

CANVAS

A Short Story

By

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First day of the New Year c.1920, somewhere in a rundown arena that doubled as a brothel.

In one quick sweep of his glove Johnson lands his first blow before the bell. It was a deft movement, breaking Shill's nose. A *bang* sounds when Shill's cut man drops the metal spit bucket followed by a *clang* of the fourth-round bell.

"He'll never last," screeches Morey, pulling Shill down onto the wooden stool.

Morey was a hard-boiled corner manager who still bore the deep scars of his former fights. Back when there were no rules that protected fighters or refs that looked for chipped glass hidden in the bloated leather thumbs of the boxer's mitts. However, today, for the right amount of money and the wrong connections, the refs looked but did not see.

Morey talks to Jack, Shill's promoter, agent, and self-appointed pimp. The latter described his title more akin to the seedy activities which always surrounded Shill's fights. When you take into account before Jack (also called Jiggs), doled out any cash, there was a whack at the percentages which rivaled tithing. Jack moves the cigar from one side of his mouth to the other, rolling it over his tongue and gives Morey a look like he needs to keep it down or Shill will figure out his nose is broken. In sort of a harsh whisper Jack leans over to Morey and says, "Ya fucking Ginny! He's got a broken nose, but that's all."

Every time Jack (aka Jiggs) talks, he blows gin breath all the way down his cigar causing the end to glow red.

I keep waiting for the gin to blow it up and cause a flash fire an inch from Jack's mouth. "Jack! Ya fucking snake! He's gotta a broken nose. Yeah! That's all, but it ain't but the forth round and Shill's got eight of these hard knockin mother-fuckers to go!"

Morey trails off at the end of this and starts absently working on Shill's nose. He wipes it down with a towel he keeps snagged in his back pocket and then pulls a cotton-tip from behind his ear. He dips this into iodine and formaldehyde (a concoction that helps stops the bleeding according to Morey) and swipes Shill's nose. Shill's eyes light up and get big. He screams in agony which is met with the clang of the bell signifying the beginning of round five.

Shill gets up a bit shaky and lumbers to meet his opponent, Johnson: the 2nd round contender in the

light heavyweight division.

"Morey, don't ever fucking talk shit in front of my fighter again!" says Jiggs and then rolls his cigar to the other side of his mouth.

"Your fighter! I trained this Irish fuck, damned near three years now...hell, I fed, clothed him and ruined a few sheet getting his mic-ass milked by one of your whore biscuits you got on that side business," says Morey. He then adds, "You might want to remember who slicks the grease in your iron, boy!"

Jack the Jiggs Monahan, moves a little to the other side of the corner and rolls his eyes at Morey along with his cigar simultaneously. Morey is trailing off again watching the fight. Every now and then yelling to pull back or stop leading with his right. But Shill can't hear him because the crowd is on their feet again and screaming. All of a sudden, Johnson drops back, moves left then right, ducks his head and pops forward leading with his left. He connects with a helluva southie to the side of Shill's face which spins his head around so far he's now staring right at Morey, but his feet haven't moved.

"Jesus rubber-stamp Christ!" Morey screams and the only instruction he gives now is, "Get the fuck out of there!"

But Shill can't hear him because the crowd is on their feet and far too loud. And Shill can't even hear the crowd because he's deaf with pain and amazement.

The ref lands on ten at the same moment Jack's cigar hits the cracked cement floor of the dingy hall. Through the din of the crowd's roar, between the smoke curling like swirling gray flowers above the cigarettes and cigars of the excited spectators, I see Shill hit the canvas. He bounces only once and then goes limp. He wasn't coming around anytime soon. I use the thick fibrous ropes to pull myself around the outer ring and squat down only inches from where Shill's head lay like a stone on the mat. Jack is hunting around for his bookie and I can see the sparkle in his eyes that tells me he bet on Johnson to win. He bet against his own fighter. Worst yet, he bet against my brother and I'd kill him for sure just for that.

He was my only brother, now that our sister had taken ill then died with the croup. He was also my

responsibility -even though he was four years older. I stop, fix on his chest to make sure he is breathing and wait. I

look between the ropes and every now and then look at Jack who is still hunting for his bookie with those greedy ugly eyes.

"Here, Dustin," Morey said now squatting next to me and hands over a wet towel he doused in the water bucket.

