



“Come on baby, that punch wasn’t sexy—put your hips into it.”

I am learning how to perfect my jab in an inner-city gym where you can work out for \$9.95 a month and then pop next door to the unemployment office to pick up your check. One of a chain of low-cost fitness centers, it is homogenized, no-frills, and this branch is especially low on the chain. The first time I bounded into the gym, hoping to convince John to “take me on,” a scrawled sign on an easel warned me that there were to be positively, absolutely no “doo-rags.”

Doo-rags?

I was relatively sure I wasn’t wearing one.

John “The Punisher” Spehar, my coach, is a 200-pound unusual brute, physically a cross between Bruce Willis and Tony Soprano. His hobby is studying the French Revolution. My Venus of Willendorff belly is flopping as I lurch forward and try to make contact with his leather punch mitts, brown cushions around ten inches wide; up by his shoulder height, they make him look like an angry bear coming out of hibernation.

My hobby is boxing.

I'm mesmerized by my coach, perhaps because he is a happier and more vigorous version of my father. On the road as a traveling salesman, with his Oldsmobile trunk stuffed with sample cases, Julius Alexander Klein (a.k.a. Jay) was funny, warm, clever—beloved by the brokers he visited all over his territory—but at home he left the personable “Salesman of the Year” at the door and in came “Sullen Man,” full of fury at being exploited by his cousins who ran Phoenix Candy company, and exuding the malignant depression that fell over my mother, my sisters, and me like a moldy blanket.

Given their strong resemblance to thugs from B movies of the 1940s, I can see John and my father hanging out together. As a teenager, my father drove the family bakery truck in the immigrant neighborhoods of Brooklyn and knew many shady characters. I can imagine him regaling John with his bombastic tale of the day he got a gun from “Ike the Toad” (ah, such names!), and I can hear the theme from *The Sopranos*—*woke up this morning/got yourself a gu-un*. My father was infatuated with “Alice the Moll” who belonged to Louis “Lepke” Buchalter’s gang, Murder, Inc. (The nickname Lepke means “Little Louis” in Yiddish and Murder, Inc. was known as the Jewish Mafia.) Lepke started out pushcart shoplifting, a particularly heartless crime, since pushcart peddlers often had just one pan to sell, one egg, one chicken. He had a henchman, Abe Reles, who did most of the dirty work. Peter Falk played Reles in the movie, *Murder, Inc.* Buchalter was the only major mob boss to have been executed by government authorities for his many murders. In the first season of *The Sopranos* HBO series, Dr. Melfi listens as another psychiatrist talks about his own family’s ties through Buchalter to Murder, Inc. The writers had done their homework.

Alice’s job for Murder, Inc. was to lure unsuspecting men into parked cars on Pitkin Avenue, where gangsters crouched silently in backseats waiting to beat and rob them. She got unlucky, though, when one of her targets turned out to be a plainclothes cop. When she got out of “stir” she and my father began a tem-

pestuous affair. This was 1932—they were both twenty-one years old, and by then Buchalter controlled a huge assortment of industries and unions in New York, including bakery drivers. My father's family was surely the victim of Buchalter's extortions.

The mob wanted Alice back—she'd been a good earner—and word spreads that they're coming for her. My father has decided to boldly protect Alice, so when the gangsters' ominous black limo arrives, he courageously protests: "She stays where she is!" But it turns out the "Toad" was running late, and when he finally did show up, he shoved a lumpy handkerchief at my father, who looks inside for his means of protection. It's a gun, but it's all in pieces. As the story goes, the gangsters all found this dilemma hysterically funny. I guess even they could appreciate the irony of my father's predicament, and somehow, miraculously, decided not to hurt him, and even Alice got away unscathed. My sister Susan remembers Julius reassuring us that he would never have used the gun; it was just for show.

