

Fall 1999

## Autobiography of a Head Bully

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### Recommended Citation

Davies, Jon (1999) "Autobiography of a Head Bully," *CutBank*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 52 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank/vol1/iss52/3>

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## AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF A HEAD BULLY

THE STREET OUTSIDE MY uncle's store was full of mackerel when the nun entered. Two men were hitting each other with dead fishes, bashing each other on the sides of the head. It sounded like the whole city was honking. The locals were walking, sliding, up and down the sidewalk.

"Milk?" I asked the nun. She was in every Thursday. Forty-three-years-old according to my uncle.

"Not today," she said.

I walked to the counter. She had a paper bag there, from the Broadway, the department store. I looked in it as she glanced out the window. It was full of ladies' wigs, red and blond and brunette.

I needed to wash my hair.

Outside the store, the two men had each other by their scalps. The one man—bigger than the other—had the other guy against the roof of the rig. The big man was the truck driver. He had a fish in his hand, and he was shoving it into the other guy's mouth.

"You ever watch the fights?" the nun asked.

"No," I told her, "just wrestling."

"There's nothing I like more than the fights," the nun said. She walked to the window.

"How much you wash your hair?" Tim had asked earlier that day at lunch, at school. "How much?" People were always asking that, saying that. He knew how much. I'd told him. I couldn't help it. His hair was "business cut" short, parted on the left, clean. I hit him, slammed him with a palm to his forehead.

"Yeah," I told the nun. "Those fights are something."

She turned to me and smiled. "You could fight," she said. She walked toward me, put her hands on my arms, around my biceps, rubbed them down to my wrists and up again, pressed her hands into my flesh. They were bruised and bony, like old trees. The fingers twisted in odd directions at each knotted joint.

"You have a fighter's arms," she said.

I pulled away, my hands feeling these arms.

The small man was among the fish on the pavement. The truck driver stood over him, reeling. In the distance, sirens.

MY WIFE, MELINDA, BLEACHED her hair the summer before she entered high school. She tells me this in the locker room as she wraps my hands in the tape. I ask her why.

"It's your hair," she says. "It's turning grey."

"You want me to dye it?" I ask.

"No," she says. "It just reminds me." The crowd is chanting my name. It's a small crowd. They've been small for a decade now. My manager's quit. "They'll think you're getting old," she says.

"They know," I tell her.

GLORIA HAD HAIR LIKE AN OLIVE, round and black, cropped at the top of the neck. Evenings, it fell across her face, her head on the pillow. I could see the gray roots near her forehead entrenched like flakes of skin wore into the floor boards of a dark house. She was thirty, twelve years older than myself. She was a graduate student at a local university, a music major, clarinet, bassoon, and bass. We'd meet at the Burger King across from the Jack LaLane Fitness Center, she in an overcoat, a scarf over her head, sunglasses. I wore shorts, a tee-shirt. I didn't care—but for her, a career was on the line. I was one of her students at the city college, earned an "A" for her class, music appreciation. Afternoons in bed, she'd say I was using her, but the class was easy. I assured her. She was my first. I was in love. Fridays, she'd go to the hairdresser, get a dye job—always black—and a haircut. I never knew her original color.

WHAT I TOLD TIM, reminded him, eventually, though I'm not sure he heard, was my mom won't let me wash my hair more than once a week. I begged her, told her most kids washed their hair every day. I knew. They told me. Mom said washing hair too often made the scalp go bad, made it turn into wax. My hair was

grease and flakes. So I hit Tim. He stumbled back. I didn't see him the rest of the afternoon.

The nun raised her hands, fisted them as best she could, better than I thought she'd be able to, started shuffling across the floor, jabbing. "Come on," she said, "Come on, Jerry. Put up your dukes."

I didn't know her name, so I called her Nunny. "Listen, Nunny," I said. "I can't fight you."

"Why not?" she asked, jabbing at me with her left. She moved slow on the floor, the same way the cops were moving slow through the crowd outside, trying not to slip in the fish. She jabbed at my chin, my chest, missing each time by less than a centimeter. She ducked her head after each move, as if she were certain I was about to strike back. She'd watched a lot of Joe Lewis and Muhammed Ali on the television, I decided. She was big, too, for a nun, almost six feet two, had wide, well-squared shoulders. She could have been a boxer.