"We get 'em up and wrap this around his neck. He liable to be in and out a bit but the cold water will get his brain started up again."

"You see that shit-hole pecking round for that slick bookie?" I say, and Morey just gives me this look like we are going to deal with that later. The ref raises Johnson's arm and a whole team of reporters and mugs and slipshods beat their way into the ring to get pictures and mementos. Some of them step all over Shill with their patent-leather heels. I jump through the ropes and pull Shill up, wrapping his head in the towel. Morey gets him on the other side and we walk, dragging him from the ring. The crowd watches as we go away, cutting a path toward the lockers. I hold on to my brother and Morey holds on to him as well just opposite me. Shill's head just lolls from side to side and his feet drag, stumble, and drag some more. We hold on and the crowd watches and yells. Sometimes they throw garbage. They yell and watch us going away.

"Listen to you, now," Morey says. "You going on like your brother had a chance in that ring today."

"Hush the fuck up. He had just as much a chance as that hack Johnson and a whole lot more heart!" I say and feel a little bad because I knew Morey was just trying to help out.

"Well, Dusty, you going on that way makes me worry that you ain't gonna hold it together after I done went all the way to town to help get this fight and we both knew ole Shill at thirty is past his prime."

Shill is still out cold on the bench and the sheet we pull up over him is hanging off his limp body and flapping from Morey pacing back and forth next to it.

"Ain't no more fights," Morey says real quiet. "Just all fighted out suppose."

I look over at Morey and he at me. It is dark except for one yellow bulb hanging from the cracked plaster ceiling. The room stinks of sweat and blood and we can hear Shill breathing, pulling in deep shallow gulps of air. The blanket stops flapping as soon as Morey stops pacing.

"One more," I say. "One more fight he has in him. Then, we're done."

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here is a slanting and tilting to the light cast from the bulb. It throws the shadows of the room in a

way that made it look funeral. Morey walks past Shill one more time and the blanket flaps and then is still again. I hold my breath waiting for Morey.

"One more time," Morey says and then we go to work on bringing Shill out of unconsciousness.

"Shut up that moaning." Morey says. "I can't make the swelling go down by just staring at it. Dusty, get me some more ice."

"If you don't hush your frigging mouth I ain't gonna work on you," Morey hisses to Shill." "Maybe you get up off that bench and we go home, I'll fetch ya some gin and biscuits."

I hand Morey some chipped ice wrapped in an old towel twisted down to a lump at the end looking like the world's biggest tad pole.

"Fuck sake Dusty, I can't work with that. Come on! Let's get the hell out of here and move this lump of meat off the table and get home."

We leave the dark locker room and go along the musty damp corridor leading out of the hall. Three shadows trail behind us, broken at the legs and bending up the brick walls. When we come to the door, we walk into a full dark night, leaving our shadows locked inside hell behind a huge metal door. We come to a broken place in the sidewalk, skirt it and go home. Shill walking on his own now. Me looking at my brother. My brother looking at the sidewalk. Morey looking at me.

Morey catches my gaze and looks away. I see the doubt in his face. We move down Fifth Street and the cement stoops, dips and rasps against the soles of our shoes. The cement is hard and hurts my feet. We climb Seventh Avenue and head toward the dingy apartments we shared at the Roosevelt Hotel. By the time we get there all of us were grunting and snuffing at the air like pigs. My gut is hard, churned and knotted.

The apartment in which the three of us lived smells of cheese and dirty socks. The gym where Shill

trained smells better. Morey, now crouching on a nail keg at the back of the crowded room, knows he smells cheese, and more. From where he sits he can see the ranked shelves closely packed with the solid, squat, dynamic shapes of tin cans whose labels his stomach read, not from the lettering which meant nothing to his mind but from the scarlet devils and the silver curve of fish. The cheese he smells is from old socks, dirty underwear, and t-shirts soaked with sweat, made worse by the intense summer heat which bakes it during the day. Then there is the smell of the hermetic meat which his intestines believe he smells coming in intermittent gusts momentarily. And briefly, between the other constant rancid smells comes another -and that was fear. I smell it too. The smell and sense of fear mostly of despair and grief, the old fierce pull of blood from one kin to the next and Morey is saved this because Shill is not his brother.

