# Communion of Saints

**by** [James Como](#) (May 2020)

*Both Members of this Club*, George Bellows, 1909

*1953.* “Start with number two, son” the father said, “number one is all taken.” He drew out the *aaalll* so there could be no doubt. “And it’s gonna stay taken.”

“Who, pop?” —quick and open, always eager with this man, and expectant. There was no other settled happiness for the boy but being around him, especially when he talked boxing. “Who is it?”

“Well, *you* know him. Didn’t your friend say hello last

week on the Drive?”

“You mean Sugar Ray? *Ray Robinson*? . . . *He’s* the greatest?”

The boy’s eyes doubled in size. Two weeks earlier, just days before this precocious boy’s sixth birthday, while cruising along on the Harlem River Drive on the way home from uncle Steve’s Jersey farm, they had pulled even with the most beautiful car the boy had ever seen: a Lincoln Continental that appeared purple to the color-blind child, with *Sugar Ray* spelled out in chrome script, right there on the rear fender.

The boy stared, unable to believe he was only three feet away from that handsome, joyful face. Then through the window he shouted, “Sugar Ray! Sugar Ray! It’s me, Butchy! It’s Butchy, Sugar Ray!” And as the boy turned down his rear window, shouting all the while, he saw that Ray, in his own back seat, was turning his down too; and when both windows were open the great champion looked right into the boy’s face, right into his eyes, beamed that radiant, world-famous smile, and shouted, “Hey champ! How’ya doin’?” —just as the cars separated.

“Yep.” The father was grinning. “And not only the greatest son, but I do believe the best there ever *could* be. *All* the skills, speed *and* one-punch power, and heart, son, and brains—sheer mental energy—and conditioning? An achievement beyond human limits. *Beautiful* to watch. Just . . . just beautiful.” As though the man couldn’t believe what he himself knew. “You’ve only seen him past his prime, Butchy, as a middleweight, and he’s *still* the best. In that prime? At one-forty-seven? Not close, son. Not even close.” These last words spoken slowly, separately.

. . . and this man—Sugar Ray *Robinson*, not any of those other so-called Sugars who were fake sweet, *Saccharine* Rays —*the* Sugar Ray had called the boy “champ,” and it mattered

absolutely.

The child had always been close to his father, but since the disappearance of his mother two years earlier he had grown utterly dependent. He had already been writing stories—sometimes even one page long—but now he would begin writing longer ones, real stories he thought. He couldn't know how bereft the man was, how devoid of those resources of knowledge and feeling and inventiveness a widower must bring to his child, to a desperate child so innocent he doesn't know his own desperation. And anyway, how could the boy know that his father, in most ways that matter, was simply third rate? So, in that desperate innocence, the child asked seriously.

"How would you have done, pop?"

"What? Me, Butch? Against *Ray*?" Real fans always used a favorite's first name.

"Yeah yeah. If you were in with Sugar Ray. You won the Gloves once, right? You were champ too. How would you have licked him?"

Touchy questions, the father knew, tricky. Twenty years earlier he had lied about his age to enter the Gloves: at thirteen he was still three years away. When he won his first two fights, both by decisions, an officious clerk—or maybe an attentive clerk with disposable cash who didn't like losing it on the street—looked closer and discovered the lie. He was awarded the championship of the "pre-novice division," which didn't exist, and became something of a local hotshot at a time and place when boxing ruled.

Three or four years later, 1937 or '38, on a rooftop at Second Avenue and 121st Street in Harlem, on a filthy hot July night, in a battle of hotshots, with lots of serious money in play, Walker Smith, Junior, a skinny wisp, stepped in and dropped Fast Jimmy (as the father, Giacomo, was called) in the

second minute of the second round. Jimmy had tried to outbox the bag of bones, who though a wisp did not punch like one. When Fast Jimmy came to he felt as though he had fallen off that roof and landed headfirst. Now, even though still a ladies' man—he knew that good looks, a bit of style, and a dose of verbal charm could go a long way—his honesty was second-guessed. Who the hell was Walker Smith, Junior?

Soon everybody knew. A year or two after the rooftop fight Smith wanted to enter a tournament but had no boxing card, so he borrowed a friend's. His name was Ray Robinson and *that* man hasn't been heard from since. Within seven or eight years of the rooftop encounter, Robinson—no longer remembered as ever having been Smith and already dubbed Sugar by a sportswriter who labeled what he saw, not what opponents felt, for none of *them* ever thought of Ray Robinson as in any way sweet—pretty soon after that tournament Sugar Ray Robinson was second in fame and boxing regard only to the great Joe Louis; after the War he was first.

