

Jaed Coffin

THE NICE GUY

THE FIRST MAN I EVER FOUGHT was a Haida Indian twice my age who looked partly white and whose name was Mike “The Nice Guy” Edenshaw. At the time, I was twenty-one years old and one year out of college back east. The Nice Guy was forty-two and worked as a janitor at a nursing home. He is dead now.

We fought on a snowy Friday night in late November, in a twenty-foot-by-twenty-foot boxing ring, in a barroom above a diner called Donna’s. The name of the bar was Marlintini’s Lounge and on Friday nights during the winter months men from the capital city and from the smaller towns and fishing villages along the Inside Passage like Cordova, Yakutat, Angoon, Klawock, and Hoonah came to Marlintini’s to fight each other in the Roughhouse Friday boxing shows. For the seven years that I trained as

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a fighter, I only spent one year—my first—boxing in the Roughhouse show, but as far as I know, the show goes on.

The morning of the fight, I arrived in Juneau with my trainer, Victor Littlefield, on the 6 a.m. flight from Sitka—the small fishing town of eight thousand where I worked in a high school and trained in Victor’s gym. Victor is a Tlingit Indian, whose family and clan have lived in Southeast Alaska for over ten thousand years. During the day, he works as an electrician at the local hospital; at night, he trains a small stable of young men from town. Victor has a son, and is married to a woman he has known his whole life. In his fighting days, he went by “The Savage.”

The first time I walked into Victor’s gym—this was early in October, after the cruise ships had all returned south and after the salmon had spawned and then died in the same rivers where they were born—Victor asked me if I wanted to fight him. I had never boxed before, but after paddling a sea kayak one thousand miles north from Seattle, I was in good enough shape to think I might win. Victor must have hit me fifty times in the first minute of our match. When he decided that I’d had enough, he invited me back to his gym to train full time. Single, brave, looking for something to care about, I started working out with Victor every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday night. Three weeks later, Victor asked me if I wanted to fly over to Juneau and fight someone in a bar. If I won, he said, a man was going to give me one hundred and fifty dollars. “It’s no ballroom,” Victor told me. “Basically, you just take your shirt off and show everyone how tough you are.” And then Victor told me that I needed to have a ring name. We tried a few out—“Half Asian Sensation,” “Thai Thunder”—until Victor suggested “The Stone,” because it went well with my last name—Coffin—and because even though I got hit a lot, I never let on that it hurt.

It rained all morning in Juneau. Victor and I sat in Donna’s eating biscuits and moose gravy while Victor told me stories of his fights. In the afternoon, we rented a car and drove all the way to the end of the Juneau road just to see it, and then into town to walk the aisles of a department store, and then we took a long nap and watched hunting shows in our room at the Travel Lodge—the hotel where the fight promoter had put us up across the street from Marlintini’s. Night fell about four p.m. By six, the first heavy snow of the season began to fall. At

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eight o'clock, Victor told me it was time for us to go over.

I followed Victor across the street and upstairs to Marlintini's. At the door, Victor told the bouncers that I was his fighter, and the bouncers waved me through. The crowd—at capacity, Marlintini's could fit 400 people—had been drinking heavily since nine. You could hear the booze in the careless chatter that registered every time the music—AC/DC, Jah Rule and Nelly—cut out, and you could see the crowd's rising intoxication sparkling in the dim light. The majority of the fans were native—mostly Tlingit or Haida—or else they were Filipino, Mexican, Samoan, and white. They huddled around small ringside tables for which they'd paid thirty-five dollars per chair to sit at, or they stood, for twenty-five bucks, shoulder to shoulder, peering out from under baseball hats and dark hoodies. Back then, you could still smoke in bars in Alaska, and so lots of people did.

The other fighters were in the corner of the barroom, doing jumping jacks and throwing punches in the air, or jogging in place while slapping themselves in the face. Everyone was acting pissed off and ferocious, but you could tell that some of the guys who looked the angriest were the ones who were most afraid to fight. The women who had come to watch them were all dressed up for a big night out: visible thongs and lots of cleavage and bangs sprayed up into big claws that rose off their foreheads. Victor put our gear in a corner near the pool tables and we sat down against the wall. Through the crowd and smoke I could see the fight ring: the canvas spot-lit and blood-dappled, the ropes the colors of the American flag.

"You got any idea who I'm fighting tonight?" I asked Victor. For the last week, I'd been waking up several times each night to think about the man. In the darkness, he was always much bigger and meaner and stronger than me.

Victor looked at me from under the brim of his hat. He has dark eyes and white Chinese skin and a face that is round and supple like a seal's. Somewhere in the past, Victor once told me, there was Russian blood.