In return, John could tell my dad about how boxing saved his life, the day a Hartford, Connecticut, police lieutenant said, "Well, kid, you're pretty good with your hands, but if I have to see you again you're going to jail." John was getting into trouble constantly. He was perpetually angry, beating people up, and stealing. So the cop offered a few unappealing options: John could be tried in juvenile court or he could be sent off to the army. John was glum at these prospects. And then the cop had a brainstorm.

"You can box, you're angry enough; it should work." When John finally started training at Johnny Duke's gym, he was the only white kid, and a mere thirteen years old. Duke, chain-smoking and bedecked in cowboy boots, had a classical approach—when a white kid came to the gym, making his way as John did by enduring two long bus rides, he'd ask how much you weighed, how many fights you had behind you—and he'd immediately set up a sparring fight with a black guy. You'd be told to go work with Hector, whose dad was in prison for killing a white guy. If you came back the next day, that was impressive, although Hector still beat you up. Hector was *there* to beat you up. It was a carefully

constructed trial by fire, and John endured it until *he* became the guy to beat.

“Jab, one-two. Jab, jab, blow to the body, blow to the head. There ya go,” John is saying to me.

“The Punisher” is teaching me to crouch like a Ninja, slip and weave, keep my hands up, and send force up from my heavy legs into my middle and out through my arms, using my body in ways I never thought possible.

It’s a surprise to feel so exhilarated by my own body and its abilities. *My body*. What a drag it’s been—what a disappointment! Sometimes it just seemed like a necessary oversized backpack for my brain. My body has been, um . . . *sensitive*. Asthma and allergies as a teenager, lifelong irritable bowel syndrome that started at twenty-one after a particularly pernicious GI infection involving salmonella while living in New York City (not even after exotic travel), migraines and chronic headaches *forever*. Not to mention the dark cloak that swathed my whole family with a swirl of odd feelings, anxieties, phobias, and panic attacks. At times we’ve been like throwbacks to Freud’s hysterical patients who couldn’t lift an arm after seeing a snake or became obsessively aware of their tongues in their mouths.

So it’s utterly new to feel my power, hear the propulsive sound of my own grunts, and experience such a delight in making this kind of physical contact. My body is bringing me *joy*. I’m also blinking desperately because my eyeballs are sweating. That’s how *serious* an initiation I’m enduring—my *eyeballs* are affected.

I’d like to say straight out that I wish I’d found boxing earlier in my life, but my sisters and husband tell me that’s a flaw in my psychology—happiness reminds me of sadness. There’s an old joke: “*Doctor, doctor!*” a woman complains, “*I’m thirsty, my god, I’m thirsty . . . I’m soooooo thirsty! I’m dying of thirst!*” “*Ah,*” says the doctor, “*Take this water, you’ll feel better.*” The woman drinks long and hard. “*Doctor, doctor! My god, I was soooooooo thirsty! I was dying of thirst!*” She goes on and on.

I think a lot about what might have been. When good things happen, I want to rewrite history and insert them earlier.

“So do you think you could really hit someone?” John talks without effort throughout our sessions. Two hundred pounds of fury, with a middleweight state championship belt rolled in the corner of a closet in his apartment above a New Haven bar, John could relieve me of my consciousness with one right cross. Of course he respectfully holds back. If he kills me, that’s the end of the boxing lessons.

“Gee, I don’t know if I could,” I say, gasping and sputtering. This is like when the dentist is cheerfully inquiring where you went on vacation and your mouth is full of gleaming tools and cotton. You leak out a lone, wet, inaudible syllable, which satisfies him until his next ill-timed question.

I’m tightening my core, I’m keeping my knees bent, I’m bouncing back and forth on my feet, and I can barely breathe. I never participated in contact sports or athletics of any kind. I have not ever dominated a younger sibling, stood up to a bully, play-wrestled with a brother, or felt my own physical strength in any way. During particularly passionate fights with lovers, I have wiped a counter clear of a dish or two, and once I tore the buttons off a man’s shirt, but I’ve never hit anyone, and the thought of it, well, the thought never occurred to me. It just wasn’t an option. Like many women, I’ve experienced unwanted attention and wished I’d had the skills and courage to do something to protect myself. As far as being on the receiving end, my father slapped me when I objected to sharing a Whitman’s Sampler box of chocolates with visiting relatives. It was the only time he hit me, but I’ll never forget the shock of his hand zooming in.

