The Niavaroni-Sax Gym in Roseville, California stands beside a Marines recruiting office. On the building façade in large, white letters are the words KICKBOXING INC. I had come to interview a young, light heavyweight named Brandon Gonzalez, and had been told by his trainer that I should come at 9:00AM if I wanted to watch him spar. When I arrived, at a quarter to nine, the gym was not open, and I sat in my truck. A silver Isuzu Rodeo pulled in and parked, perhaps, like me, waiting for the doors to open, but then drove away a few minutes later. I went across the street for a cup of coffee, and when I returned, at 9:30, the open sign had been illuminated, the silver Isuzu had returned, and visible through the plate glass window was a man standing at the front counter. I turned off my truck and went in.

Along the right wall, facing the training floor, were two men in basketball shorts. I sat down beside them and put my notepad on my lap. The man closest to me looked familiar, and I asked him why I thought I recognized him.

"Maybe from THE ULTIMATE FIGHTER," he said.

I recalled then that he was Billy Miles, and that on the sixth season of Spike TV's THE ULTIMATE FIGHTER he had looked tentative in the Octagon, and had been submitted with a rear-naked choke in the first round of his first fight. "I believe we went to high school together," I said instead. "Did you go to Del Oro?"

"Yeah," he said, and we shook hands. Then he turned back to the man to his left and picked up their conversation where he'd left it.

More men started filtering in—thick, short fighters with wrestling pedigrees and aspirations, I supposed, for the cage rather than the ring. On the radio was the Adam Carolla Show. A woman walked in wearing tear-away pants. She took a bottle of water from the refrigerator behind the desk, and when she walked onto the floor she didn't speak to anyone. She appeared anxious amongst all these men, and went to the rear of the room near the ring and began to stretch.

A tall man who had been hitting the speed bag stopped and walked from the back of the gym the length of the bench, talking to the men who sat wrapping their hands. When he got to me he said, "I want to train the lefty." I was writing notes with my left hand. He introduced himself as Eric Regan, and I told him that I had come to interview the boxers. There was a fight scheduled for the following week, on the 15th of May, at the Red Lion Inn in Sacramento. When I had read the press release, Brandon Gonzalez's name was at the top of the bill. He'd fought three times as a pro, and had knocked out each of his opponents in the first round. The other fighters appeared less distinguished, especially Mike Simms, whose record stood at 19-9, the five most recent consecutive losses.

As far as I could tell from the fight poster and various websites I had visited, Gonzalez's

opponent was still 'To Be Announced,' so I asked Eric, "Do you know who Gonzalez is fighting yet?"

"You'll have to ask Nasser." Nasser Niavaroni co-owned the gym. "He's promoting the fight. He should be in this afternoon around three if you can hang out."

I had intended to hang out, but not necessarily for six hours. "When is Gonzalez going to be in?" I asked. I looked out into the parking lot where the Isuzu still sat parked, wondering if it wasn't Gonzalez in the car, talking with his girlfriend.

"I don't think he will be," said Eric. "He's probably still in Vegas. But Simms and Otis will be. That's Simms right there in the parking lot." He watched the door as a young woman in white sweats and a green top came in, carrying a small duffle bag. Then he looked back at me. "You should write that these guys are always late for training."

"I've noted that," I said.

The woman in green sat down beside me and began winding her hands in pink wrap. Eric watched her. "Who's your favorite cage fighter?" he asked her. "Tweeto Ortiz?" She didn't laugh so he repeated himself to ensure that she'd heard the joke.

"No," she said, but she didn't provide an alternate. Eric walked to the front desk, and she took out her phone and began writing a text message.

Outside Mike Simms got out of the Rodeo and walked through the front door. Eric said hello to him and pointed over at me. I stood up and went to the desk and introduced myself. If Gonzales wasn't in California, I would interview whomever was.

Simms is a big man with small hands. His face resembles Bernard Hopkins', although he appears to have taken fewer punches on the nose. I told him that I was there to interview the fighters featured on the May 15th card, and he said that he would be happy to talk with me. He walked back to the ring with his bag, and I followed him and sat on the mat, waiting for him to change. Near me a man was doing sit-ups on a declined bench. Across the gym Regan yelled for the congregation of recreational kickboxers to assume their formation, and en masse they began doing arm circles.