"It doesn't matter," Victor said. Then he got up and walked over to a small table where a large white woman with a clipboard sat and where earlier I'd had to sit, in a chair while an EMT with several lip rings gave me a physical exam that confirmed that I wasn't drunk and that I didn't have any broken bones.

"It's that old native dude," Victor said when he came back. The barroom was mostly full of "native dudes," but I knew exactly who Victor was talking about. The Nice Guy stood just beyond the pool tables, punching a cement pillar with one palm while sucking drags off another man's cigarette, which he cupped in his wrapped hand like a joint. His hair was long over his ears, he wore a heavy and untrimmed mustache, and his arms hung from his paddling shoulders with a sense

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of defeat and unimportance.

“Anything else?” I said.

Victor shrugged. “Name is Mike Edenshaw. Calls himself ‘The Nice Guy.’”

The Nice Guy, I thought. I liked The Stone better. “How many fights he got?”

Victor frowned and then looked at me squarely. He bobbed his head left under an imaginary right hand, and came up with a left cross of his own. We were both southpaws, and this was a move we’d been working on for the last several days. Victor called it his “sleep button.” He’d hit me with a lot in the last weeks. “All I know is that if you slip his right and come up with a left,” Victor said, “you’ll knock his ass out.”

About ten-thirty p.m., Victor sat me down in a backward metal chair and wrapped my hands. When he was done wrapping he slid on my gloves. In a quiet corner of the barroom, he took me through combinations hook-cross-hook. Cross-hook-cross. Pop-pop-pop. When I’d worked up a good sweat, I jogged in place watching the other fights. In the ring an old Tlingit man knocked out a teenaged black kid with an ugly and nearly accidental punch that sent the kid to the canvas, wiggling. Two obese fighters, after ten seconds of the first round, were stooped over, exhausted and panting, as the crowd booed for them to keep fighting. After one of the bikini-clad ring girls circled the barroom with a card that read ROUND 2, the more obese fighter got a bolt of life and knocked out the other man with a punch to the back of his head.

It was my turn to fight. Before I made my way to the ring, I kneeled in the corner and then whispered a short Buddhist prayer even though I didn’t know what it meant. I stood up and walked behind Victor through the crowd and into my corner.

In the middle of the ring, barking into a microphone, stood a red-faced man in a derby hat, with a red-sequin tuxedo vest and a matching bowtie. The man was Bob Haag, the H of Big H Promotions and the mind behind Roughhouse Friday. At the time, Haag’s show was the most successful entertainment event in all of Southeast, which meant that it beat out all the other monthly offerings at Marlintoni’s Lounge—a category which included a pole dancing cabaret of various local women, Salsa and Texas Hold ‘Em nights, Sunday Afternoon Pajama Karaoke, and a touring group of Midget Wrestlers who stapled dollar bills to each other’s heads.

“In the red corner, from a town called Ketchikan,” Haag growled into his

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microphone, “he works as a night janitor at the Mountain View Senior Home...calls himself The Nice Guy...” The crowd, by then, was too drunk to cheer for anything but violence. And then: “He’s a school teacher in Sitka, calls himself ‘The Stone’!”

I jogged in my corner. Victor slapped my face with Vaseline and then offered me some final wisdom: “Crush skulls,” he said. “Steal souls. You’re a fucking warrior.”

Ding. Ding. Ding.

Standing there across from The Nice Guy in the moments before either of us had thrown a punch, I encountered a kind of amplified silence unlike any silence I had ever heard before. A comparison might be drawn to a heightened state of meditation, but that was not exactly it. I mean yes there was the same electric sense of emptiness—elevated now by the vast whiteness of the blood-dappled canvas, and yes there was the same fuzzy murmur—this from the murmuring crowd, but the big difference between what happens in the mind and what happens in the ring is that rather than encountering the slow breath of my dissolving self, I instead found myself confronting, through the slim space between red leather gloves, the dark eyes of another man.

The Nice Guy did not move much, but rather stood mostly still, or shuffling, flat-footed, open-mouthed, as if waiting for me to come forward. When I threw the first punch, I did not do it out of aggression; I threw it because I wanted to end the abysmal silence that hung between me and my opponent.

It was just a meek jab, followed by a few more. Victor was yelling something from behind me, but I did not hear it. The crowd was growing unsatisfied. To please them, I kept moving forward and jabbing. The Nice Guy—hands low—refused to move. And then: bang.

The punch landed flush on my cheek. The crowd erupted, but it did not hurt. In fact, the slap of impact made me feel better, and it made me wake up to the fact that there, standing across from me, was a man with whom I probably had very little in common beyond the terms of our simple agreement: to punch each other.