"I can't hit a nun," I told her. "I can't hit a woman of God."

She popped me on the right side of my mouth, and I went down, cursing.

"Shame on you," she said.

"What'd you do that for?" I asked her. She stood over me, hitting her two fists softly against each other as if she had on gloves.

"Are you going to fight or not?" she asked.

THE WAY YOU ENTER THE ring is this. You come out of the double doors on the right, jog down the alley. Some guy along the railing, some guy sitting about fourteen rows up, tells you you're going to be pulp, you're going to eat the floor. You give him the finger, and the folks around him laugh, say, "That's it. That's the way to go, Jerry." On Saturday nights, they dream of you. You are the gas station they can't own, the lottery they can't win. You are beating up their boss, giving him a headache that will last through Wednesday morning, keep him home half the week. You are the President of the United States of America and you are whipping a commie for the boys overseas. You are punching the teacher that failed them in fifth grade science. You are punching that

police officer who gave them a ticket last Tuesday afternoon for a stop sign only a telescope could see.

You are almost too big to squeeze through the ropes. You are Godzilla on steroids. You are going to fell some buildings. This man is nothing. He is a Barbie doll. Look at the way he wears his hair, curls and frills along the bottom edges, little ringlets on his scalp. Paste a ribbon on him and he'd be Miss Junior America 1973.

Your arms and legs won't stay still. You jump around the ring on the balls of your feet, knock your hands together, jab at air. Onetwothreefourfivesixseveneightnineten just like that, down. You punch the corner post, wrestle the turnbuckle. Your corner man tells you to turn around. The referee gestures for your body. You knock gloves with the-sissy in the other corner. You go home, jump along the corner ropes, wait for the bell to ring. In five minutes, the referee will raise your right arm, and you'll strut about the ring like a proud rooster.

LUCINDA BANCOR WAS THE REDHEAD from Peru. She had a Southern accent. Her father oversaw the offshore drilling for Texaco gasoline. She'd lived her first ten years in Biloxi, the next ten in South America. She'd come to Los Angeles to study acting but gave up school after one semester. She'd landed a role in one of the soaps—*Loving*, I think. She was Clara Moore, the spoiled, Southern girl who killed rich boys for a living. The role lasted a year, and she was rolling in the money for a while. I met her in a nightclub a couple months before my fourteenth fight. I was an "up and comer" in the newspapers, had a fight coming up with Condon, a junior weight from Hoboken, New Jersey. It was the red hair caught my attention, red hair on a white evening gown. She'd heard of me. It wasn't much of a problem muscling her boyfriend out of the picture. The red always came out a dark gray in the gossip columns. We saved the pictures, laughed at them over the breakfast table and at parties in our home. A week after we broke up, her old boyfriend accosted me outside my gym. "I dare you to fight," he said. I punched him in the belly, not hard either. He fell to the ground, gasping. I turned, didn't see him pull the gun.

“Fag,” he said. “Fag.”

DAD DIDN'T APPROVE. When my head was in Mom's lap, he'd complain about this being sissy vulgar for a twelve-year-old boy. He said this was monkey and gorilla stuff, moms poking through their kids' hair for mites, that we were human beings and had shampoos for that. Mom continued her massage, but I heard him, and I knew. There was something wrong with me. At school, the kids called me “Flakeface” and “Lepercan,” “Walking Sunburn” and “Mr. Clean.”

It was the nun taught me how to fight. Not all the way through, but the basics. Thursdays, she came into the store, showed me the moves. No one was around much. If someone did come in, she'd drop her hands and stare at the racks of pills and produce, the plastic bags of herbs and cartons of trail mix and raisins and yogurt-covered peanuts, until that person left. The way she trained me was this. She performed the moves herself, the left uppercut, the right hook. I watched. Then she took my arms, my legs, in her hands, moved them for me, showing me where to take them. Afterward, I stood beside her punching, following each move, the same punch over and over and over and over again. We began sparring, not fast, not hard, just practicing the moves in opposition to each other, the defensive ones, the ducking, the hugging. I didn't want to hurt her.

She herself managed to give me a black eye. This wasn't in the store, though. This was in her house. She claimed the store was too confining. I moved the shelves around, cleared a space, but she said it wasn't large enough. She told me we'd meet at her house after I got off work. “I thought you lived with the nuns?” I asked.