Simms came out of the dressing room and sat down on the mat. He took out his ring boots and a tangle of hand tape that he separated into its unique lengths. He rolled each strip into a coil and then began wrapping his right hand.

"Who are you fighting on Thursday?" I asked. I hadn't paid close attention when I'd read about his scheduled bout.

"Derrick Harmon," he said.

"You're a heavyweight?"

"Cruiser," he corrected me. "Two hundred pounds." He had finished with his right hand and had started on the left. "One of the last fights I had was in New York," he said, without provocation. "I fought Roman Greenberg, who was like 240. I knew I was gonna come in close to 200, and the promoter told me I had to come in well over that so it wouldn't be such a big gap in the weights. I was like, 'That's a part I can't help.' I'm naturally walking around at one ninety-five. So an hour before the weigh-in they took me across the street from Madison Square Garden and gave me French fries, a big ol' burger, juice, and everything. They had me try and pack on some weight. I think I came in at 206. Greenberg got on the scale and he weighed 241."

Simms finished with his left hand and put his sweatshirt into his bag. As he laced up his boots he said, "I think the biggest gap I had was my first pro loss, to a guy named Akuzia. Akuzie? I think I was 192 and he was like 246." He didn't seem to remember the fight well. (Later, when I was looking over his record, I found that his first pro loss was to Yanqui Diaz, in a six round decision in Reno. Diaz had weighed in officially at two twenty-seven, so perhaps this was our man, renamed and enlarged, but certainly a heavyweight).

"But I never worry about a guy being heavier than me," Simms continued. "If you land just one, ugly punch, you can do some damage. It don't got to be accurate. Just an ugly punch."

I mentioned that Rocky Marciano had never looked beautiful in the ring, that he had thrown brawler's punches, or what Al Weill, his manager, had called his "Suzie-Qs."

The man doing sit-ups had stood up and was wiping the sweat off his forehead. "He could hit like hell, though," he said, speaking of Marciano, and we all three agreed that Rocky Marciano could hit like hell.

"Or you take Joe Calzaghe right now," said Simms. "He throws a lot of punches, but he don't throw nothing with bad intentions. Like amateur scoring punches."

This, I assumed, was the other way Simms assumed he could fight a heavier man, by darting in and pecking at him. I mentioned that I thought Calzaghe's approach to fighting Hopkins recently in Las Vegas had been to slap him rather than slug him. The other man, whose name I later learned was Eric Regan's brother, Ezra, said, "That's what he does." I reminded them that Calzaghe had KOs—thirty-two of them, in fact—and that perhaps it had been Hopkins refusal to meet Calzaghe in the center of the ring that had inspired Joe's style.

"He just pummels you down," said Ezra, still speaking of Calzaghe. "The way he beats guys up is probably worse than getting caught with one. Ask Jeff Lacy. He ruined Jeff Lacy."

Since we had discussed the two extremes of boxing style—the brutal slugging of Marciano and the light, aggressive, percussive boxing of Calzaghe—I asked Simms how he considered his own work in the ring. "Are you a puncher or a boxer?"

"I definitely can punch," he said. "But it's like, people believe more in my punching ability than I do." He laughed.

"Mike be a boxer," Ezra said. "Switching left and right, doing every move in the book." Simms brightened at this compliment.

"My old trainer, Ray Williams," said Simms, "would tell me that when I got in the ring it was like my stage. I could go in there with the skills I had, and the toughness, and knock guys out in the first round or two. If I mentally wanted to. But that's not how I think." I wondered then why any boxer who had consistent, first round knockout punches, wouldn't use them exclusively, or at least box his way into as many fortuitous situations as possible. Simms continued, "I go into the ring and people tend to think that I'm in there playing around. People get confused because I'm not all mean-mugging, I'm not huffing and puffing, foaming at the mouth, or trying to scare my opponent with any kind of mental tactics. They think I don't take it serious, when I am serious." The tenor of his voice when he said serious made me wonder if he actually was.