Thwack! My glove makes contact with the punch-mitt on John’s right hand. My god, it feels good. I do it again, remembering to snap my jab right back after I throw it. This is . . . it’s . . . *thrilling*. I’ve never made such a profoundly clarifying sound with my fist before. To say that while I was growing up my family lacked a certain . . . *athleticism* . . . would be an understatement.

Although in the 1950s and 1960s President Kennedy put the nation on a physical fitness kick, in my home there was no concept of “fit,” except as it applied to clothing, and because we didn’t do sports, our obsessive interest in food made matters worse. My sister and I loved nothing more than to laze around watching television while consuming entire bags of Wise potato chips. I emptied boxes of animal crackers into large bowls and assembled them by size, eating the panther, the bear, and the lion first, and working my way expectantly up to the gorilla and hippo. My mother, though not the most inventive of cooks (I ate my first fresh mushroom in my twenties), could whip up a mean Duncan Hines sheet cake. Late at night my father would inhale a salami sandwich on rye with Gulden’s Spicy Brown mustard over the kitchen sink. His traveling salesman tales were punctuated by detailed descriptions of the sumptuous meals at restaurants that he put on the expense account when he entertained the jobbers. “They had a spread, my daughters . . .” he intoned wistfully, while we listened with rapt attention to lurid tales of deli meats, chopped liver, cocktail shrimp, blintzes, and chocolate cheesecake.

Although my father had been a track star at Thomas Jefferson High, I never even saw him walk fast. My parents both seemed worn out. Newark’s Weequahic High School had an award-winning basketball team, but I never knew anyone who played on it. (Philip Roth’s Portnoy reminds us of the classic cheer of the era: *Ikey, Mikey, Jake, and Sam/We’re the boys who eat no ham/We keep matzohs in our locker! Aye, Aye, aye, Weequahic High!*) In the 1940s, Roth and his buddies were still fleeing from anti-Semitic violence in the streets of Newark, especially perpetrated by kids from non-Jewish schools, and still Roth said, “I could no more smash a nose with a fist than fire a pistol into someone’s heart.”

I certainly never knew any boxers. In my Newark of the 1960s, I marched against the Vietnam War and considered myself something of a pacifist, just like the cooler-than-cool boys in high school I coveted, who professed a fierce pacifism when I quizzed them on fantasied scenarios of danger. *No, babe, I don’t think I could*

*defend you. Peace, baby*, they droned while trying to master Woody Guthrie chord progressions on acoustic guitars draped with embroidered straps.

“No one’s got any balls anymore in this nation,” John is saying as I continue pounding his punch mitt. “It’s the worst for men—they get babied, and then they just look to be mothered.”

*Thug philosophy*, I think, *simplistic but oddly compelling*.

By the hour’s end, my sweat smells like a mixture of bitter oranges, aluminum, and old pastry. It could be a mixture of both our smells. Boxing is an intimate partner sport, one of the few that allows a man and woman to be physically involved without having sex. It is July, and John and I are sharing this physical intimacy in a small corner of the gym, where John has cleared away elliptical machines and treadmills with the deft push of one meaty hand. If my husband knew just how exciting I find this contact, he might want to pour molasses into my boxing gloves.

“Okay, baby,” John beams. “Not too shabby.” He knows I’m shot. “Now go hobble over to the water and take a break.”

I walk over to the window ledge where I keep a collection of fluids—and encircle a bottle of vitamin water with two giant gloved hands, like a clumsy baby. Water spurts everywhere and dribbles down my chin. John laughs, and tells me not to worry; it’s a dirty sport.