As for Fast Jimmy: He didn't exactly slow down, but he drifted away from boxing to marry a darkly beautiful and athletic girl with Slavic blood from a different neighborhood, went to war, won two Purple Hearts, made sergeant, was busted when he took the liberation of Paris more literally than some French fathers liked, returned to Harlem, got his GED, went to college on the G.I. Bill, settled into the innocuous life of a non-bylined writer for a Long Island sports rag, and had Butch. The saddest things in the world, he would say, are wasted potential and missed opportunities.

It was only when his wife, pregnant with his daughter Evangeline, was murdered seven years later during a botched grocery store robbery on Third Avenue and 115$^{th}$ St. that he bought a house and gave up womanizing. In any event, raising the boy took all his wit, energy, and faithfulness. Everybody saw they were a devoted team. Otherwise, a wall—or at least a

finely meshed fence—went up. Evangeline, who was in fact born of her clinically dead mother and to whom Butch was devoted, would spend much time with an older cousin, Penelope (who for reasons unknown Butch greatly disliked).

"How would I have handled him?" the father snapping back. "Well, Butch, you know, I was fast in my day. Naturally I would have thought of stickin' and movin' —I would have thought of boxing him, because Ray always could mix it up. Listen Butch, he should have been called Lemon Ray because in the ring he's a bitter guy. Well, I'd be making a mistake. A . . . mistake. Because nobody sticks with Ray. If you did, you paid. So I would have gone right at him. Right at him, Butch. Let him know I'm not scared and show him some pain. Back off, draw him in. Then—"

"Then nail him, right pop? Straight lead right hand. Bam!" The boy jumped in, shadowboxing the moves.

The father laughed from deep in a belly then was silent for a moment.

"No Butch. I'd let him get real close where the ref couldn't see, then—Bam! —an elbow to the chops! But truthfully? I don't think it would do any good. Even if I dropped him, he'd only get back up, and then I'd be in big trouble. No son. I wouldn't handle Ray. He came down from some higher place, on some mission of his own."

The boy stared. He had never heard his father speak this way. It wasn't the concession to the great boxer's ability. There the father was one voice in a big chorus and nothing new. Rather it was the distant tone, as though the man were seeing something and understanding it for the first time. And it unsettled the boy even though he didn't quite know it. Then the father laughed again and they shadowboxed. The boy scored to the body and laughed as the father growled in mock pain.

That night, after kneeling to pray and going to bed,

Butch had a dream.

*A tall slender man walked at night, slow and distracted, on a slummy street. A dark street: stores boarded, fenced, gated. And there is the victim. Lying across the sidewalk, his feet toward the curb, he squirms and moans. Hurt, not drunk. The man kneels behind him, puts a hand on his side. "Aayyg," the hurt man pants. Now they're in a gym. The slender man feels the warm wet stickiness of blood, looks at his hand, sees it, turns the hurt man gently, sees a long, deep cut between ribs, looks at the face, with its opened eyes, and recognizes Ray Robinson. "It's me. It's Sugar Ray. Can you help me? Can you help me?" So he shouts, "Sugar Ray's been stabbed. He's bleeding. Get help." Most stop and turn and peer his way, but they do nothing. And he hears, "who's Sugar Ray?"*

He decided to tell no one about the dream, especially not his father. He didn't want to upset him.

*1963.* At five-foot-ten-inches but weighing in at three hundred pounds, with no preamble of illness or surging pain, Fast Jimmy dropped dead. His life insurance barely covered the funeral. Finally Evangeline went to live with cousin Penelope permanently, and Butch, who was a college freshman at the time, was left with nothing but devastation and . . . perduring shame, shame at a wash of relief when he heard that his father had died. But why? Why relief? What was he relieved *of*? What possible burden could that devoted and genuinely selfless father have represented? Others would have attempted some rationalization, or even denial. But given his stern honesty Butch couldn't do either or even try. For the instant that separates one heartbeat from another he had felt relief. And so he asked of himself, How could I be so craven?

Butch was a baseball player, a shortstop good enough to invite some scouting. But when the death came, he had been

training at a gym in the Bronx. He had also been working part-time at a Laundromat. Now, needing more money and distracted by grief, Butch dropped out of college, made the job full-time, and hit the gym hard.

