

DETROIT GOLDEN GLOVES—1969

2013

This is 100 percent the truth. (My words in 1969: had to leave them in, as well as all the 1969 stuff.)

1969

I was sitting in a corner of the locker room staring blankly and purposelessly at the ceiling, seemingly feeling the walls close in on me. My mind was a complete void, and the rest of my body was numb. Did I exist? What was I doing here? Was I here? These ideas came up from my subconscious. I was all absorbed in these thoughts. I felt a punch in my stomach. I looked up and saw “Big Frank” looking down at me.

2013

I wrote this during my senior year in high school dramatics, but let’s leave it as is. Psychedelic memories are flying back.

1969

“You looked scared to hell,” he said.

“You’re right,” I stammered.

Big Frank looked unusually pale, and his actions were jittery and unnatural.

Although I already knew the answer, I asked him anyway, “Are you scared, Frank?”

“Christ, I wouldn’t be normal if I wasn’t.”

At least I was not alone, and it was reassuring to talk. Our other fighters joined and we started talking, trying to release and ease the tension. We were all placed in an unnatural position: we were all having our first amateur fight in the Detroit Golden Gloves.

This was the day of judgment as to whether you trained correctly and hard enough. All the roadwork you did, all the working out on the never-tiring punching bag, all the cut lips and bloody noses were all going to be worth it, or a waste of time. I had been training for about four months at the Michigan Boxing Club on the outskirts of Detroit. This is an ordinary event to young men in other parts of the city, but to me, it was different. I was white and from an upper-middle-class neighborhood called Birmingham. And boxing is not one of the big sports with affluent society. Boxing was referred to as a sport for the blacks.

I was never encouraged to box. Often, after coming home from working out at the gym, I would boast to my parents that my left jab was getting sharper, or my footwork was improving. I would get a reply like “Some colored kid will tear you to pieces.” My mother would interject, “We have provided you with a country club. Why don’t you play golf?” Friends would take me half seriously when I would talk of entering Golden Gloves competition. All this social and physical strain would be worth the trouble, or a failure, after tonight.

2013

Fifty years flies by fast.

It was a weird time for me: a first love and loss.

There was a lot of weirdness and loss for the country as well. John Kennedy and his youthful promise (they called it “charisma” and “Camelot”) had been dead for six years, Martin Luther King, then Bobby Kennedy. The ’67 Detroit race riots, with fifty-two dead and tanks

rolling down Woodard Avenue, occurred two years earlier. The Vietnam War was still going on and so was the Tuskegee syphilis study.

The black-white thing was tearing the country apart. I lived in a completely white suburb. There were no black kids in my high school. Part of the reason I tried my hand at boxing was that I wanted to get to know some black kids. See what the trouble was all about. Why we weren't supposed to get along.

I found Cassius Clay/Muhammad Ali a fascinating role model, and Joe Frazier heroic.

I also had good hand speed and could handle myself.

Ali stood for something. He gave up millions for a principle. Can you imagine our 'roided-out, overpaid athletes doing that today? It also brings to mind Sandy Koufax not pitching on the Jewish Sabbath during the High Holidays.

Because of the ubiquitous steroids, they're faster and stronger but much less heroic.

Roger Maris is still the home run king.

1969

There were five boys from the Michigan Boxing Club entered in the Golden Gloves. We were all seated between two rows of gray lockers, "shooting the bull" and telling jokes. Big Frank was leading the discussion, as always. (Big Frank got his name because there once was a "Little Frank" who used to box, but after a trip to the canvas, he stopped coming to the gym.) Big Frank was about six feet tall, with black hair and a pocked complexion. However, his most notable characteristic was his Clark Gable mustache. Big Frank was also Italian. To hear Frank, one completely forgot that there were other countries in Western Europe. Frank was the

ringleader of the gang because of his seniority (aged twenty-two), and he had served in Vietnam. He was telling stories of Saigon women.

2013

I didn't know much about women: only that I was anxious to learn.

I didn't know much about Vietnam: only that I didn't want to go. Four years earlier I didn't want to go to Boy Scout summer camp, even though no one was shooting at me. I was going to college, so I would have at least five years of deferment, provided I was a bad student and didn't graduate in four. Most of the kids in the Golden Gloves weren't going to college, so next year they had a good chance of going to war. Some got the jail or Vietnam-jungle option. Fifty-five thousand of my contemporaries died there. Now it's a vacation destination. No thanks.