She laughed. “Of course,” she said.

“But the nuns,” I said, “the nuns aren't going to like this.”

“You let me worry about the nuns,” she said.

Turned out she had a car and all. Drove me to her home. It wasn't a nunnery or anything like that. It wasn't anything like I'd expected. It was a house around the corner, four and a half blocks from the health food store. Two blocks from my house. It was one of those California bungalows, one story, two hundred square feet of front yard grass, a couple chest-high shrubs shoved against

the front of the house, a porch smaller than the corner of a boxing ring.

Inside, crucifixes covered her walls. I couldn't hardly turn without running into one of those figures staring down at me the way they do, all sad and weepy-eyed, that look of "why'd you do this to me?" all over their faces. I couldn't hardly breathe in there. But it was the nun who was watching me, not him. "You like my friends?" she asked. She walked me to this back room, an empty room with nothing on the walls or the floor except red velvet.

"I'll be back," she said.

I stood in the room, waiting for what seemed like an hour. I leaned against the wall, stuck my hands in my pockets, walked around, tried to imagine pictures on the sides of the room, on the material. All I could see was those crosses. I walked to the doorway, looked around, cross upon cross strung all the way down the hall like railroad ties. I turned, started to shadow box, my feet almost sinking in the carpet. I was used to the concrete floors of the store. I felt like I was walking on hair, jumping on it, in it.

"That's good," she said.

I turned around. She had on a pair of boxer's shorts, red with white strips around the edges, and a sleeveless tee-shirt. On her feet were two boxing shoes, purple, laced up almost to the knees. On her head was one of the wigs I'd seen in the bag months earlier. It was a blond one, big, fake curls from scalp to almost shoulder. Her legs, I noted, were unshaven.

"Here," she said. She handed me a pair of gloves from under her arm. She stuck a couple on her hands as well. We boxed for a few minutes like we always did, careful, slow, and then she let me have it, threw punches faster than I'd ever seen before, hit me hard. "Come on, Jerry," she said. I ducked, dodged. "Hit me," she said. "Hit me hard." But I didn't. I didn't even try. We boxed a long time. I ran out of breath, but she continued, punch after punch. I went down, a kisser to the left eye.

"You okay?" she asked when I came to. I was in a bedroom, pictures of Ali, Marconi, Lewis, on the walls. There wasn't a feminine thing about the room.

"Yeah," I said. I felt like someone had stuck a pencil up my eye socket.

"I think you're ready for the big boys," she said.



YOU KNOW YOU ARE GOING TO LOSE. You pretend you are invincible. You kid yourself you're going to retire before anything bad happens. But you don't. You can't. Fighting gets into your blood, and even more so, winning.

The first time you go down is like being shot in the back. You don't even know you're on the floor. You wake up, and you hear this man calling out numbers, waving a finger in your face. There is something on your back, something unfamiliar, something that is not supposed to be there. It is thick like denim, but you have no shirt on. You know that because there is sweat running from your belly down to your back. You try to get up, not because you want to win, but because you want to prove you are okay, that all your internal organs are still there. Perhaps, you do get up. You are not ready. You never will be. You haven't felt this bad since your days as an amateur, your teenage years before you were in shape, before you were in fighting form. You know you will lose.

I am lying, of course. Losing should be so easy. No, it is not like being shot. It is like being terminally sick for fifteen years. You know you are going to lose from the first, from the moment you enter the ring, the moment you feel that first slug in your ribs. You want to turn and run, but you are scared of the crowd. You are scared of that man in the fourteenth row who said you were pulp, said you were going to eat canvas. And you are scared that you really are going to be pulp, that you really are going to eat canvas. You are scared of the gloves on the other man's hands. You are scared of the newspapers Sunday morning. You are scared of your trainer and the next decade and a half of your life. You are scared of the next fight and the one after it and the one after that. You are scared you will never win again. You are scared you will be the boxer other boxers use to become twenty-one and zero. The canvas is almost a relief. At least, you are dead then. At least, it is over. But you fear waking up. You yearn for the one good punch that will end it quickly, send you sailing into the black forever, but you also yearn, try to hold on, thinking, hoping, that maybe, the other boxer is as bad off as you, that if you can just take punches for the next hour, he will crumple from exhaustion. Victory by deterioration. You know that, one day, this will not happen, and one day, it doesn't. The black lights never last long enough.

