

"The Best Move
Lies Closest
to the
Worst"

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After All, Fellows / Afternoon

What Would Saturday Be Like Without a Headache?

morning

One ~~time~~ ^{at} the Grammercy Gym on East Fourteenth Street in New York, a friend of one of the boxers came along to join us ~~for~~ the Saturday ~~morning~~ workout. He had never put on gloves before, but ~~he~~ ^{quietly} was confident. Having finished the New York Marathon in close to three hours, he was even ready to get in the ring on his first day, and that was notable since it usually took a couple of months to build up to such a moment. Of course, the marathoner was in superb shape.

He sparred for three minutes with the friend who had ~~the friend no more talented~~ brought him, a boxer ~~of no more than average ability even~~ at ~~the level of our small skillist~~ ^{undistinguished} and by the end of the round the marathoner felt too used up to go for another three minutes. There was never any question ~~in our minds~~ that the answer was

~~not~~ anywhere but to be found in the special nature of boxing. If our visitor had been playing one-on-one basketball for the first time, or running after a tennis ball, he might have felt talentless, even foolish, but he would not have been wholly winded in three minutes.

Boxing, however, is not like other contests ~~restricted to~~ ^{between one} person and another ^{for} ~~two people~~. It is polar, which is to say that it arouses two of the deepest and ~~most contradictory~~ anxieties we contain. There is not only the fear of getting hurt which is profound in more men than will admit to it, but there is also an opposite panic, equally unadmitted, of hurting others. Part of the second fear rests, of course, on the well comprehended equation that the harder you hit your opponent, the more he is going to feel free to bang on you.

It goes deeper than that, however. To be born into the middle class is to be brought up not to strike others--the strictures are laid into us along with our training for the

toilet. Children engaged in fun and games were probably the first to feel the yoke of being politically correct: ~~not that easy~~ "That's nice, children, play nice."

Maybe that is one of the reasons it is surprisingly more difficult to throw a good punch than you would think. It not only requires as much coordination as to hurl a football in a spiral consistently for thirty yards or more, but the punch ~~even~~ insists on inner sanction. You have to feel justified.

Even professionals at the highest level are not immune to the need for sanction. Muhammed Ali once paid a ~~press-inspired~~ visit to Floyd Patterson's training camp in the Catskills a few weeks before their championship bout in Las Vegas, and on arrival ~~at~~ ^{Floyd} ~~Floyd's premises~~ proceeded to heckle Patterson brutally. 

"You're nothing but a rabbit," Ali told Patterson in front of the reporters, ~~gathered around~~, and then decamped in high operatic disgust. Patterson managed to throttle ~~his~~ ^{his visible} perturbation down to a wry grin. "Well," he said, "I won't

have to worry about motivation with that guy, will I?"

One could ^{just about sophisticated} divine Ali's ^{premise}: To a man like Patterson, an overload of sanction could ^{prove} disastrous. On the night of the bout Floyd was so tense that his lower back went out on him in the second round. While he managed to keep on fighting ^{out of} ~~through~~ one distorted position after another until they stopped the contest in the eleventh round, he never had a chance. All he ^{succeeded in proving} ~~could prove~~ was that he was no rabbit.

The marathoner wore out because two wholly opposed anxiety systems were both working at full thrust in him. It is one thing to ^{be} ~~be~~ frightened--some other part of yourself can pull you through. When both halves of your nature ^{however} are in panic ^{and} ~~however~~ worse ^{wholly different} are in panic for ~~opposite~~ reasons, paralysis or quick exhaustion is the consequence.