There was another kid who came to the gym. He was big, a light heavyweight. He had red hair. His older brother, whom the redheaded kid worshipped, was in Vietnam. I remembered his brother. I met him when I was a freshman in high school and he was a senior. I was terrified of him. He was the leader of a youth gang, but also a gifted artist. He stuck up for me once when I was being bullied. He didn't have to.

His younger brother said that they hadn't heard from him in a few days, and this was unusual because he would send a continuous stream of letters from Vietnam so their mother wouldn't worry. There had been interruptions before, but never this long. The kid stopped coming to the gym. I learned that his brother was killed by a mortar. Decades later I saw his name on the Vietnam memorial in Washington. He was one of those special kids who would have changed things had he lived. Our tough (a former professional-hockey defenseman) school principal took the former gang leader under his wing. He saw the potential. I was told he sobbed

when he learned of the young man's death. I could imagine manly tears tracking down a broken face.

In retrospect, I think Big Frank was messed up. Whatever he saw over there was a bit much for a twenty-year-old.

Muhammad Ali had "nothing against them Vietcong. No Vietcong ever called me n----."

Muhammad Ali knew something we didn't.

1969

"Shut up, Frank," Wayne said. Wayne was our heavyweight. Wayne and Frank always had a constant but friendly rivalry between them.

"Up yours, fatso," Frank replied, and he continued with the conversation.

The conversation was cut short when Charley, our boxing coach, came in saying, "Doc wants to see ya in the other locker room." We all put on our boxing trunks. I put on my green and white satin trunks. I felt like Sugar Ray Robinson. In fact, we all felt like Sugar Ray Robinson. We walked into the crowd, and sucked in our bellies and flexed a little bit. Some kid in the crowd yelled out, "Here come the girls!" The crowd roared and once again I felt like a lowly junior-novice boxer awaiting his first fight.

As I entered the other locker room, I was overtaken by an air of confusion. The black fighters had been kept separate from the white fighters. This was their locker room. It was bigger and newer-looking than ours: the blacks outnumbered the whites about three to one. There was screaming and yelling going on, but there did not seem to be that tension that so prevailed in our locker room.

One of the things that struck me as most unusual was the fascinating display of underwear. Green, blue, and even pinks were worn by the black fighters. We stood in the locker room until a guy dressed in a white sweater with several Golden Gloves patches on it directed us to where the weigh-in would take place. All five of us got in line. Mike, Steve, me, Frank, and Wayne. The line moved rather slowly. When it got to be my turn to weigh in, a man asked my name.

“Kroneman, Olaf.”

“Weight and division?” he asked.

“165-pound junior novice,” I replied.

“Step on the scale,” he said. He looked at the scale. “One...hundred...and...sixty-five pounds on the money; good work.”

“Thanks.” I stepped off the scale. Was relieved and quite surprised I made the weight class. Frank was weighed and then heavyweight Wayne stepped on the scale. A tall and thin black fighter stared at the scale. He was a funny-looking kid. He was a light-colored Negro and he had red hair. His hair was combed into a gigantic Afro hairstyle.

“205,” the official said.

“Wow,” the amazed red-haired kid said. He punched Wayne in the stomach and said, “I wish I was fighting you; I just love fighting fat kids!”

We were shocked and surprised at the comment. We crowded around this kid.

“Where are you guys from?” he asked.

“Michigan Boxing Club.”

“How much do you guys weigh?” he asked, pointing at Steve.

“156,” he replied.

He pointed at me.

“165,” I replied.

“Oh,” he moaned. He put his hands on his head and got melodramatic. “I feel sorry for you.” He turned around in a circle. “I know who you are going to fight: good luck.”

2013

I’ve evolved. I went from tighty-whities to more-colorful boxers. And I left the term “Negro” in the piece because at that time it was polite and showed respect. So did “colored.” It was the term Martin Luther King Jr. used. Check out “Letter from the Birmingham Jail.”

I don’t use exclamation points in my writing, but I did when I was sixteen. So I left them in. Elmore Leonard said not to use them, so I don’t.

Elmore Leonard was another hero.

1969

We were directed to go to the doctor for a prefight physical. We got into the line and I started to sweat. I was not moving. I was just standing, but I started to sweat. I turned to Steve and said, “Hell, I am sweating like a pig.”

“Yeah, me too.” He lifted up his arms as he said it.

I was nervous and jittery. It all seemed like an illusion I did not believe I was going to fight, despite the fact I was going to get the physical.

The doctor asked my name, and if I’d had any major operations.