Ding. Ding. Ding.

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Between rounds, Victor took out my mouth guard and sponged my shoulders and face while telling me, “This guy’s cold. He’s fucking old. He’s all dried up. Look at him.” I was sitting on a stool in the blue corner, trying to slow my breathing. Victor had taken out my mouth guard and given me water then told me to spit it into a bucket. “He’s fucking old, man,” he said. “Be a warrior. Hit him. Run him. He won’t last.”

When I looked across the ring to where The Nice Guy was slumped over on a stool, I realized that Victor was right: his cheeks had turned a gray shade of yellow and the skin of his sagging chest was puckered and blushed. He stared at the mid-ceiling as though it were a pleasant afternoon sky. Maybe a sunset. There was not a drop of sweat on him.

In the next round, I came out fast. I threw big wild punches for about twenty seconds, and while none of them landed cleanly, the pressure and weight of them began to damage The Nice Guy’s enthusiasm. At one point, we locked in an awkward clinch. The Nice Guy’s head was stuck in my armpit, but Haag—who doubled as ref—let us fight on. So I started punching, clumsy uppercuts that landed on The Nice Guy’s chin and throat. After I landed two or three—his head remained about waist high, the physics of our clinch seemed to trap it there, bobbing—something deep inside my stomach flexed, flashed, and broke loose. Whatever the feeling was, I had never felt it before and I knew that I was in no position to hold it back. When Haag broke us apart, I ran at The Nice Guy and punched him several more times. By now, I could feel the hardness of his skull through the padding in my gloves, and the dull sensation only made me want to find it again. Then I felt The Nice Guy’s body bend, and sink. I backed off when he fell to his knees.

Ding. Ding. Ding.

By the time he rose for the third round, The Nice Guy’s punches looped toward me at no more than quarter speed. As I slipped them, I could hear heavy, taxing breaths leave his chest. I was no boxer then—and I suppose that over time I still never became much more than a decent fighter—but The Nice Guy’s slowness gave me that thrilling sensation of absolute control. Each time he swung, I ducked and countered with sleep-button left crosses followed by more right hooks—as if Victor and I had choreographed the sequences weeks ago.

The next time The Nice Guy threw a blind right hand, I slipped it and immediately felt the power building in my toe, traveling through my calf, my knee, rising into my hips and stomach, turning over in my shoulder. When

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the power reached my wrist, my fist could do nothing but snap.

Pop.

The Nice Guy went down. He wobbled to his feet and remained there unmoving. I drilled him again, harder, near his temple. Pop. This time, flat onto his back. His feet kicked up into the air—like an insect, or a cartoon of the just-dead—and for what seemed like too long, the feet remained there above him. Haag had already counted up to four; I stood in the neutral corner. The crowd erupted. I believe that I turned to the barroom and raised my arms. But it was while watching his feet rise, and then hang there, that I noticed the details of The Nice Guy's sneakers.

They were brand new basketball shoes, colored bright white and dazzle red. The shoes seemed comically adolescent for a forty-three year old man, and as The Nice Guy crawled across the canvas and dumbly pawed at the air, I found myself imagining him strolling down the aisle of the department store in Juneau, his hands in his pockets, a bashful look on his face, then stopping to admire the shoes, turning them over in his hands, fighting back a pang of giddiness, cursing the price tag, then telling himself: to hell with it, because tonight, as he moved beneath the golden spot light of Marlintini's, they were going to be worth every penny.

It took several minutes for The Nice Guy to come to. He went to his corner, where someone removed his gloves, and then he wandered to the middle of the ring. Meanwhile, Victor and I celebrated my first victory. The crowd liked what they saw—perhaps they hadn't seen much, but I was the product of an old champion, I was new, I had won, and they were drunk and someone had gotten knocked down and that was good enough reason to stand up and scream.

"Get up on the ropes!" Victor said. "Give them what they want!"

I put my feet on the middle rope, and rose up with my hands over my head. It was a stupid and arrogant gesture but I could not stop myself. In that moment—the crowd swelling beneath me, the ring alive and throbbing while winter and darkness and snow and cold hovered outside—I believed I would be the next middleweight champion of Roughhouse Friday, and I believed that winning that title would come with no irony or complexity and at no cost to me or anyone else.

The Nice Guy and I shook hands; our shake became an embrace. "Good fight," he said. His voice was much higher than I thought it would be, and his breath left his body in short wheezes. For the first time that night, I worried that he was not all right.

"Hey," I said, but I did not know what I was going to say next. "I wish..." I was looking at The Nice Guy's drawn face, which had suddenly become boyish and un-menacing. "I wish I could have fought you when you were my age."