*1970.* His love for boxing, but also for baseball and books, was a legacy from his father; but he also loved going to Mass, which his father not only could not explain but found odd. For the boy there was no deep explanation: Christ is who He is, He is there, so that's where he went to meet Him, in the Body and Blood of Holy Communion. More than one Professor and several classmates had mocked Butch for this practice, but only mildly and in each case only once. Sometimes Butch ran into a few Puerto Rican fighters at the church around the corner from the gym, and he realized that one of the great attractions of this gym was that while it offered much—and often raw—ribbing and great depths of chronic, rooted ignorance, there was little real malice.

He had never been much of a ladies' man but soon, along the way and probably owing to a combination of brawn, looks, a good rap, and maybe DNA, Butch had acquired several girlfriends. So within two years of Jimmy's death he had dropped out of the church as well as college, since he would not mix promiscuity and Holy Communion. And as grief had turned to numbness, he trained himself so hard for the ring that he entered the Golden Gloves which, more easily than anyone could possibly have guessed, he won. The night of his championship fight, a Wednesday, when he KO'd his opponent at twenty-six seconds of the first round with a straight right-hand lead – that night he had the dream, again.

. . . Waking first was Kyra, his genuine steady, screaming terrified, huddled against the wall. Butch explained it was a bad dream; Kyra calmed down. But when he wouldn't tell her the dream she cried. She knew there were other women,

but she also knew, and rightly, that she mattered most to him. She left the bed and dressed. Butch watched. As she was leaving she said, “talk to that Professor Rulx who trains at the gym who you like so much, or go see that Father Rigo you like, Butch. Somebody. On Sunday you tell me that dream. After breakfast.”

Butch said, “you’re my dark-eyed, raven-haired beauty, Kyra. My one and only, and the only one I could ever love. But please don’t come back until I call. I’m sorry I scared you. I’m ashamed I scared you. And I’m sorry I can’t tell you the dream. It would be like betraying a confidence.”

She had first seen him from behind the counter of a diner. She stared until he noticed. He did, and from that moment, she thought, his goose was cooked. Now she looked at him sitting up on the bed and stared conspicuously with her big eyes at his crotch, and before walking out she said, “you miss me already, Butch. And I miss you, but in ways not so obvious. *Pues, tu sabes muy bien lo tanto que te quiero*, but you have these muscles all over your chest, your stomach. Hard like a wall. They hide your heart. I’m no sparring partner, Butch; I’m a partner partner. You must be the friendliest lonely man who ever walked the earth.”

Even as Kyra was leaving Butch opened his journal. Since his mother’s death he had dreamed phantasmagorically, and later, when he began to keep a journal, always in the third person, he had taken to recording some of these. But the Ray Dream was the first he dreamt recurringly. He would note each of them up to a hundred for nearly a year, when he stopped. Then so did the dreams.

Kyra’s cold departure troubled him, so he decided just to sit and to think it out in writing. She was the only woman who ever unsettled Butch, threw him off. Animated and formal, warm and aloof, she presented a puzzle to him, a mystery. He was hooked and he knew it. In fact, he realized how self-

involved he had been, and for how long. “Dearest Kyra,” he began. “I love you with all my heart.”

He stopped. Had he meant to write that? He meant it, he thought, but he wondered if it were true, really true. Her wanton carnality in bed—never feral, always rapturous—was unselfconscious and always followed by modesty. Or was it her litheness and grace? Even when she was standing still the air around her seemed to shimmer. She was ever unselfconscious. Her own artfulness made no difference. Maybe that’s why whomever she smiled at—actually, smiled upon is more accurate—felt flattered and re-assured. Always it was about the other. Yet even when she talked about herself, Butch knew it was a sort of invitation to enter into her performance. That’s why maybe two men a day (and probably as many women) fell in love with her, and she knew it, and she didn’t care, and she enjoyed it. He saw that and didn’t like it: Kyra the flirt. And tease?

Now her openness also seemed somehow artful. He had never known anyone with the kind of charm that in a fairy tale castes a spell—and she had given it all to him. Then—well, then Butch re-read what he had written. Suddenly—like that—it was as though he awakened from a head injury. Or had had cold water splashed in his face between rounds when he was sat dazed in his corner. He now knew that he had been beguiled. Charmed. As in enchanted. It’s what she does. And there was the rub: beguilement is not love. He folded the letter and put it in his journal.

On Saturday he went to the church, mostly to speak with “the priest,” as Kyra referred to Father Rigo. He went early so that he could be at the gym by noon when it opened. This would be his first time back since winning the Gloves and he looked forward to it. They would call him Champ. The priest said he should call Kyra and apologize, which he expected to hear and thought he would do, eventually. But he didn’t expect the depth of the priest’s insight into his mental landscape.

