

Chance Fraser | Slap Boxing

Almost a Connect

At first David was tight lipped and rarely drank a beer. He was a prep cook and I was a server. We worked the day shift together along with four other employees, the six of us feeding more than forty businessmen and women.

After a month of rain, April's warm weather felt like a heat wave. We set tables out on the sidewalk, and Tacho, the daytime chef, drank four beers instead of his usual two. David rolled back his sleeves: the Virgin Mary on one arm and what looked like faded letters and numbers on the other.

"What are those tattoos?" I said.

"Gang shit."

"You're in a gang?"

"Not anymore, really."

While I folded napkins, I asked David about his life. Details filled in every work week. David's father died when he was twelve. Afterward, he and his older brother emigrated from Mexico City, D.F., to San Francisco's Mission District. He dropped out of school, joined a gang, and became a crack dealer, buying his dying mother a house in Mexico with drug money. He told me this as if he were merely speaking his thoughts aloud in an empty room, only occasionally flicking his eyes at me while stripping the plith from a pea or reaching for another tomato to dice.

On slow days, we would throw squares of oily foccoccia bread at each other, him behind the kitchen counter and me behind the bar. Sometimes this led to slap boxing matches.

I towered over David and had kick-boxed with professional fighters for a few years. He told me about street fights where he would wrap his belt around his hand, a giant buckle with a dollar sign making his fist like steel. He got beat in the prison yard and spent time in solitary after assaulting someone in the cafeteria.

His stocky frame meant he had to dart in close to me and sneak in a body punch, leaving a light sting. I countered this by throwing jabs, keeping him at a distance. Jabs with a closed fist would stop a few inches from his face, and open-handed jabs slapped his temple. We always argued about who won. Then he came up with a solution: "I'll bring in my boxing gloves."

"Alright, what are they?" I asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Are they sparring or fighting gloves?"

"I don't know."

David and I told Tacho we were going to have a boxing match. We wanted to know who he thought would win. He examined our knuckles, studying David's meaty fists before mine.

"Jesus, look at this guy," Tacho said, touching my protruding knuckles. "Like God damn razors."

For a while after that, I expected to walk into the changing area and find two pairs of boxing gloves on hooks, dangling by their laces. I'd remind David, but he kept postponing. So I imagined we would just continue to do this, talk about something that would never really happen, like two inmates joking about breaking out of prison.

Every few weeks David bought a new cell phone, one with more features.

“Check this out,” he would say, showing me picture messages of half-naked women he had presumably fucked.

“I don’t want to see that,” I would tell him and turn away, but I couldn’t help but feel amused. David also wanted me to listen to rap songs he downloaded onto his phone, blasting them through its tiny speaker. One song he listened to repeatedly had a part in the chorus that barked “murder a fool.” He would repeat this line, curling his fingers to make a gun.

During a busy lunch one day, the bartender failed to mention that she dropped, without breaking, a bottle of champagne I was about to serve. A spray of seventy-dollar Veuve Clicquot drenched the customer waiting for a tasting. Redfaced, I apologized and comped another bottle, which I paid for out of my own pocket (my day’s earnings). After service ended, I was just trying to get through folding my quota of napkins so I could leave. In the kitchen, David bobbed his head to songs rattling from his cell phone.

“Murder a fool,” David said, snapping back the imaginary gun in his hand, mimicking its kick-back.

“You’re not serious about that shit, are you?” I asked.

“Straight murder.”

“Man, that’s fucked up.” I pressed hard on the crease of napkin, realized it wasn’t centered and threw it into a pile of discards that were stained or ripped.

“What do you know?” he said.

“Two of my friends were murdered.” I walked over to the bar and took a bottle of water outside for my break, thinking of those friends. They were gagged and bound before being shot in their own home. The nineteen-year-old who killed them is now twenty-nine, my age. He’d been beaten as a child and then ran away, squatting an abandoned building.

When I returned to finish folding napkins, David was cleaving chicken into serving portions, no longer playing his music. I continued to fold the linen into neat rectangles.

“My homie got shot in the stomach. I watched him die.”