Morey cannot see the table where the gin bottle sat, but I can tell by the way he licks his lips he knows it is there. The more he sits and thinks, the more afraid he gets and the more he wants to drink. And then Shill is there

on the torn sofa, burping its shag matted cotton out of little pockets, and I can see in his eyes the enemy sat there too with him. *Our enemy*, I think. The enemy of fear and despair. Ours. Mine and his. Both. Not Morey. He's our friend, but he ain't no kin.

Shill stands looking out the dirty window into an even more dirty city, but he cannot hear Morey

mumbling to him because the one side of his face is swollen and the ear to Morey was cauliflower. The two of them now look at one another, not saying anything and then Shill speaks up real loud, like a deaf man not knowing the temper of his own voice any more. "I told you no more fights after this one. I got it caught up in my head I could win and I didn't."

Morey looks over at me like he was caught, so I say, "What proof you got that you lost that fight on account of talent or guts you sonofabitch?"

Shill is stunned and actually grins. It was all I could think of saying to snap him out of his low and get him moving. It must have made Shill think a bit because he is still grinning when he busts me right in the nose.

"The hog fucker done plucked the chick," Morey screams and then starts laughing while the blood runs down my chin and on to my shirt.

"I told him, I warned him Shill you ole ass eater," cries Morey and then keeps on laughing like he's crazy. When I get back on my feet I give Shill a leering eye and then go to the wash pan to rinse the blood off my face. The tears roll down my cheeks mostly from pain, but they still roll and I can see Shill feels sort of bad, but not enough to apologize.

That night I paid a town boy one dollar to get us some cold beers from the tavern and bring em back to

the apartment. He was a strange boy and he said, "Shill was wood and hay and burnt easy."

I said, "What?" but that boy just handed me the beer and change and I handed him back a penny and he laughed and scrambled.

That night I lay in bed and it smelled like cheese and piss and I thought of what that strange boy said and it was all the proof I needed. As the night faded and the moon gave way to a small crouching cloud, it was proof in the

pudding. Proof that they're laughing at Shill and he didn't only have to fight one more time, he'd have to keep on fighten until he was champ and then he'd have to fight some more to keep it.

For a moment I thought my older brother was going to die in the ring. Sometimes I'd get this sick

feeling and then mostly it just went away when I remembered how strong he was. I was always the little one. An "odd one," our father would say. Shill now sat crouching near the window while Morey slept in the chair. I was in the kitchenette frying some eggs. It had been three weeks since Shill's last fight and he was still bruised.

"Get in here and eat some eggs. Then we go to the gym for more training," I said, scooping a heap of yellow mush onto one of the tins we used as a plate.

"I ain't gonna fight cuz I ain't got no fighter to hit on or hit on me more like and Morey's an old fuck who can't train me and that slick shit of a manager Jack is working hard to peddle me as a no-show, no-win thug."

This was the most Shill had said in three weeks and it came out all at once. "Eat your fucking eggs and shut your everlasting gabber," I said, and then dropped the tin on the counter heavy with the wet eggs where Shill could see it. I then walked past Morey who let out a gaseous fart and went in the back room to pack the gym bag.

I was tall and thin and always wiry like our father. Shill was tall as well and stock beef. He generally

wore faded jeans, much too small for him on account of always building his body up and no money to up the clothes with his build. He had straight, uncombed, brown hair and eyes gray and wild as storm scud. He was a hard and distrusting man. Shill didn't see people as good. Instead, he saw they were always between him and something he wanted. In his world, there was nothing but a lane of grim faces and at the end he saw the injustices done to him and it made him meaner. I believed if he could channel that rage he'd be a helluva fighter. Morey on the other hand was a gray florid man with a hard empty face. A shabby, hapless, stout man in spectacles, beckoning the world to put him out of his misery. A world he called done in. He took up no more space than what he sucked out of a bottle of gin.

I suddenly felt no floor under my bare feet as I headed for the bedroom, the only bedroom. I seemed to

walk beneath the palpable weight of the grim turning faces of the crowd in my mind that kept coming back and making me hate them even more. They were cheering for Shill, but only when he went down and went down hard. My back was stiff like it always was when we were training, but not like when Shill boxed. I packed the gym bag absently and donned my black coat. With frantic grief and despair I aimed to lie to Shill and tell him he's still got a reason to fight cuz there's a champ in him. I aimed to lie to him and I would have to do it a bit more even if it meant Shill getting the breath beat out of him.