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The Nice Guy looked at me, turned his head sideways. My intention was to compliment him, but by the time I realized it had not come across this way it was too late.

“Oh,” said The Nice Guy.

Haag raised my hand. The Nice Guy smiled to himself, took my other hand, and raised it also. As he exited the ring, one of his sneakers got snagged in the ropes. He stumbled into the crowd. Later, I tried to find The Nice Guy with the intention of buying him several beers with my winner’s check, perhaps splitting a package of cigarettes, meeting the rest of the Edenshaw family. I spent several minutes searching the barroom for signs of his red track suit—but I guess he was already gone.

I did not stay in Alaska for very long. I fought Roughhouse for the rest of that year, and, after winning a middleweight title that spring in what Bob Haag called “The Southeast Showdown,” I moved back east, to Maine. In Portland, I joined up with a top-level boxing club, with serious pro fighters and elite amateurs who fought in Golden Gloves tournaments all over the country. I never did tell my coach or the other fighters about my past in Alaska. For all I cared, fighting a bunch of Indians in a barroom didn’t count for boxing experience. Over the next several years, I racked up enough amateur bouts to be deemed a respectable handful. I learned how to move and counter and adjust to different fighting styles in a way that Victor would never have been able to teach me. They were things one could learn only by leaving a remote place like Southeast.

And then one November, while training for a big regional tournament, my sparring partner—a lightning fisted middleweight from Haiti named Lamour—caught me with a jab I never saw. I did not black out, and the punch left me with no stitches. But for the next several weeks, I couldn’t get rid of my headaches and nausea. I tried to run it off, but the symptoms wouldn’t shake. MRIs and CT scans all negative, I returned to the gym with the intention of fighting again. But whenever I hit the heavy bag, or did a push-up, or fainted too fast, I felt like I was going to vomit. I knew it was time to stop fighting.

Months passed, and one Friday night, after I’d been out drinking in the Old Port, I came home to my empty apartment with a strange kind of hunger that I hadn’t felt since I’d been in the ring. I knew there was no way to satiate the feeling. There was nothing like fighting and nothing that could fill the emptiness of not doing it. I am not sure what part of my brain told me to do this, but I wandered to the back of my apartment and turned on my computer. I searched

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online for record of “Mike Edenshaw, Juneau, Alaska.” There was only one record: an obituary in the *Juneau Empire*.

The obituary said that about a year ago, The Nice Guy died of brain cancer. Survived by a wife and sons and daughters and grandchildren and great-grandchildren, the obituary also read that Mike Edenshaw, though he was known as The Nice Guy to boxing fans, was known as “Haida Mike” to friends and family. His favorite activities besides boxing were hunting, fishing, and carving. Many of his carvings could be seen in and around the cruise ship hotels along the Juneau waterfront.

What the obituary didn’t say is that the Edenshaw name held some weight in the native cultures of Southeast. Charles Edenshaw, a deceased Haida carver whose work had pioneered a market among white collectors and who had helped the anthropologist Franz Boas to cultivate original studies on “primitive art,” was a real source of dignity among his people. Charles’ ancestor, Albert, was known as one of the great chiefs in the history of the Haida nation. Albert Edenshaw had probably been among that slim generation of Northwest Indians who’d known the land both before the arrival of the Russian and European fur traders and also after that time—when it had been farmed and Christianized, over hunted and over fished, and sold away. The night that I fought him, I knew nothing about this lineage and I did not know that the meaning of the Edenshaw name—derived from the old Tlingit word *Eda’nsa*—was used to describe things that were “melting away, like the ice of a glacier, until there is nothing left of it.”

On the night that I fought him, I also did not know that three years later, in the same barroom, in the same ring, on the same canvas, Bob Haag would hold a Roughhouse benefit night to raise money for The Nice Guy’s hospital bills. Though The Nice Guy wasn’t well enough to attend, Haag had even presented members of the Edenshaw family with a plaque that read: “To a great boxer, Mike Edenshaw, from all your friends at Marlintoni’s.”

I stayed up a while longer that night, wondering how I was supposed to feel about the fact that a man I had once fought was now dead. The Nice Guy and I had known each other for about three minutes total, and yet I could still remember the weight of his slow heavy glove on my cheek, the bony feeling in my fist when it hit his head, the flash of his sneakers as they hung there, brand-new and sparkle-red, in the spot light over the ring.

Later, I found myself digging into a desk drawer for an old pack of cigarettes. Sitting on my front steps, staring into the cold November night, I lit one, took a few drags, and then held it away from me. For several seconds, I watched the cigarette shorten and the smoke curl, and then, fixed on the dazzling cherry, I watched it melt away until there was nothing left of it.