\* \* \*



GINA HAD BROWN HAIR, DARK brown, with medium-sized kinks, kinks like a finger had rolled them, fingertip kinks. We'd watch the sitcoms, the *Happy Days*, the Fonz, the *Laverne and Shirley*. She'd snort a laugh, and I'd pull on her hair, not hard, just enough to straighten a curl, watch it roll itself back up like a spring. "What're you doing?" she'd ask, and I'd kiss her neck, say, "Nothing." We rarely got all the way through *Laverne*.

"You got nice hair," she told me late one night, "really rich, thick, like a woman's should be." The lights were off, but we could see each other by the street light coming through the window, shadows with a streak of color where the glass showed itself on the bed. She had my hair in her hand. It was long then, shoulder-length, the style for a few more years. I didn't know what to say exactly. I'd been losing a lot of fights.

TIM SAW MY HEAD IN MOM'S LAP, saw it plenty of times, almost every time he came over. "Come here," Mom'd say. We'd be watching *The Flash* on the television, *The Fabulous Five*, *Superman*, when we were older, one of those daytime talk shows or, if it was on, a baseball game. "Mom," I'd whine. "Come here," she'd say. "Aw, Mom," I'd say, but I'd come, and she'd put her fingers in my hair. "I don't get it," she'd say. "It's like your whole head is dead." Tim would snicker when we got outside. "Monkey boy," he'd say, "Freak."

After school the day I hit him, I met him in the locker room. Tim was standing in front of a mirror beside his line of lockers. He had his shirt off, and he was rolling his shoulders back, feeling his chest with the fingertips of his right hand. I didn't say anything. I went to my locker and started the combination. The locker room was a rectangle with lockers along three of the walls. My locker was on the long wall across from the showers. Tim's was on a short side to the left of the showers.

"Those yours?" he asked. I turned around. In the middle of the room were two rows of benches. On a bench on the far row from me were a pair of white shorts. They looked damp, droopy, lying there, a layer of freshly disembodied flesh.

"They stink," he said. He stuck his arms through his shirt and pulled it over his head. He pulled the bottom of the shirt with his fingers, letting the print on it go tight then loose. He

watched this in the mirror. "They stink up the whole room," he said.

"I wouldn't wear any crummy shorts like that," I told him.

I was there to pick up my P.E. uniform. It hadn't been washed in two weeks. This was the night Mom was to go to the Laundromat. I pulled out the sports bag I'd bought with my money from the dime store and stuffed each item of the locker into it: my red uniform tee-shirt, my pair of white socks, my running shoes, my jock strap. Besides my deodorant, there wasn't anything left in my locker.

The shorts on the bench were from a uniform. They were cotton and white with a one-inch slit up each side. They didn't have pockets, but they had a tight elastic waistband that gouged into the skin like a string of fingernails. The bottom edges of the shorts were big and loose and made the legs of all of us but the most fit look skinny and malnourished. They were uniform shorts. They fit everyone and no one. The only way to tell which ones belonged to whom was if we sewed or magic marked our name or initials onto the inside. Mine had my initials marked under the manufacturer's tag where the laundry handling information used to be printed. But I couldn't see that from where I was.

Tim had his bag full and closed his locker. I laid down my bag and sat on the bench beside me. After a few seconds, I laid my back and my head against the wood. In a few moments, Tim would be gone.

"What you waiting for?" he asked, the handles of his bag slung over his left shoulder.

"Nothing," I told him. "Just resting."

When he saw my bag was still open, he dropped his bag off his shoulder, carried it to the far edge of the bench near his locker, and laid it on the floor. He sat down then, grinning.

We waited like that for what seemed like hours.

Finally, I got up, retrieved my shorts. Within seconds, Tim had me by the arms, pushed me, shoved me into the hole between the lockers and the partition covering the door. He punched me in the ribs, the stomach. I squeezed tight against the wall. And then, somehow, we were on the floor, and Tim was on top of me. I closed my eyes. There were fingers in my hair. Skin was peeling away. Dandruff was coming out all over the place.

\* \* \*

"DON'T WORRY ABOUT YOUR HAIR," my wife tells me. "You have pretty hair." We are in the locker room again. She is dabbing the cuts on my face with alcohol and aloe vera. My head bumps against the table with each swab.