Morey woke up with a snort and a fart announcing his alertness to the room and the world.

"That'll do," I said. "Take your wagon-size ass and get out of the chair...let's go."

Reluctantly, Morey attempted to stand, fell backward, farted one more time, and rose to a standing position. And as if he'd been waiting on us all this time he shouted, "Let's go!"

I turned, smacked Shill on the back and followed him out the door, Morey behind me walking a little stiffly from where the age had taken him on the hip and heel. We followed the two blocks leading toward the gym now, Shill in front, and then me, his young and more astute brother behind. Morey trailed last and bitched about the cold.

As we passed the alleyways, a hobo approached us. He was hiding just back and somewhere in the

darkness of the buildings. "I could a done shot ya," he said to Shill.

"Ain't no hobo smart enough or rich enough to own or work a heater," Shill said back and we passed him by. He was no taller than Morey and he was a familiar hobo. He worn a frown on a battered face from years and drugs and his pants sagged on him. When we were a safe distance away, he yelled, "Barn burner! Take a fall for ole Jiggs like a good dog!" Both Shill and I were set to go back and beat the stink off him, but Morey just waved his hand and said we'll prove our mud in the ring.

Again, I could not see the whirling figure of fear in my mind; but I knew it was there and I knew what

it was. It was failure and death. It bore a face in a red haze, moonlit bigger than the full moon, and it owned my soul. Leaping in the red haze toward my face feeling the hard blow and shock of it was the fact I was probably leading my older brother, my only brother, to his death by talking him into another fight. He'd have to take on men that put Johnson to shame in the ring and Johnson damn near took his head off and broke his spine. I could still hear the thick snap when Johnson landed the right to Shill's unsuspecting face. And I watched Shill feel no shock when his head struck the canvas - his body scrambled up and leapt again, this time feeling no blow because he was already unconscious.

He wouldn't taste the blood until later - he was spared this, and the harsh cold voices of the crowd yelling and sneering at him to get back up. They were like a grove of locusts. A hulking, moving mob of hatred hungry for Shill's blood. Then there was Jack, looking around for his bookie. He was in on it all the way. Sold us out in spades. I felt he was somewhere in this city sitting at the table of some mob boss. Among the sorry residue of the dozen or so men with faces like battered stoves counting their money. And later they'd slap Jack on the shoulder and ask him when Shill would fight again so they could double their proceeds. The men would smile and behind those smiles was murder - even Jack's, but he was too stupid and greedy to know it or care. Later, he would lay some fat whore in a broken bed and hammer away for two bits while staring at a clock knowing it'd cost him another two bits ten minutes later.

We got to the door of the gym and Shill drew his sleeve across his face to wipe away the snot

running from the cold and began to ascend the long wooden stairs leading to "Mitch's Boxing and Compliments Gymnasium." No one ever knew why Mitch added the word "Compliments" in his gym but had told Shill that if he ever won the title, he'd call it Shill's Boxing Arena and not charge him for the namesake, cuz he was good-natured.

"Get on the bag," Morey told Shill when we walked inside the gym and the stench of sweat and broken promises hit all three of us in the face. I mounted one of the old bleachers and waited for Shill to warm up. Morey went about the business of working with him on his foot movement. Sitting down from me and already there was

Jiggs. He looked my way nodded and then looked back away quickly before he saw the hate in my eyes. Two fighters were in the ring sparing and striking each other like two dumb mules landing one savage blow after another.

"No discipline," Jiggs muttered and I muttered back, "Cocksucker," but he paid me no mind.

Another strike from one of the fighters in the ring and back and forth until one grimly stumbled away throwing his arms in the air.

A quiet crowd of three or four people sat peppered along the bleachers watching men beat the agony

of lost dreams from themselves and into one another. *Maybe it's done*, I thought. *Maybe Shill's finally done*. Stopping myself, not to say it aloud. Morey came over and sat next to me. His hand touched my shoulder. We waited for Shill to warm up. We waited for our moment in the sun, which sits in an empty sky outside and shines like it don't care. Coz it don't. The sun always shines warm - even hot. No matter if dreams are busted all over some dirty, bloody canvas.