~~Patterson, however, was skilled--he had found a professional accommodation between these two fears.~~ Be it said that for professionals ^{such opposed} ~~the~~ fears still exist--it is just

that the ante has gone up: Now, you can kill a man in the ring

or be killed yourself. It took Ali to divine that Patterson,
~~no matter how successfully he had found a way to live professionally~~
~~with both fears—would be made too~~
~~made (murderous by Ali's insults, would be precisely the man to~~
~~lose~~
~~above~~ ^{would become so} that his back would go into spasms,
 his fighting balance (seriously upset, X Ali was not a

genius for too little. ~~If~~ In the ring, genius is transcendent

moxie--it is having the audacity to know that what ~~should not~~ ^{usually does not}

~~work or is~~
~~work, or what is usually too dangerous to attempt, will in one~~ ^{can}

~~this special case prove a winning move.~~ ^{(which is why attempts are made}
~~Of course, if Ali had~~ ^{from}
~~had miscalculated Patterson's state by fight night--if Ali had~~ ^{time}
~~Patterson, the~~ ^{to}
~~awakened Patterson's determination instead of cramping it, the~~ ^{time}
~~price would not have been small.~~ ^{to}
^{compare}
^{boxing}
^{to}
^{chess.)}

~~of course, At Ali's level,~~ ^{had} you ~~and~~ ^{then} to be ready to die, (for
 your best ideas, ~~but~~ ^R for our pugilistic fold on Saturday

morning in the gray, grimy, greasy, now ~~demolished~~ ^{closed} [JM note

it isn't a gym but I believe the building was still standing,

as of a few months ago--it was on a second floor, right?]

Grammercy Gym off East Fourteenth Street in New York where

even the ropes and the canvas were gray, and the windows, summer or winter, were a dish-rag gray, we were ready to show up--each at our own private frequency--some ^{regularly} (once a week) ~~regularly~~, some once a month, and all ~~the~~ variations between--
 we ^{yes,} were ready to wake up on Saturday morning with the knowledge that no legitimate excuse was there ^{on this occasion} (to get us out of it ~~today~~). We would have to show up. Nonetheless, it was also true that once there, one did not have to box, one could merely work out, shadow-box, hit the speed bag ~~and~~ the heavy bag, do sit-ups, jump rope, or even less--there were no rules, and no obvious rewards, and virtually no shame for doing too little, other than ~~the~~ faint inner distress at one's subtle queasiness on macho matters.

Or, one could box. Sometimes there were weeks in a row when ^{you} ~~one~~ went one, or better, two three-minute rounds on every Saturday. It varied. No one judged anyone else. ^{Given our} ~~With all~~ ^{individuality,} ~~variations,~~ we were nonetheless not that unlike when it came

to our guts and our skill. Most of us did not have ^a great
~~deal~~ ^{of the latter,} We were there to make delicate adjustments on our
^{workaday} ongoing ~~(ego)~~. Sparring honestly for several weeks in a row,
 just that once-a-week submersion into three minutes or six
 minutes of high-speed (for us) boxing did wonders for the
 self-esteem one could carry out to one's social life.

Of course, most of us separated outside. We had ^{among us} a cab
 driver, an editor of a porny magazine, a high-school English
~~teacher~~ ^{who suffered a broken jaw one morning,}
 an actor who worked as a dealer nights in a gambling
^{A purchased headgear}
 joint and ~~wore a boxing mask~~ (with a vertical bridge to protect
^{handsome} his ~~handsome~~ nose--which we all ^{found ludicrous} laughed at (until he went on to
 become a television star in a ~~reasonably serious~~ TV crime
 series. He had been right--his nose was part of ^{his} ~~his~~ capital
^{had} and he ~~and~~ seen too many losers in the gambling joints each
^{night} night with noses as flat as their wallets.

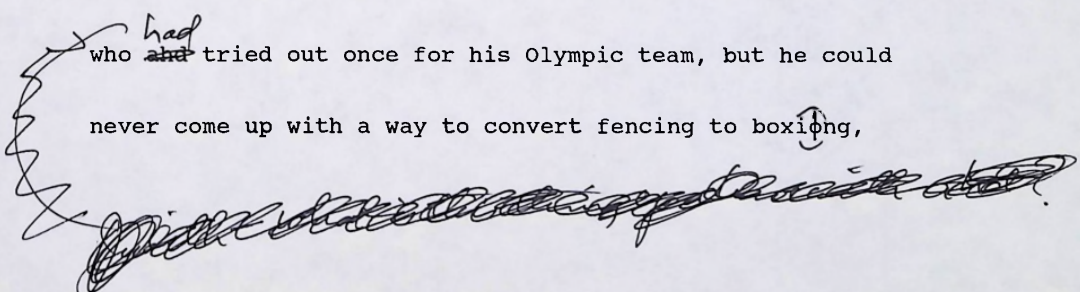
We also had a couple of young writers and one Golden
 Gloves aspirant who lost his first and only bout, and we had

