

It began with a basketball game. Mike Dichter and I went up for the same rebound, and I accidentally stuck my elbow in his chest. Then Mike stuck his elbow in my chest, pointed a finger at me, and told me to watch out. In those days I had a reputation for toughness to maintain, so I told him that he better watch out, and on the next rebound neither of us watched out and both of us got elbows in the chest. Then we started shoving each other under the basket and pointing fingers and making threatening faces, which was fine with me because looking threatening was one of the things I did best.

Before things could get out of hand, however, gym ended, and Mike and I glared at each other and went back to our respective homerooms.

Things probably would have taken a peaceful turn if I hadn't walked home with Kevin Cox after school and told him that the next time Mike and I played basketball I was really going to throw some elbows, and if he, Mike, didn't like it, I would fight him anytime, anywhere. I don't know why I said this. Perhaps I was thinking of the Mike I had known a year before. Perhaps I was thinking of the thin, gullible, good-natured Mike who had since grown four inches, gained fifteen pounds, and become as humorless and menacing as a drill sergeant.

Kevin looked at me doubtfully.

"Do you really think you can take him?" he asked me.

Since Kevin had always been one of my most loyal and servile followers, I was astonished by his doubt in my physical prowess.

"I know I can take him," I said.

"He's three inches taller than you," Kevin said.

"So?"

"He's really strong."

"I'm really strong."

Kevin shrugged. "Okay," he said, "but I think Mike could take you

Now it was my turn to shrug. It was also my turn to lay a condescending hand upon Kevin's shoulder and leave him to ponder his absurd and traitorous notions.

The next day in school everything proceeded as usual. I listened to the teachers, took notes, fell asleep, made a few uncalled-for remarks, and gazed at Denise Young's legs.

During lunch I was sitting with a tableful of friends, talking and listening in my usual superior way, when I heard Mike Dichter say, "Hey, buddy!" Somehow I knew that he meant me. Somehow I also knew that all kinds of jigs were up and that something momentous was going to happen. I turned to look at him.

"I hear you want to fight me," he said.

"That's right," I said.

"I'll meet you after school."

“I’ll be there,” I said. Then he walked away, and I discovered two interesting things about myself. The first was that the idea of fighting terrified me, and the second was that in moments of extreme fear my body produced ice-cold sweat.

Someone said something to me, and I smiled and nodded. Someone said something else to me, and I smiled and nodded at that too. Perhaps they were giving me advice. Perhaps they were telling me to stay low and lead with my left. I stood up, without really knowing I was standing up, and walked from the cafeteria to the playground. I had never felt so lonely or so frightened in my life. Somehow I had taken a wrong turn and wound up in the wrong day, in the wrong body, with the wrong future. Somehow, in three hours, I was going to be in a real fight with real fists, and there was no way out of it.

My biggest problem, I knew, was that I didn’t hate Mike or even dislike him. I had no animal rage to ball my hands into fists and thrust them into action—no deep-seated envy or resentment to impel me toward him with the object of destruction. All I had was fear and pride, which is a pretty poor combination as far as fighting is concerned, because all pride could do was guarantee that I show up for the fight, and all fear could do was guarantee that I lose it.

The rest of the day passed in a haze of anticipation and dread. I sat through my classes, a smiling silent shell of my former self, and tried to look as casual and confident as possible. Now and then I would look up at the clock and realize that the fight was only one hour and forty-nine minutes away—one hour and forty minutes . . . I tried to tell myself that it might only be a one- or two-punch fight, that maybe Mike would throw a punch and I would throw a punch and we would both smile, throw our arms around each other, and become friends for life. But I knew that it would not be a one- or two-punch fight. No. It would be a fight to some extreme and horrifying limit—a fight to unconsciousness or hospitalization or reconstructive surgery.

During my walks from class to class I discovered that most of the eighth grade had taken sides and that my side consisted of me, a foreign exchange student named Hans, and two girls whose hearts I had not yet broken. The rest of my peers were massed behind Mike, eager to see me put in my place once and for all.

The last class of the day was shop. We were all told by our teacher, Mr. Bledsoe, to work on our special projects. My special project was a skateboard, so I began sanding its nose and trying with all my might not to think about the fight. It is said that there is nothing like working with wood to take one’s mind off a problem, but it could also be said that there is nothing like a problem to take one’s mind off working with wood. No matter how intensely I sanded the nose of my skateboard, the fight was always with me, and the air around me seemed as thin as Alpine or Himalayan air.

I tried to tell myself that in three hours it would all be over, that I would be in my own house, in my own room, and the fight would be a memory. But three hours would not be enough if I lost the fight. A month would not be enough to heal my humiliation. What would be enough? I asked myself. Six months? No. A year? Yes. A year would be enough. In a year I would be able to look back on this day and smile, or perhaps laugh. In a year the fight would be a distant memory, and I would be a different person with different friends and new reasons to feel confident and proud.

So I closed my eyes and asked God to please make it a year later—to please take me out of this year and place me in the next. With my eyes closed I almost believed that time was racing past me, that eggs were being laid, chicks were being hatched, growing plump, laying their own eggs, and dying.

Unfortunately, when I opened my eyes, I knew that I was still thirteen, still in shop class, and that the fight was waiting to be fought. I thanked God anyway, guessing I had prayed the wrong prayer, looked at the clock, and saw that I had ten minutes left. I did not even try to sand my skateboard those last ten minutes. Instead I drifted into a pleasant state of suspended animation where there was no joy, no fear, no pride, no regret. During this time my pulse rate and respiration dropped, the blood in my veins slowed to a crawl, and I believe I stopped aging.

And then the bell rang, and my time was up.