“No.”

He checked for a hernia, the heart, and lungs. He began to check the blood pressure. He looked at the gauge and asked if I had high blood pressure.

“No,” I answered.

“Well, your blood pressure is pretty high,” he said.

“How high?” I asked

“196.”

“What is it supposed to be?” I asked.

“120. I can’t let you fight until it calms down.”

I walked out, heading for our locker room. The gym was filling up with a noisy crowd. I went in and saw Charley taping the other fighters’ hands.

“Charley,” I said, “my blood pressure is up, and I am not to fight until it goes down.”

“Go sit down and relax somewhere.”

“Okay.”

I sat down on a small stool in the same corner I had before the examination. I stood there looking at the crack in the floor.

“Hi, kid.” I felt a slap on my back. It was my father. “How are ya?” he asked.

“My blood pressure is up.”

“How much?”

“196. I’m going for a reexamination in fifteen minutes.”

“Do you want me to stay?”

“No.”

Eight years later I would become a doctor. I realize now that the high blood pressure, the spontaneous sweating, was adrenaline, sympathetic discharge. “Flight or fight.” I wasn’t going to flight. But this whole thing was weird and strange.

I didn’t have the “white coat” syndrome; I had the “I’m afraid of getting my ass kicked” syndrome.

My father left me alone in the locker room.

They say that black kids don’t have fathers now. They did in 1969. Their fathers hovered over their sons. They were more protective and appeared more frightening than their sons, who also looked frightening.

I remember one kid said, “My daddy’s not afraid of anyone ’cept God, and God better not mess with him.”

1969

I went back in fifteen minutes. My blood pressure was down to 160, and the doctor permitted me to fight. I was relieved and walked to the locker, telling Charley I could fight.

“Good,” he said. “Take a seat and I will tape your hands.”

My hands were taped and Charley called us all together.

“Now all you guys can win,” he said. “Let’s have five winners.”

Things started moving faster, and things began to be more confused. The fights started. We all got around George, our other trainer. George was about sixty-five and told us of the old days in the ring and his first fight. A kid returned to the locker room after his fight. I only caught a glimpse, but it was enough. He had red welts on his body, and he was bleeding heavily from the nose.

“He lost,” replied Charley.

“Where’s Nathan—Steven Nathan?” asked an official.

“Here,” Charley replied.

“Get him ready; he fights next.”

Charley grabbed Steve by the arm, and we shook his hand and wished him luck.

We left the locker room to watch Steve fight. He fought a white fighter. It was a good fight, and Steve won a decision.

When Steve returned to the locker room, he came in with his nose still bleeding. Part of his face was covered with dried blood, and one eye was swelling. He came in grinning. He was breathing and sweating heavily.

“I won.”

The fighter that Steve beat came in. He was red and both eyes were swelling.

“If you don’t win this whole damn tournament, I’ll be surprised,” he said.

“Mike is going to fight next,” Charley said.

Mike stood in the corner, looked at his feet, and started to pray. We left him alone. Mike was the best boxer among us. We went out to watch Mike fight.

There was a fight going on before Mike’s fight. The bushy-haired, redheaded kid was fighting. He was getting clobbered. Every time he would get hit in the head, perspiration would fly from his hair. It reminded me of a walking sponge. The referee stopped the fight and declared the fight “no contest.” Our friend lost!

Mike fought another white fighter. He put on a superior boxing show and knocked the fighter out in the first round. He returned to the locker room, grinning from ear to ear.

Mike said, “That kid was undefeated until tonight.”

2013

I don’t think it was a knockout. It was most likely a technical knockout. The kid was mismatched and wasn’t able to defend himself. There were very few knockouts in the Golden Gloves. The gloves were 14 to 16 ounces; the pros used 8- to 10-ounce gloves.

I loved boxing, but it is brutal and should be outlawed. Too many long-term health consequences.

So should football, hockey, car racing, and Ultimate Fighting.

The injuries are probably more severe now because of steroids.

We should get serious about the steroids thing.

Caught once, you’re done—just like gambling. Steroids are more pernicious than gambling.

1969

After Steve and Mike won, I became inspired and I was emotionally “high.” I wanted to win more than anything. All my thoughts were on winning. I kept thinking about a quote I remembered from some novel: “But man is not made for defeat. A man can be destroyed but not defeated.”

2013

The quote was from Hemingway’s *The Old Man and the Sea*. Great, manly, take-no-prisoners stuff, which I admired at the time. I’m sort of amused by it now.