an established older writer, myself. For the record, I didn't hang up my ^rfourteen-once gloves until I was fifty-^{seven}~~eight~~ or fifty-^{eight}~~nine~~, but by then, my knees were gone, I had beaten them ^{half}~~half~~ to death jogging ^{on sidewalks,} and if you cannot do a little running the requisite three times a week, you certainly don't have the wind to box on Saturday. It does not matter then how much you know about boxing ^{and its} ~~with~~ two systems of anxiety, the fact is that when you ^{have} ~~have~~ no wind, you cannot be any kind of pugilist unless you are as ^{sly} ~~wise~~ as Archie Moore or as ^{wise} ~~as~~ as George Foreman. For an average man to go into the ring without wind is equal to going in without blood. So I ^{gave} ~~gave~~ it up, I eased out of it, and have never felt ^{as} ~~so~~ virtuous since. Nor as young. ~~That is for sure.~~

We had others who came on Saturday morning, transients.

A criminal lawyer was there fo a few weeks and a greek fencer

who ^{had} ~~and~~ tried out once for his Olympic team, but he could never come up with a way to convert fencing to boxing, [↑]



although he certainly ~~had~~^{must have} a good long left jab. a thrust and a quick recovery, you might say. The friends of friends showed up for short periods, and there was one year when we had an instructor, a fast Puerto Rican bantamweight professional who was too good to impart very much to us. ~~he~~^{had} ~~and~~ been brought in by Jose Torres, our resident dean, who used to enjoy boxing with all of us. Torres had been light-heavyweight champion of the world, having won his title from ^{Willie} (Pastranno in 1965 [CK] by a TKO in the ninth round at Madison Square Garden and having lost it to Dick Tiger in 1967 in fifteen rounds in ~~the~~^{the} same place, a fight so close that it established an unheard-of precedent: A champion could actually ~~forfeit~~^{lose} his title ~~in~~ⁱⁿ a close fight. Torres then lost the rematch with Tiger in another very close fight (which promptly put an end to the new precedent.)

Why he enjoyed boxing with us, I never quite understood, ~~for~~ ^{It} bore comparison to the kind of bemused pleasure Colin

interval, with sixty seconds of rest before it rang again.

So, we worked through three minutes rounds

~~The prevailing gray of the auspices was a reflection of~~

~~the burnt-out hopes of most of the professional who worked~~

~~there, so it was a three-minute round, not so.~~ *Let me* ~~It may help to~~

explain the difference, ~~if I say that~~ the last sixty seconds of

a round feels as long as the first two minutes. Boxing two

rounds in a row (which total of six minutes *is equal to* ~~was as long as a~~

three-round amateur bout) one could get *enough to find it* ~~so~~ tired that it was

considerably easier to take an arm-weary punch to the head from

your opponent than to raise your own bone-dead arms in

defense.

Ryan O'Neal came to join us, however, and our Saturdays *for*

that season ~~were altered.~~ *Ryan* ~~He~~ was making a movie in New York and ~~some~~

Jose Torres was his friend, and *had* ~~and~~ worked as a boxing adviser

on Main Event, a comedy O'Neal *had made* ~~and made~~ with Barbra Streisand,

Now, each Saturday morning, after five days of shooting on his

film, O'Neal would come in to the *Grammy* ~~Grammy~~ *mercy*.