“What are you ashamed of, Butch? Why so guilty?” he asked. “It’s not guilt, Father. It’s those stinking, twisted cigars you smoke. Doesn’t everybody around you make twisted, guilty expressions?”

“Not everybody. Just the guilty ones. And you never before.”

Butch liked this man, who did not condescend. Butch thought of him as somehow thicker on the inside than on the outside, as he had thought of his father. So Butch told him of his dream, and of his interval of relief when hearing of his father’s death, what really had brought him to the priest. But again the priest changed the subject. More relief. Butch had said it, the priest had let it go, Butch was off the hook. What the priest did say was, “you can’t quit, Butch. Get back. You—”

Butch became impatient. “I know Father. I do know. But without Holy Communion, the Mass . . . I can’t go to confession. I wouldn’t mean it. Not now. Maybe soon, but for now I’d rather leave it alone.”

“Butch, unlike your matches conversations usually go more than one round. You should know that. Pace yourself. Let the other fellow work. You find out what’s up. I was referring to college not to Mass. You haven’t quit the church, no matter what you think. But you do belong in college. You like languages. You pick up the Italian I teach. I hear the Spanish. That I know you learn from the gym and from the Puerto Rican nurse, Kyra. By the way, do you know she came by yesterday? She didn’t chat. She made a confession.”

“I hope you didn’t give her more than three Hail Mary’s for penance, Father.”

“No penance. Someone else will do it for her, as Our Lord paid for us. How much do you know about Sugar Ray?”

Butch was wary: a feint, leading to more talk of Kyra? Or was Ray the genuine interest? Butch rushed at it.

"A legendary record. The frequency of bouts and the great ones. Moves. Power – knocking guys out while going backwards. The successful comebacks. His rep of course: the greatest pound-for-pound. And you do remember that I don't only know about Ray. I *know* Ray." Butch was smiling. The priest—like so many others—had heard the story of Butch's passing encounter with the great fighter many times.

"Then you know he killed a man?"

"Yeah Father, of course. Jimmy Doyle, June 24, 1947. Died in the ring."

"Right. Right. So you know that Ray dreamt the death the night before?"

No, actually, Butch hadn't known that.

It seems the boxer had had a dream in which he struck Doyle—not any opponent but the actual Doyle—so ferociously that he dropped and never got up. When Robinson awoke in a panic, he called the boxing commission to cancel the fight. This caused a frenzy. A priest and a minister were called to reassure him. But the dream was in fact prophetic, and Robinson was changed forever. From then on he hated boxing and fought only for money, became moody and sometimes violent in his homelife, and never again ignored prophetic dreams, which he claimed had come to him all his life.

"How do you know this?" Butch felt the way boxers feel when they're losing on points with only a few rounds left.

"Many people do, Butch. Priests talk about it in the seminary as a test. 'What would you have told Robinson if he had come to you?'"

"And what would you have told him, Father?"

“Don’t fight.”

Although he would realize it only much later, that moment for Butch was a turning point. In the interval that separates one heartbeat from the next he knew that no matter what you feel there is no such thing as relief.

When he entered the gym, the clatter stopped and he heard, “hey champ! The champ is in the house!” and was given a round of applause, back slaps, glove taps, and “nobody spars with Bad Butchy now.” He breathed in the mix of stale hospital, salt and leather that only unventilated and busy boxing gyms have. He chatted and relived the fight and heard how hard he hit and was told he was ready to turn pro.

But he didn’t wrap his hands. Instead he approached a middle-aged white guy whom everyone called Professor because he taught at some institute somewhere. Most regulars liked him, nobody disliked him. He minded his own business except every now and then, when he cracked wise out of the blue. Then everyone laughed, especially the butt of the crack. He was low-key, asked after people, listened, and wasn’t above doing a favor for somebody if asked. Butch spoke, the Professor nodded and said “bank it,” Butch said thanks, and the Professor said, “you owe me two rounds.”

Then Butch went into the locker room and called Kyra. Her mother took the message. She didn’t call back.

*1973.* The year came round. Butch had returned to college, majored in comparative literature and secondary education, vastly improved his Italian and Spanish, even picked up passable Latin, and though he had had to play catch-up got mostly A’s. All the while he trained hard, thought of winning the Gloves again, dreamt the Ray Dream and noted it, and waited for Kyra, whom he called many more times, to return his calls, which she did not. He worked and saved hard enough

to buy a piece of the Laundromat. He visited Father Rigo, who, himself a former boxer, dropped into the gym every now and then. Once the priest was there with the Professor and told him, “I want you Prof!” The Professor said, “good, Padre. And when I knock you on your ass I can confess, get absolution, and do penance all in the same round!” Everybody laughed.