Hemingway killed himself when he was about the same age I am now. Evidently, he was destroyed and defeated.

He used the same gun his father used to kill himself.

They must have been doomed high-functioning bipolars.

Hemingway was a big boxing fan, as was Norman Mailer. Joyce Carol Oates is a big boxing fan.

1969

A man came in and said, “Kroneman fights after intermission.”

My sense of time became distorted. I remember walking up and down the locker room.

The official returned.

“Get Kroneman ready.”

Charley grabbed me by the arm, and we left the locker room. We had to walk out through the gym. I remember just a myriad of faceless people and a loud roar coming from the crowd. I walked to the other dressing room. In a little room was an elderly black man who put the gloves on the fighters; I mechanically placed my hands in the wine-colored gloves.

“Hurry back, son,” he said.

Charley led me to a wall. From there I could see the ring. Standing next to me was the kid I had to fight. He was shorter than I but much stronger. Something else, he was black. My father’s words came to my mind over and over again. “Some colored kid is going to tear you to pieces...to pieces...to pieces...to pieces.”

Charley led me out. The crowd started to roar at our approach. Nobody said it, but it was a fight between a black and a white that they were yelling at. I felt like I was going to puke. I took a big gulp and started to walk faster.

“Slow down,” said Charley. “Make them wait for you. You’re the entertainer.”

I walked up the steps and into the ring. It was strange feeling. I had been in the ring many times before, but it seemed to me that this was the first time I had ever set foot in a ring. I turned to look at my opponent. All I can remember is the perfect arrangement of his stomach muscles.

“Turn around,” Charley commanded.

They started to announce the fight.

“Ladies and gentleman, fighting for the junior-novice, heavy-middleweight title...”

As I listened to the announcement, my body became tight and unnatural. I felt like a spring that would have to push out or break. CLANG.

Round 1. I completely lost my head and ran over to my opponent and threw a roundhouse left. I missed. We started to brawl, not box. The black fighter was a brawler and not a boxer, and I was fighting his fight. He was outthinking me. We traded power-packed roundhouse blows. We clinched and he threw me down like I weighed next to nothing. I got up, embarrassed and mad. I threw a roundhouse right. I then missed with a left hand and almost fell out of the ring. I remember a lady screaming as she got out of the way. Some people at ringside put their hands out and kept me from falling out of the ring. We brawled for a few more seconds, and I slipped to the canvas. He hit me as I was getting up. Infuriated, I lunged at him but the bell rang. We both raised our gloves threateningly, but neither one was bold enough to land a punch after the bell.

I do not remember anything Charley said to me in the corner. I was told later he was pleading with me to fight my fight and use my head. But I was crazy for the moment. CLANG, Round 2. I charged out and threw three punches, all of them landing. He threw punches, too, and most of them landed. I remember his nose was bleeding. I kept trying to hit his nose and make it

bleed heavily, so I could win on a TKO. I had him on the ropes, and he elbowed me in the forehead, above my right eye. The ring began to sway, and I was unsure of my footing. The bell sounded the end of Round 2.

After some frantic corner work, CLANG, Round 3. The ring was still swaying. I came out and met a punch, and then threw a few of my own. They all missed their mark. I was too tired to raise my hands. However, my opponent couldn't raise his either. So the third round was spent trying to get up enough energy to hit each other. CLANG, the end of Round 3 and the fight. I felt like I was about to fall, and so did my opponent. We grabbed each other, and in order to keep ourselves from falling, we walked around the ring arm in arm. The people applauded. The referee brought us both to the center of the ring.

“The winner of the junior-novice fight in just a moment... The winner: Charles Burns.”

The referee glanced at me and the other boxer, and softly said, “Which one of you is Charles Burns?”

2013

That was my take in 1969.

Muhammad Ali is still my hero. He exemplifies standing for principle and not selling out. Speaking truth to authority. No matter the cost.

I think race things are better. The Tuskegee syphilis study ended in 1973. Each victim got \$37,000 from the federal government and an apology from President Clinton.

We have a black president.

I have a George Foreman grill.

But we also have Rodney King, Reginald Denny, Trayvon Martin...

These things are becoming less frequent, for we now know the names of the victims. We don't know the names of the people lynched from 1894–1968 (3,446 blacks and 1,297 whites).

Joseph Stalin said, "One death is a tragedy; a million, a statistic."

We now deal with tragedies rather than statistics.

We shall overcome.

THE END