He was good enough to have been a ring professional. ~~If he had had a different life, he might not have been a~~

~~movie star but a ring professional.~~ Torres could not play with him when they boxed, and once Ryan even ^{managed to} hit José with a shot to the mouth that drew a little blood. ^{That was equal to} a sacrilege. ~~so~~

~~angered~~ was José ~~that he~~ nodded curtly, and stepped out of the ring. ^{in rebuke,} The retaliation he ^{had} chosen not to ^{express} offer was as violent palpable as the air in summer before a storm and O'Neal looked sheepish, like a man who is too far from home to be caught without a raincoat.

After that, he and José did not box so often and when they did, ~~governors on~~ their intensity ^{was kept} ~~was~~ (subtly in place). ~~Instead,~~ O'Neal would work out ^{instead} ~~with whoever~~ ^{was} there.

By our measure, he was in superb condition. He would take us on serially, each of us ^{going} for a round ^{or} two depending on our ability to continue, and by the end of his workout he had ^{his way through} boxed eight to ten rounds against our easy opposition. Then he would go off to play racket ball with Farrah Fawcett.

Powell might take in teaching close order drill to recruits.

On the other hand,

In any event, *(we all enjoyed boxing with a former light-*

heavyweight champion. He was impossible to hit and that was an interesting experience--you felt as if you were in the ring with a puma. On the other hand, it was part of his honor not to hurt anyone. When you made a mistake he would tap you. If you repeated the error he would tap you harder. Defensive reflexes developed in the student. *Only if* If you were incorrigible, ~~however, he~~ *maybe* would murmur, "Keep your gloves higher," and move away. *Torres* Over ten years of boxing with Jose *(I was able to catch* ~~him~~ *him* ~~Torres~~ with a good right hand just twice, and the first occasion was an event. He ran around the ring with his arms up in triumph crying out, "He hit me with a right. ~~He hit me~~ with a right!" *and* *that day* ~~he~~ was unconscionably proud of his pupil.

It was due to Jose that we had the use of the gym. The management *offered* ~~gave~~ him the keys. When he did not show up on an occasional Saturday, a poet who lived in a fourth-floor loft

above the third-story gym would let us in by opening his

begrimed window ^{long enough} (to throw the key down to us in a rolled-up

sock, ^{and} When we climbed the stairs, the gym still reeked of the

serious sweat of the professionals who ^{had} trained here ^{all through} ~~from~~

^{the preceding} Monday to Friday.

Such was our club. ^But for the clear exceptions, we were
all more or less equal, and we sparred like ^{club members.} ~~gentlemen.~~ There
were few wars. We worked on what we considered ^{most} ~~we were~~

lacking, a better left hook, a sharper jab, a hook off the
jab, a heavier ^{or a} faster right hand. ^{Or both} (Some of us even ventured

into combinations, but never far. Mediocre condition was the
scythe that dictated the ^{slow rate} ~~level~~ of ^{one's} ~~our~~ improvement. It is hard

to describe how tired ^{you} ~~you~~ can get in a three-minute round
^{when} ~~when~~ you are forced to ^{work at} ~~do~~ your best. Two-minute rounds, the

duration employed in the Golden Gloves for Sub-Novices, would
have been ^a ~~both~~ considerably more satisfactory ^{interval} (for us, but at the
~~G~~rammercy, our bell was set on a professional three-minute

Getting in the ring with Ryan O'Neal became not only the

focus of each Saturday, but the point to what some of us had

been trying to do for ~~the last 20~~ years. Ryan would take it

~~easy with us, but not altogether, and he~~ could be mean as cat

piss. Even when he was carrying ^{a man,} you, he could ~~choose to be~~ ^{punish him,}

~~and when he had~~

~~punishing. He and dislikes, and~~ he would take them out on ^{the}

opponents ~~who irritated him. With all he had done in his life~~

~~and in spite of every romance in his private dossier, Ryan had~~

more than a decade to the gossip columns, Ryan had

a dry spot--the Puritanism of the Irish, none more judgemental

encounter)

when you ~~find~~ ^{happened to be} it. He took a secret dislike to the editor of

the porny magazine who ~~was~~ ^{not much of a boxer.} Awkward in

the ring, it was not hard to play tricks on ~~him,~~ ^{the porny editor,} but he had

He had surprising stamina however.)