Now nobody would spar with Butch without wearing body pads to go with the headgear and belt. He was training thirty rounds at a clip, running eight-to-ten miles a day. Victory in the Gloves was axiomatic.  He talked seriously of turning pro and asked Al, his manager and trainer, a question he had wondered about all his life: what it was like to fight for the championship of the world.

Al said, “sure you gotta know the drama, resist it but also dance with it. I had a fighter once at the Garden—the big room, not a championship bout but his first main event, an opponent more lover than fighter, everything’s right—we’re makin’ the walk, he’s bouncing behind me, hands on my shoulders. Then I feel nothin’ but smell shit. He went in his trunks, dripping down his leg. The drama took over.”

“Holy shit!” from Dumb Jackie on the heavy bag, with no humorous intent.

“You know, Butch,” Al continued, “you’ve been a spectator at the Garden for a world championship fight and heard the noise. Like an earthquake. The lights are up, you see everybody, the floor shakes, the ring is crowded. But if you’re the challenger when you get there you wait. And then, my friend, you find out what noise is. Because here comes the champ. And I’m telling you Butch, he looks ten times bigger than ever, and mean like a jungle beast, because that’s what he is. That’s why he’s champion.”

Butch said, “sounds surreal.”

“Yeah, whatever the fuck that means. It’s so unnatural

that the *natural* thing to do is crap your pants."

"Well Al," said the Professor, "Butch'll just have to borrow some of your old man diapers." Everybody laughed.

For Butch that night began like most nights. He ate at home alone as he watched the news, then did his college reading. He went out for some decaf. He knew he'd come back home, pray, and then fall asleep reading some fiction. It helped with the recurring headaches. He got home, got ready for bed, and knelt to pray. But this night instead of praying he started to cry. Just like that, and he couldn't stop. At first he didn't know why but he quickly realized that he really had been much sadder for much longer than he knew; in fact, that he was very close to despair.

It was an epiphany that changed him instantaneously. It changed how he saw himself. So even as he wept he thought, and as he thought he remembered, and as he remembered he knew: to his own amazed disbelief he knew that he missed—and for a long, long time had been missing—his mother and father.

For the first time in his life he saw himself as an orphan and knew what that meant. Women, the Laundromat, reading, college, baseball, the gym, boxing. All of these now seemed to be nothing but tactics, or theater props, mechanisms for avoiding pain. These he had held on to. The Mass, Holy Communion in particular—the one real thing, as he thought of it—he had walked away from.

His presence of mind—ring generalship to boxers—told him that this strong wave of emotion would pass, but he was too honest not to admit that it symptomized something real, an occurrence as solid and consequential and unmistakable as a head-spinning hook to the tip of the chin. With astonishing ease and quickness sleep came.

*He awoke in the dark on his back with his hands folded on his chest, the way he sometimes napped on the training table before a fight* . . .

He did not remember how he had fallen asleep and wondered why the room was so dark. He had never slept this deeply before a big fight, or had ever woken up this alert from such a sleep. He noted how fresh and loose and strong he felt. He lay still for several minutes, enjoying the dynamism and the darkness and the small mystery that he was part of. Then he saw that his eyes were not adjusting to the dark and wondered why. He decided to get up.

"That's it, Butch," he heard Al say, "jam those fists in, close to the knucks. How does that feel? Now tie him up, Steve. I can tape the laces."

Al was calm, as always. Steve was reassuring in a humdrum way. Father Rigo there, with the Professor, together, both looking his way and smiling. Time to sweat. The tape was packed hard on his knuckles, his shoes and gloves were laced to the same tightness just the way he liked. Eight-ounce gloves. Dangerous gloves, Mexican.

Al put on the punching mitts and Butch went to work. Four, five, six punch combinations, from all angles. Double and triple left-hooks. As soon as Al flashed a mitt Butch pounded, loud and powerful. When Al swiped Butch was too quick, bobbing, weaving, tilting just enough for Al to miss, then striking back, dead-on center pad.

"You're killing me kid, and you're all aglow. Time for the walk." Once outside the locker room Al stopped, Butch rested his hands on Al's shoulders from behind and hopped, hood down not up, and Al began the slow stroll down the corridor into the arena. Steve followed.

"Punch this ticket Butchy. You still owe me two rounds," the Professor said, loudly. But from the door the priest said,

“Don’t fight, Butch.” Only Butch heard him.