“That’s terrible,” I said. David’s shoulders were slumped more than normal, and the bill of his hat blocked out his face. I imagined him that night—David returning to his friend after the gunman fled, blood pooling onto the concrete. David staring into a mirror afterward, his baggy, hundred-dollar jeans and G-Unit jersey stained red. Thinking not of his friend’s death but how his own life might end, with a temporary altar on a sidewalk. Thinking his name, one day, would be tattooed onto arms or airbrushed on shirts. Maybe David had finally connected that memory to his boasts about murder. I knew by now that he had beaten people and was imprisoned for stabbing a girl who was an opposing gang member, an act of revenge for the worm-like scar that ran from the base of his stomach to just under his chest. He was seventeen when he stabbed the girl and spent a year in juvy before serving four more in Chino.

For the rest of that day, David didn’t say a word about murder, but the next day he was bumping the same songs about guns and money. He worked all the time to keep himself away from his gang—trying to go straight—but was still stuck in that mindset. David was still attached to that life by drugs, even though he wasn’t a dealer anymore. Instead, he was an addict.

The dilation of his eyes and his translucent teeth were signs of drug abuse I had witnessed before in friends but mostly my brother. Like all addicts, he became another person when he was high and when he needed to get high. After my brother got clean, people avoided him, and he almost relapsed. I didn't want to avoid David like that. We lived in the same neighborhood, and once, from across the street, I saw him hanging out with his friends on a stoop, drinking beer from crumpled brown bags. These were the same types of guys I walked by at night with clenched fists, and this is why I felt strangely honored when David invited me out with him and his friends. I felt like he saw how we could view each other as just people—friends—without anything else attached.

“Come on,” David said.

“Nah, I can't.”

“We'll get an eight ball.” David pretended to hold a pipe and swirl an imaginary lighter around the end of it.

“You're crazy,” I said and glanced over at Tacho. “Why does he waste his money on that shit?”

“It's stupid,” Tacho said, looking at David and then me.

“Yeah, you work three jobs and never have any money,” I said.

“I got money tonight,” David said, rubbing his hands together with a childlike smile.

Tacho and I could not help but chuckle.

I thought of meeting David's friends, who I assumed would ask David in Spanish who was this *puto*. My puffy hair and baby blue windbreaker I used to always wear making me a target.

The next day David didn't say anything to me when he showed up late for work. I folded napkins and waited for him to at least look up.

"Jesus, what happened to your hands," I asked, staring at his swollen knuckles.

"I got in a fight."

"With who?"

"Some fools at the courts on Van Ness."

"I'm sorry, man."

Early the next morning, I went downstairs to get a can of espresso grounds, and David was chopping carrots and celery.

"Did you bring your boxing gloves?" I asked. David shrugged.

"What's up man, you alright?"

"Yeah," he said. "Just tired."

"When you gonna bring those gloves?"

"Don't need no gloves, fool." He stepped away from the cutting board and threw the end of a carrot at me. I punched him in the shoulder, and he drew his hands, unclenched, close to his face and threw a jab that tapped me on my cheek.

"You got lucky," I said, cracking a smile.

We shuffled around the cutting board island, flicking occasional punches. The aluminum can of espresso was still in my left hand. David threw a jab, and I blocked it with the can. Another punch came right afterward, hitting the base of my stomach and leaving me temporarily breathless. The next punch I stopped with the can again, but this time I drove the aluminum into his fist, felt his knuckles contour around the impact. A breath later, a punch caught part of my eye and most of my nose. Everything flashed black, and when the room returned, white spots

faded from my sight. I dropped the can to the floor and wiped my nose, blood smearing on my finger. David's hands, still cocked, eased to his sides.

"You fucking punched me in the face," I said and stepped closer to David: we were inches apart. "I'll fucking stomp you," I yelled. "Why did you punch me?" I bumped my chest against David's, and he glanced down toward the cutting board island. I left the kitchen at that moment and went into the bathroom. After ten minutes or more of deep breathing and blowing the rest of the blood from my nose, I went back to work, folding napkins on the pick-up counter near Tacho. David was still downstairs, preparing chicken soup.

"Is my nose swollen?" I asked Tacho, after I told him David had punched me.

"Your eye is a little," he said.

"That guy's crazy," I said. "I mean, he stabbed a girl." Tacho stopped chopping a slab of lardon into chunks and looked up at me.

"He didn't just stab her. He killed her."

David got fired a couple of days later. The head chef had been yelling at Tacho, and David told him if he didn't shut up, he would knock him out. I never saw David again, and in hindsight, I would like to think it was instinctual that I had walked away from fighting him. That my subconscious had warned me David wasn't glancing downward to cower or apologize; he was eyeing the long razor sharp knife on the cutting board between us. I glanced at the knife too but turned and went into the bathroom.