~~stamina.~~ ^{in fact} Until Ryan came along, the pornographer had, the best

stamina of any of us. ^{Maybe} ~~It was then as if Ryan equated such~~ ^{that}

~~physical~~ ability to sexual stamina and disapproved of its

presence in ~~that editor,~~ ^{so unworthy a vessels)} for he all but disembowelled the man,

throwing cruel left hooks to the ~~others~~ ^{the editor,} stomach until ~~he~~

collapsed, still conscious, in the middle of the ^{second} round, wholly unable to go on. What made it worse was that the pornographer's lady love, a good-looking girl who worked in a massage parlor, was ^{present} ~~there~~ looking on. She was loyal, but it was a humiliating defeat, and something in their love--and it was, after all, their love--was lost that day.

I happened to be the next one in the ring with Ryan that ^{morning which} ~~day~~, and that ^(was) my good luck. After every discharge of ~~his~~

mean feelings, Ryan would become angelic--he ^{could sit for} ~~was~~ a study in

^{now} cruelty ^{can} ~~alternates~~ with conscience--and so, ^a little ashamed,

^{expect} I believe, of what he ^{had} ~~had~~ just done to the pornographer, ^{now}

^{now} ~~that he had done it~~, he ^(boxed) absolutely unlike a movie star--

he did not protect his face. ^{Since the man} ~~(I liked the man he had hurt who~~
was a sweet and generous ^{fellow, and extraordinarily optimistic about life} ~~gay~~, which is probably how he had

gotten into pornography in the first place ^{I liked him} ~~(since it is easier~~

^{When I saw him take that beating, I realized} ~~to get into that life if you believe in the essential goodness~~

~~that I saw him as a friend. I would apologize for~~
~~of everyone). A digression! It is to carry me around the~~
this digression if it were not essentially narrative
in spirit for it helps to carry me around the

embarrassment of declaring that I boxed better on that day than I ever did before, and ~~possibly~~ since. I was in a rare mean mood myself, mean enough not to be afraid of Ryan, and--it is very hard to do any kind of good boxing against a superior without some premise or fantasy to carry you--I was ^{now} feeling like an avenger. And there was Ryan boxing with his face. ^{IX} ~~so~~

^{was not hard to} hit him some straight rights, and he reacted with all the happiness of seeing a beloved senior relative get up off a sickbed. In our first clinch, he whispered, "You punch sharper than anyone here." Pure Hollywood.

"Go fuck yourself," I told him.

We ^{fell} ~~got~~ into a pattern. He would give me a target, I would take it, and he would counterpunch. He hit harder than anyone in the club but that was the day ^{when} ~~when~~ my two systems of anxiety were at rest, and I never enjoyed boxing as much.

^{Following that Saturday, we} took up a weekly form of behavior. I would invariably ^{be the} ~~be the~~ ^{to box} ~~box~~ first with him (mainly, I think, so I could enjoy watching

the others ^{now that} ~~when~~ (I was done) and he would ^{continue to spar} ~~box~~ with his (face) as
 if daring me to catch him, ~~and~~ often I would, and he would
 counterpunch. How much he took off his blows I do not know--
 at whatever level he gunned down his motors for me, his
 punches ~~still stung and~~ jolted, and occasionally took your head
 half-around, or left a space in your gut, and I, in turn, ~~I~~
 took my punches down very little for him, ~~but~~ ^{however,} whatever the
 balance, ^{however,} we had found it, and it was as close as it ever came ^{for me}
 to having some knowledge of how a professional might feel in a
 real bout for money with a hard-hearted crowd out there and
 the spirit of electricity itself in the ring lights. I even
 came to understand what it was to feel love for the man you
 were fighting because he ^{had} ~~and~~ forced you to go ^{a little} beyond yourself,
 and I never took as many good punches or threw as many ~~good~~
~~ones~~ as in those one or two rounds each Saturday with Ryan
 O'Neal.

