with a name that you won't forget: The Nonpareil Hilario.

THE PAST, TOMORROW

Turon is 14 years old. He stands 5'7 and weighs 115 lbs. His eyes meet yours when he speaks though his voice is quiet, as if he expects you to lean in to listen. His overall presentation convinces even adults that he should be respected. He has the flip-side down too; that is, he's secure enough with himself to be respectful. Rap videos don't echo in his head. The kid has presence.

If you know what to look for, a boxer can be identified in the way he moves. He'll tilt his head, roll a shoulder, or flutter his hands, and his swagger is more confidence than bravado. The

boxer moves gracefully like any elite athlete, though a hint of hazard is there too –like a big cat in the bush, or Shaft. Turon walks with that kind of self-assurance already.

Training begins with shadowboxing. “I tell him he is not to trash-talk. He is not to gloat,” Hilario leaned in close and continued, “that is not the way of a great fighter; it is the way of an insecure person.” In a culture where the self-esteem movement has adolescents teetering on pedestals never earned, where gangsta rap shakes a fist at things decent and sensible, Hilario upholds old-fashioned demands of self-respect. “Hip hop culture has been lying to our children for years,” he’ll assert, “There is no substance to it. Being a man doesn’t mean disrespecting women, it doesn’t mean demeaning others because of who or what they are, it doesn’t mean celebrating those who poison our people with drugs and negativity.”

The bell rang. Hilario stepped into the ring with Turon with body armor for drills and then worked the mitts for several rounds. When instructed to do six minutes on the heavy bag, his son nodded his head and got to work. Nothing approaching the sighs, eye-rolling, or teeth-sucking typical of his age group is evident. Nothing sags about him –not even his trunks.

Boxing has a unique way of punching right through the flimsy shields of ego and lies to expose the truth about a man. Any flaws underneath are forced to the surface –deficiency of will, low pain tolerance, self-consciousness, fear. This young fighter has a rare advantage. His father’s approach to boxing is comprehensive; it begins with the insistence that boxing is a character sport. For Turon, training doesn’t end when he leaves the gym. It’s constant. His father spends almost all of his free time with Turon and his little sister. Their days are structured, though not militaristically. They run on a track at a nearby community college, play tennis and chess. They haunt Borders and read for hours, exchanging quotes. Some evenings are spent watching old films like “Body and Soul” and “The Defiant Ones” that are then discussed as a family.

When Turon came home from school complaining about teachers who he claimed were singling him out, his father listened patiently then offered an unorthodox parental response:

“What do you do when you are under fire in the ring?”

Turon thought about it a moment, “I slip and move.”

“You should do the same thing in school.”

Advice in the gym becomes discussions at home, transfiguring the boxing ring into something bigger, something philosophical. It also reduces the world to a boxing ring, which becomes a microcosm where tenets are taught, experienced, and reinforced to bring success in both. For example, Turon’s composure in the ring will help him remain composed in the classroom, in the work place, and on the street; chances are good that it will be absorbed into his identity. Such “spiritual discussions” are “equal to 15 rounds of training,” Hilario said, “they elevate him.”

The Cappiello Brothers’ Boxing and Fitness Gym is a two minute walk from the Petronelli’s. Turon sparred four rounds against a young amateur there with experience and a six pound weight advantage. They sparred the week before and Turon took a beating in the third heat. He

came back to his corner wide-eyed. “I wanted to say, ‘Pop, that’s it for the day’,” Turon admitted, “but then I thought, ‘there’s no time for that’” and on he went. It didn’t get easier. Hilario watched from the corner. That evening father and son sat down, “Nobody goes shopping for thoughts,” Turon was told, “thoughts just come. We make a decision; we try to make the right decision.”

The rematch was different.

Turon circled to the left of his opponent, feinted with the jab, and concentrated on being elusive for two rounds. He landed a straight left to the body that was a mirror image of Tony Zale’s straight right to the body from the conventional stance, and a right hook to the body that mirrored his father’s signature shot. In the third, Turon may have thought that the jinx was in after a left hook echoed off his headgear like a gong. He held on. The bell rang. In the corner, Hilario knows when to give instruction and when to give a boost –and a boost was in order here. Turon took the fourth with a masterful display of tilt jabs (ie, jabbing with your opponent), body punching, and what Archie Moore called “escapology” –building a bridge even while attacking to escape quickly. In this little comeback lie the seeds of far greater ones.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow sat unseen in a folding chair, ringside: “In ourselves, our triumph and defeat.”

Turon was thinking not of the poet but of a pragmatist as he unwrapped his hands. “Pop told me to ‘Joe Frazier’ him,” when pressed for a definition of what a “Joe Frazier” is, he said, “you come in low, hands up, bobbing and weaving and sneaky bump him so it won’t look like pushing –to get him moving back so I can counter and punch him while I’m moving forward.”

“Pop teaches me a lot of angles, how to come in, how to spin out, stay balanced, and punch from both sides,” Turon said. Already this budding stylist has better technique than half the professionals I’ve seen on cable. And his manners are impeccable.

Danye Thomas is a trainer at the Cappiello Brothers’ gym. “The Nonpareil,” he said, “is wise.”