We were to meet in front of the school. When I got there, I saw a crowd of fifty or sixty people awaiting my arrival. Under different circumstances I would have been pleased by the turnout, but the hopelessness of my position offset whatever theatrical lift I might have felt. I did, however, smile. I was, after all, the other half of the act and was not about to look somber or scared or penitent for anyone.

I saw Mike Dichter standing fifteen or twenty feet away, looking as menacing as ever. He fixed his eyes on me for a moment, then kissed his girlfriend, Linda Lieban. I had foolishly broken up with Linda ten months before. Now, as Mike was kissing her, she looked at me as though she would soon have her revenge.

And then, before I knew it, someone said, “Let’s go,” and everyone started walking toward the park two blocks away. Strangely, I felt not like a boy on his way to a fight but like a king on his way to the gallows. These were not my classmates before me but peasants in revolt. My wife had already been beheaded, my children sold for horses, my servants set free.

I tried to put everything in perspective, to assure myself that it was only a fight and that losing was no disgrace. And maybe I wouldn’t lose. Maybe I was one of those people who did not know his own strength until he was confronted. Maybe when I was facing Mike, some inherited ancient instinct would propel me toward his throat and give me the strength of ten men. My father was certainly a powerful man. My father, at certain times, was one of the most powerful and frightening men I knew. Up to that moment, all I thought I had inherited from him was his pride and his nose, but maybe once I was standing face-to-face with Mike Dichter I would discover that I had inherited his blind rage and lion heart as well.

When we got to the park, a short discussion about the rules of the fight took place. First it was decided that kicking and biting should not be allowed, then that kicking should be allowed, but not scratching. During this time I was standing by a stone water fountain, breathing slowly and wondering when the blood of my father and his father and his father’s father was going to show itself. I still couldn’t summon enough rage or fury or indignation to make me want to fight Mike or anyone else. All I could do was hope that I was subconsciously feeling those things and was merely biding my time.

“A fight’s a fight,” I heard someone say. “No bullshit rules.”

This motion was contemplated, then carried: Everything allowed. No bullshit rules.

“Should we take our shirts off?” I asked, hoping to postpone things a little longer.

“Whatever,” someone said.

And with that all the decisions were made, and there was nothing for Mike and me to do but face each other and fight. Tim Hamilton, our referee, walked us to a clearing and told us to shake hands and fight whenever we were ready. For a moment Mike and I just looked at each other. Then Mike

crouched a little, I do not know why, and began to circle me. I knew I should move in and attack immediately, but I was rooted where I stood.

"Fight!" someone said. And now Mike began to advance and kick karate style. The kicks not only served to display his formidable kicking skills but were also a superior defensive and offensive weapon. In order to get to Mike, I would have to find some way to get around his kicks, and in order to do that, I would have to be someone who knew how to fight. My only choice, therefore, was to look unworried and back up, which is what I did. Mike, however, was advancing steadily, which meant that I could either continue backing up until I reached the bus stop on Santa Monica Boulevard or stand my ground and see what happened. Pride demanded that I choose the latter, just in time for Mike to kick me on the thigh. I turned sideways to present a thinner target, bent my knees a little, and took a hard kick to the ribs.

And then things began to happen very quickly. In an instant Mike was on me, and my legs buckled, and we were wrestling on the ground. In an effort to prove that I could fight as dirty as anyone, I gingerly grabbed his groin and discovered that I had neither the will nor the strength to squeeze.

"So that's how you want to play?" Mike said, grabbing my groin a good deal less gingerly and wrestling me onto my back. Somehow I was able to get out from under him, and a great deal of grappling, kicking, scratching, and punching ensued while the crowd yelled for either Mike or me to do something that I could not quite make out. Then I saw blood on my shirt and wondered who was bleeding. Before I could find out, Mike was on top of me and my arms were pinned under his knees and he was hitting me very hard in the face. Curiously, I hardly felt the punches. All I felt was the dull impact of the blows, and all I heard were the shrieks and hollers of the crowd, along with the *thump, thump, thump* of fist hitting cheek, ear, chin, forehead, and occasionally mouth. For some reason I was very relaxed. Perhaps because I sensed that I was only getting what I deserved. After all, I had feasted on my own glory and egotism for three years. The check was bound to come.

"Kill him!" I heard Linda Lieban cry. "Kill him!" So Mike reached back and hit me on the side of the head with the hardest punch he had thrown yet.

"Give?" he said.

I shook my head.

"Okay," he said, reaching back to kill me again. He repeated this eight or nine times, and after each punch he said, "Give?" and I said, "No," or shook my head, and he reached back again.

And then, for an instant, I had had enough. For one brief moment the blood of my father and his father and his father's father welled up within me, and I put my hands under Mike's knees, lifted him in the air, held him there, and threw him off me. The crowd gasped, and for a moment Mike looked surprised, even scared. I stood up to my full height, and the full height of my pride and dignity, but I did not know what to do next. I was no more willing to fight now than I had been before; and the moment passed, and my fury ebbed, and before I knew it, Mike was on top of me picking up where he had left off.

Soon I could not distinguish one punch from another, and my ears burned, and the noises around me seemed to be coming from the other end of a hollow tube. I saw glimpses of faces, but I did not see friends or former friends—all I saw was a crowd, and all I heard was a crowd's noise. I knew it was all over—the love notes, the phone calls, the envy and adulation. Each punch robbed me of another friend,

another heart, another follower. From here on out it would just be me, and my TV, and my memories of glory.

And then, one by one, or two by two, the lights went out in my mind, and Mike's legs were around my stomach and I couldn't breathe.

"Give?" he said.

I shook my head.

He squeezed harder. "Give?"

*Why not?* the last light in my mind said. *All I'm giving him is the fight. So I gave: I gave him the fight, the love notes, the phone calls, the envy, the adulation, and the arrogant hull of who I had been.*

For a moment I felt very light, almost weightless.

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