Life, in the form of Luce Publications, caught up with this

romance. Ryan, having ~~given me over to~~ ^{produced} my Saturday

illumination, would then box with another three or four ~~people~~ ^{of us}

and ~~he~~ kept to his habit--I always thought it was penance for ~~having~~ ^{become}
~~being~~ a movie star--of ~~boxing with~~ ^{showing} that open face, so easy to
 hit.

There came a day when I popped him in the left eye a few times ^{running}
 and the boxers who came after me did approximately as much in
 the same place, and ~~he had a mouse~~ ^{for the day he had a mouse,} That got
 into the papers. One of the gossip columns, if I recall, said
 that Norman Mailer had given Ryan O'Neal a shiner.

People Magazine called up. They were ~~going~~ ^{ready} to do a story,
~~on it. I knew that would kill the beginning of real~~
~~friendship with Ryan, and I wanted to know him better. I had~~
~~rarely encountered a man who had such contrasts of darkness~~
~~and light. So I turned the reporter from People Magazine over~~
 to Jose ^{Tovres} I knew he would protect Ryan.

He did. For my money, he protected him ~~and~~ too well

since it came at my expense. "Ryan could ^{have} ~~any~~ easily beaten

Norman up," said Torres for publication--which was exactly

true, I understood ^{that it was true} (with all the hard objective core of my

pride in being a writer who will ^{always} ~~try to~~ look at the truth, ^{that}.

^{severe gray lady, gray as the Gromore gym,}
(but, still. . . How about ^{a little} ~~the~~ transcendence?)

Jose was much too agile, however, to ^{sacrifice} ~~leave~~ one friend
~~wholly~~ ^{in order to defend} to the wolves at People Magazine ~~while in the course of~~
^{as a filip to the} defending another friend. So ~~he added for the benefit of the~~
^{he added:} "Norman could whip Sly Stallone in one round."

"Yes," I said to Jose, "and what happens when I run into
Sly Stallone?"

Joe shrugged. ~~That was on next year's agenda, or, more~~
~~likely, five years down the road~~ Jose and ^{more} immediate
^{were always,} problems (waiting for him around every corner.

^{do not} I ~~don't~~ recall ^{it} ~~at~~ if was one year, or two or three before

I did encounter Sylvester Stallone, but it was ^{did happen one night particularly} (in a disco ^{dark} one
^{with a naked floor, that I recall,}
~~night, and the conversation may be worth recording.~~

"I understand," said Stallone, "that you're the guy who can beat me in one round."

He had never looked ~~better~~ ~~nor~~ in finer shape.

"Yeah," I said, applying all the thickener I could muster to my voice, "I remember when Jose said that, I said to him, 'Yeah, swell, but what happens if I don't knock him out in one round?' and Jose said, 'Oh, then he will kill you.'"

Stallone gave his sad, sleepy-eyed smile. "Oh, Mr. Mailer, I can assure you, I don't go around killing people."

It was gracious, ~~it was generous~~. One could only respond ~~in~~ [#]kind. "Mr. Stallone," I said, "I don't go around getting in the ring with people who can do one-arm pushups."

"Ah," he said sadly, "I can't do them any more. I hurt my arm."

We grinned at each other, we shook hands. I think we were in silent league (for the ^{most} ~~little~~ good it could do) against the long ~~dirty~~ reach of People Magazine.

Afterward, I could smile at the cost of ^{such} knowledge. It
 had taken ^{me} ten years of boxing to come up with ~~one little~~ ^{one little}

jewel--what if I don't knock him out in the first round, yes,

one boxed for the better footing it gave ~~me~~ in the social

world, and one could even believe, yes, absolutely ^(that boxing) ~~it~~ was one

of the sixty things a man must learn to do if he is to get

along in this accelerating world, ~~¶ Farewell, Gramercy~~

~~Gym, My son Michael used to box there,
 when he was sixteen,
 and he ended up President of the Boxing
 Club at Harvard in his senior year, and~~

~~entered the Golden Gloves as a So~~

✓ Yes, ~~¶~~ Farewell, Gramercy Gym, gray lady of
 my late middle age, I will always be
 loyal to you,