Out from the tunnel and into the arena and Butch’s eyeballs swell and throb from the quaking white glare. There were no people, not separate, palpable human beings. Instead there were twenty thousand throats that turned the building into one, pulsating, monstrous throat, a ravaging organism meant to shatter human cells with an unrelenting, concussive blast so violent that Butch’s ears shut down. He had expected a vaulted, cathedral grandeur; instead he got pinball vulgarity, a grandiosity of appetite with himself as a morsel to be eaten.

Never had he known such beckoning, irrational, targeted, vital fear. It was all about him. A precinct of clarity at the back of his head watched it all and was jubilant. He climbed the ring stairs, stepped between the ropes, raised his arms, danced, and listened.

But he didn’t hear his own name. Across the ring he saw a looming, hooded, avenging wraith that might reach across at will and strike him dead. What he heard was, “and in the blue corner, weighing in at one hundred and fifty-five pounds, the former welterweight champion of the world, and for the fifth time the middleweight champion of the world” —and the inevitable pause, as the throated beast tore the air—“the greatest pound-for-pound fighter in the history of boxing” —and the opponent danced to center ring, twirling, the skirt of his robe rising in rhythm, his arms raised but his head down—

“Sugarrr

“Raaaay

“Rooobbbbiinnnnsssoooonnn.”

And Butch thought—this is Olympus and he is Zeus and I am dreaming. And he heard Ray think, *no you ain’t Butch. I*

*don't teach dream pain, son. No sweetness tonight for you. Tonight I'm bitter, Butch. For you I'm Bitter Ray Reality*. And in the center of the ring, to get instructions from the ref, he hears Ray, *look at me Butch. That's it. HEY CHAMP! HOW 'YA DOIN'?*

Some guys are talkers; in a clinch they'll tell you what they did to your wife last night. Never Butch. Not Ray, whose eyes are dull red, his face immobile with a relaxed, predatory fury. Back in his corner Butch thinks—Ray's legs are even skinnier in person than on TV.

And he watches Ray, so patient talking to his corner man, the ring so tiny there is no room to run, the lights scorching white. And he grows impatient for the bell, and—This is solitude. This is exifuckingstential angst. What am I doing here?

*What are you doin' here, Butch? What are you DOIN'? You're here to decapitate me, you pathetic phoney fuck. That's what you doin' here. Either that or leave now.* No bell, Ray bouncing on his toes, Butch walking to him, rotates his shoulders and hips and throws a straight lead right hand off his back foot, catches Ray hard and flush between the eyes, and hears, *how'd that feel Butch? You caught Ray Robinson square. Now, you know that hurt, so you better be hopin' I didn't dream about* you *last night, right Butch?*

Butch jabs to shut him up, but Ray twitches left even before the punch is underway and throws the left hook to the liver and Butch loses his legs, his torso now planted immobile, his diaphragm in spasm, no air left to exhale and none coming in. He covers up, weaves his shoulders, chin tucked. Most head shots don't hurt there and then, but heavy blows to the body debilitate instantaneously to horrifying, lasting effect.

Yet nothing follows. Then he hears, *or did I? What's*

*your real name, Butch? Maybe Jimmy? Jimmy Junior? Jimmy Junior Doyle? Did you check the calendar?*

At his stool, Al closing cuts over his eyes, 2% adrenaline solution, Steve dousing him and fanning with a towel, Butch cannot see out of his right eye swollen shut. He's panting, a rib broken, maybe two. He looks left and there she is. Kyra, strolling the round girl stroll. Made up slutty to hide that pure and pretty face, everything out. Round six coming, not six hundred, which is what it feels like. Ten to go. Why, Kyra?

*Because you turned her into a whore, Butch. Butch's main bitch. That's what they called her. I heard them. You like bitches, don't you Butch?*

Ray is holding and Butch can't shake him off. Before the ref breaks them he hears, *I beat your father on the roof. No match. Didn't he tell you, Butch? You know he was mediocre, don't you. Strictly third rate.* As Ray moves backwards he hooks to the chin and Butch is down. With the ref's fingers in his face Butch looks across the ring and sees Ray bleeding, from his stomach and chest and mouth and even from his ears. And his corner man whispers. Ray smiles. Butch is up, then dances away.

Your mother wasn't killed Butch. She ran away from all of you. She's still alive but don't give a dumb shit about you Butch, nor your sistes neither. Come close Butch and I'll tell you more truth.