"Why would I be worrying about my hair?" I ask her.

"I didn't say you were," she says. "I just don't want you to. That's all."

But I am worrying.

My wife's hair is thin, always has been. Dish water blond, somewhere between brown and bleached. It lies on her head like a piece of tissue paper or like old cotton. She doesn't curl it and can't. It won't grow longer than halfway down her back without going fuzzy, splitting ends. No perms. No fancy stuff. She washes it, combs it in the morning, goes out. It is not bad looking hair. It is, in fact, some of the sexiest hair I've known, especially under-water. Wet, it clings to her head and her neck tight like skin.

Hers is the hair beauticians hate. They create short styles for her, boy's cuts. My wife caught onto that years ago. A quickie shop for men will do the same job at a fifth the price. We need the money, always have. She didn't meet me till I was well on my way out.

We met in a swimming pool at a detox center. Yes, I drank for awhile. What else could you expect? She had her glasses off and had lost her contact lenses three months earlier. She was swimming laps, and I was floating on one of those plastic rafts. She bumped into me. It wasn't that she couldn't see me. Her eyesight's not that bad. It's that she wasn't watching where she was going. I'm not sure if I like being married. It's like telling yourself there are no more victories to be had. It's like hitting that canvas. But it is also restful. It is that clear, black center you find on your back for a few seconds in the ring.

I STARTED WORKING OUT AT Klazuski's gym, sparring with the big guys. It was the nun who brought me there, introduced me to Sam and Walter and Casey and the others. Said I had staying power and a decent left hook. They took me into the ring, let me fight it out a few minutes with one of the local boys. I sent him back crying to his mother. He barely even got a hit in. "That's enough," Casey said, almost before I started. They took me in.

The nun came to see me a couple weeks later at the gym. Said I looked good. I asked her about the other nuns, and she laughed, said she'd see me in a few days.

But I never did see her again. Not as a nun. The next time she showed up, she'd shaved her legs, bought some heels, a black dress, sleeveless and six inches above the knee. She was wearing make-up too and that blond wig. She looked awkward and ugly, that huge build on those tiny shoes.

"Milk?" I asked her. I didn't hardly recognize her at first, but the wig and the six feet two inches gave her away.

"Jerry," she asked, "how old do you think I am?" She'd rested her arms on the counter, was looking me straight in the face.

"Forty-three," I said before I realized I should have said thirty-eight, thirty-seven, something to make her feel good.

"I'm twenty-nine," she said.

"Oh," I said.

She put her hands on the counter, the bruised and cut ones, the bony ones with knots at each joint. "I'm not that old," she said. She looked down at her hands. "Jerry?" she asked.

"Yes?" I said.

"Do you think?" But she didn't continue. "It's these hands," she said, "and the shoulders and the height."

"What are you talking about?" I asked.

"We had something, Jerry," she said. "We had something."

"I don't get it," I said.

"What are you, Jerry?" she asked, "Seventeen?"

I wasn't, but I told her yes.

"The men don't like me," she said.

"You're a nun," I said. "What does it matter?"

"I ain't a nun," she said. "I ain't never been one. It's just, their clothes, their clothes are the only thing I look good in." She pulled off her wig then. Her head was bald. A red, coagulated scar ran from just above the center of her forehead to her left ear. "Brain surgery," she said. "Cancer. The hair grew back in patches. I was twenty-one."

"I'm sorry," I told her.

"It's a terrible thing, Jerry," she said. "A terrible thing to age before your time."

\* \* \*

THE TABLOIDS SAID I WAS GAY. They said I'd been shot by a lover's ex-boyfriend. They said I got Lucinda Bancor pregnant. They said I dropped her for a rival coach. They said I was washed up. They said I was the best up-and-comer in the United States, and the sexiest. I was the sports star the women wanted to see do daytime television. I was the one who beat up the girls I went out with. I was the one who spent all my money on phone sex. I was the one who punched a waiter at an unnamed downtown restaurant. I was the one getting psychic readings from Kenny Kingston, the paranoid one, the one who wouldn't fight on a day that Kenny didn't approve. I was a star, not a big one, but a star nonetheless, someone some folks had heard of, soap opera fans, diehard boxing fans.

Tomorrow, I'm forty-three. When I retire, the tabloids won't even mention my name.