TIME PASSAGES

Hilario wasn’t always wise… he was expelled out of Brockton High School for fighting. He had just found boxing and had not yet internalized its demands for self-control and patience; but he’d suggest to you that it wasn’t an expulsion so much as a transfer. The Petronelli gym became his new classroom and Steve “The Celtic Warrior” Collins and Robbie Sims his tutors in science class –the Sweet Science. Sims took him under his wing and before you could say “mahvelous” with a Boston accent, he’d won the silver mittens in his first amateur fight, and then had 60 more, winning all but 6. He’d spar regularly with a professional boxer named Ray Oliveira who was a fixture on ESPN in the 1990s and held his own. By day he was in the gym or in the public library studying boxing history; by night he would pop fight films in a VCR and practice in the mirror for long hours.

Hilario was 16-years old when he met an antediluvian named John Bonner. Bonner had two cousins who fought in the early 20th century: Jimmy Bonner and Jack Bonner. The latter fought

Jack Blackburn, a dangerous lightweight of the time who went on to train Joe Louis. The Nonpareil's most valuable mentor began life as an orphan, was raised in North Philadelphia and spent his early years boxing in those tough gyms. Later, Bonner moved to New York City where he would hang around the legendary Stillman's Gym during the golden era of the 1940s. He soaked up an endless array of tricks. And his memory is sharp. When he met Hilario, he was immediately impressed with the tendency of the young Kriolu to rattle off long-dead names that Bonner himself hadn't heard in decades. The old man had found a worthy student, and so bequeathed him all those tips, traps, and techniques that no one knows anymore.

With aspirations of turning professional, Hilario followed in Bonner's footsteps to New York City. Indigent, he stayed in the Covenant House in Times Square though the connections he made were priceless. Stillman's Gym closed its legendary doors in 1959, but in no time he met Mark Breland at the New Bed-Stuy Boxing Center and Jose Torres in Michael Olajide's Kingsway Gym. Torres invited him to his house and Hilario stood jaw-to-floor in what was essentially a shrine to boxing. Torres enjoyed his company enough to invite him to attend USA's Tuesday Night Fights where Torres was the Spanish Commentator.

On Fridays, Hilario took the train over to New Jersey to work with Al Certo whose roster of fighters trained included Mustafa Hamsho, Buddy McGirt, and Andrew Golota. Hilario jumped another train back to Brockton just in time to greet his first-born son into the world –Turon, and then returned to Jersey to train with Certo and McGirt, who was still swapping leather back then. Certo was as old-school as they get –for him, training for a fight was all sparring and heavy bags. Speed bag platforms were empty –"fighters don't punch like that," he'd snap.

"I felt like King Tut," Hilario recalled, "Jose Torres on weekdays, Al Certo on weekends."

One day he was in the ring and Certo stopped the session: "Hey Junior, what's on your mind baby?" It was his new family. Homesick, he returned to Brockton. He turned up at the South Shore Gym in Whitman, MA, with a plan to turn professional close to home. His first fight was already scheduled when he asked a manager who he'd be fighting. The response was a short right that he didn't see coming: "Never mind that, you're getting paid to fight." His face, his health, his life …but evidently not his right to know. So he dropped the skip-rope and walked out. Like Bonner many decades ago, Hilario became a gym rat –fighting all and sundry, honing skills, trying to ignore depleting nickels.

An epiphany in the form of a parable changed everything:

A man was looking through a window for a teacher, but it was always blurry. For years he continued on his journey but would inevitably return to the window. One day, it became as clear as a ringside bell in an empty arena and he saw that it wasn't a window at all. It was a mirror. He himself was the teacher he was looking for.

Since then, The Nonpareil Hilario has not discriminated in gaining disciples. He extended a gloved hand to demographics once scorned in cauliflower alley, the beautiful people –white collar professionals at the Beacon Hill Athletic Club and suburban athletes with a strength coach named Saul Shocket. But he wouldn't stray far from the more raw-boned venues he's familiar

with. He trained several fighters in the Brockton area and worked in Buddy McGirt's gym in Florida with professionals Dat Nguyen, William Guthrie, and Jimmy Lange.

Two years ago, Turon asked his father to teach him the secrets of the Sweet Science …and it was Hilario's turn to find a worthy student in a new generation.

THE FUTURE, YESTERDAY

John Bonner, the man who Hilario affectionately calls "Ray Arcel" moved into a convalescent home in New Hampshire. He is 88 years old now. Hilario brings his son to visit him, and they never leave empty-handed.

During one visit, Bonner described a move he picked up in North Philadelphia, a move that became Ray Robinson's "candy-cane" shot. Robinson would feint a jab and throw a right hook to the kidney. His glove would turn around mid-flight so that the back of his knuckles would land. Bonner described this and the counter. He said to "sit down" (ie, assume a compact stance), twist with the shot as it whistles in to catch it on your elbow, and shoot an uppercut.

Bonner stands up to demonstrate such things from the gold mine of his memory and then collapses in his chair, exhausted, the moment the move is finished. Turon watches intensely with eyes wide, and then repeats the shot and the counter. Some of these moves haven't been seen in a boxing ring in over half a century –they are little resurrections. Turon's execution is perfect… and the old man laughs and claps his hands.

The Nonpareil, with an eye on the past and the future, smiles knowingly.

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