Ray's hair is messy, sticking up. He bleeds but the blood does not fall. He stalks, the predator, he stalks for two minutes. His rhythm is restful as he stalks. Butch so beguiled he just wants to move with him, hears, *this is about you, Butchy boy. Everybody has to grow up at least twice.* And Butch says—you're full of shit Ray.

And wants to call *him* the phony fuck, but Ray, breaking

his stalking rhythm with one step, darts in too fast, bangs Butch's fists into his own face, breaks Butch's nose, beats his arms, the top of his head, lands a combination to Butch's heart and Butch sags to his knees. He sees Ray's legs.

Who are you Butch? You want to be me? Is that it? The Professor? Maybe that useless priest who should have said Ray don't fight but didn't? You Jesus, Butch? Is that who you want to be? Too bad, baby. You your father. That's who you are. Ain't that a relief, Butch? Ain't that a happy thought? He decides to get up. The bell rings.

"One more round Butchy." Al is talking slow. Humdrumming Steve, solemn Steve, "Spend it all Butch."

Butch looks across and Ray is not bleeding and his hair is not messed up. He's looking back. With two heads? No no. The corner man has turned too and both face Butch. Ray and—it's Fast Jimmy—together are looking at Butch. And Butch thinks—he is the greatest, pop, you were right and I'm sorry pop. And Butch hears, but now not from Ray—me too, son. Me too. He is the greatest and he is truthful, Butch. And he needs to hear truth. That dream gym was his church and you were there. You were the only one. You tell him.

Come on, Butch. You heard your old man, didn't you? Let's trade some truths. Only three minutes left. You got anything left, Butchy? And Butch goes down, then up, down and up, down up. And Ray closes quick but too quick, careless, and Butch throws the right from his hip to Ray's jaw, left-hooks him twice, body head, bobs from habit, uppercut – I was there for you Ray and I tried but nobody else understood and I love you Ray.

Then Ray flies up then down onto his back. And the full-throated crowd-beast returns, and Butch's vision is bleached white. From the canvas Ray thinks, I know. So stop worryin' kid.

The ref is counting over a supine ghost-Ray, but Ray is up and walking to Butch, hands lowered, and says, Fast Jimmy was in real pain, Butch, a long time and deep. You knew it. That's why the relief, son. He wanted me to tell you that. That he knows that. You're off the hook. Stay there, he says. You're one tough nasty sonofabitch in here, baby. You hit hard, especially for such a soft kid. Stay soft Butch. That's who you are. You the real Sugar, Butch, not me. Don't fight.

Butch knows he's smiling now, through his swollen eye and broken nose and the blood from cuts over most of his face. His facial muscles tell him he's smiling.

The ref, bent low, crosses his arms, twice, signaling that ghost-Ray has lost. But Ray has turned to his corner and Fast Jimmy has his arm around him. They both turn back, look at Butch, and Ray thinks Hey champ! How'ya doin'? But, Butch, you know me and re-matches. Watch yourself. Watch yourself Butch. And one more thing. Your father was a warrior.

And Fast Jimmy says nothing but looks at Butch, and Butch hears him thinking – you weren't scared son. Now no more bad dreams, you hear? Because now Ray has to go. Relief is sweet, isn't it son? Thanks, Butchy, for all of it.

And Sugar Ray and Fast Jimmy turn and Ray holds the ropes for Jimmy to climb through, then Jimmy for Ray, and once down the three steps they go their separate ways.

Butch spent three weeks in the hospital. The first two days he was unconscious and close to death. On the third day he opened his eyes. On the fifth he could converse. The priest, Al, Steve and the Professor came to see him on the sixth. Al, calling the rescue and promised recovery a miracle, explained how Kyra had saved Butch's life. Apparently a lurking cerebral hematoma had finally struck. He had fallen unconscious, first hitting his face hard against a bookstand,

then bouncing against a small writing table, breaking two ribs, finally hitting the floor, again face first.

Kyra had finally found the key that Butch had given her to his apartment and, at last, had decided to return it. Coming off her nightshift at the hospital she stopped off just with the sun coming up, so she knew he must be there and knocked. Then she banged. Next she shouted. Finally she let herself in and found him lying on the floor bleeding from the mouth and left ear. The ambulance got him to their critical unit with barely enough time to operate and save both his life and his wits.

"Al, when will she be here?"

"She won't be. Wops and Spics? Come on. She asked me to let her know when you were out of the woods, so I called her yesterday. She said to tell you three things. She loves you. She understands. The key is on the writing table."

"That's it?"

"As far as she's concerned it is. She finished school, got her RN. She said there's no such thing as coincidence. She believes she was sent to your apartment to save you, but she didn't tell me to tell you that. I believe she's full of—"

"Stop Al." Butch lay quietly with his eyes closed for several minutes, the four men watching.

Steve murmured, "she doesn't deserve Butchy." Then more silence. Only Steve saw that Butch shook his head.

"Yeah yeah," Al rushed in. "And you're right, kid. She's just a little whacky. But listen, you took some beating. Hard to believe it's all self-inflicted."

"Not so hard for Butch, I think," the Professor said, and with uncharacteristic gravity, "and not exactly self-inflicted."

“You can’t box no more, Butchy. I won’t wrap you if you do.” Steve also didn’t wait for Butch’s eyes to open and was as solemn as always. “You can train, maybe, every now and then spar light. I’ll work the pads with you. But that’s it. And don’t go tryin’ some other gym, either. We’ll put the word out. No comebacks.”

Butch said, “no more boxing. I already knew that. I heard him.”

The Professor, smiling, added quickly but softly, “what he means, Steve, is every so often a two-minute round or three with the likes of me.” Fixed in his watching, finally the priest winked to the Professor and said it was time to go, kissed Butch on his forehead, and whispered to him. Butch nodded. Two days later he made his confession.

Later he told the Professor about his vision and was surprised when he didn’t dismiss it out of hand. “I may not be a Catholic,” the Professor said, “but I compensate by reading a lot.”

During one of their talks Butch asked the Professor if he had ever been to East 121st Street, and the Professor said, “many times, for the pushcarts.” And Butch said, “yeah yeah. Those old paisans knew everybody. You could run but you couldn’t hide. Even the dumbest kid couldn’t get lost. They’re long gone.”

And the Professor said, “with the Third Avenue El, Butchy, and just as suddenly.” Butch said, “You know, Professor, one day I woke up. I was a little kid and I looked out of my bedroom window from the fifth floor of the projects. I could see the El. And this one day, real early, when I looked I saw a bunch of little sticks coming up from the curb under the El. These little sticks that hadn’t been there the day before.” And the Professor said, “parking meters.” And Butch said, “at the time I thought they were magic sticks that

had grown through the concrete."

It was then the Professor suggested he write about all that had happened. Then he said, "I've never heard you mention the past before, Butch, which is strange, stranger. So I'll mention the future. If there is a Grand Design, then no need to force it. Some get it, some don't. The big picture can take care of itself. In other words, my friend, between three minutes of a single round and the sweep of eternity there's a lot of living. Don't be a spectator."

After a few seconds of silence he asked, "what did your father look like, Butchy? In your vision."

Butch smiled. "He looked good Professor, real trim. Young. I swear to God he looked like he could go with Ray. He looked . . . he looked his real self."

"That's wonderful Butch." The Professor was thoughtful. "But listen. Something special happened to you. More than meets the eye or the medical machines."

"You're a strange man, Professor. There's more than meets the eye in you, too, isn't there?"

The Professor merely smiled. "I'll see you at the gym."

"Thank you, Professor. For every little thing." And Butch and the man hugged, the way boxers do when showing affection after a tough fight.

He woke up very early and decided to go for a run. Cousin Penelope had sent a card wishing him a speedy recovery and saying that she's been waiting too long to see him. He would see Evangeline and hug her to his heart. Only then did he realize that Kyra had been on his mind—on and off but mostly on—for a long time. He remembered the letter. Later he would re-read it, maybe revise it. He liked things to be

clean, and that included breaks.

Soon he rose and decided to go for a walk instead of a run, for a . . . a . . . stroll, slow, casual. Just then he decided to take the Professor's advice. Kyra had said "he doesn't lie." He sat back down, chose a pseudonym, a surname from the old neighborhood and the given name as a tribute to his father, and began to compose: "Start with number two, son" the father said, "number one is all taken." He drew out the aaalll so there could be no doubt. "And it's gonna stay taken."

Penelope lived only five miles away, a good walk, but first he would go to 7a.m. Mass, Kyra's favorite. Maybe a short conversation later? After all, he told himself, the saddest thing in the world is missed opportunity.

He strolled with a touch of rhythm in his gait, like Ray up from his stool at the bell and oh-so-nonchalantly closing on the center of the ring for the next round, a plan in hand and not a care in the world. Then he stopped.

Was that Fast Jimmy, with Ray and another lesson, waiting, just there at the corner, Jimmy outside the ropes, Ray inside playing possum, both watching him?

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**James Como** is the author of