

Prizefighter

I have no great love of boxing, but having seen my share of bouts, I've grown to appreciate, and perhaps to understand, a spectator's raw attraction to the sport, in the same way I've come to understand why we gawk at fatal accidents on the freeway. We all share a predatory hunger—stalk the rush of observing another's close proximity to imminent disaster, while marveling at our own distance from an identical fate.

I met Javier Francis Black Feather at a poker game at the Soaring Eagle Casino in Mount Pleasant, Michigan. He flowed into the card room and up to his spot at my table like a torrent of rainwater cascading from a downspout after a storm. His physique was that of a comic book superhero, lean and muscular, but in no way restrictive. Upon his upper lip grew the wispy shadow of a moustache. I got the sense that he might at any moment lash out with great speed and force, had it not been for the childlike grin he seemed to wear on his face perpetually, a sort of implicit guarantee that he had no intention of hurting you. He happened to be assigned the seat immediately to my right, and as he maneuvered his 145-pound frame into the chair provided he brushed up against my elbow, which at that moment I happened to be using to lift half of a chicken salad sandwich to my lips.

“Dude! I'm sorry. You got enough room there?” he asked.

“Sure, no problem,” I mumbled back.

“They got us all squeezed in here like cheese,” he said, laughing out loud.

I didn't have a clue as to what he meant by that comment, and had I not had a mouth full of chicken salad I might have chosen to make some snide remark to that effect. In retrospect I'm glad I did not, as at the time I didn't know that Javier was a former Golden Gloves Welterweight amateur boxing champion and was, just this year, at the midway point in his march toward his goal to acquire the Welterweight world title.

“You play the high stakes game here before?” I asked him, as I was not from that area.

We'd just flown in to visit my wife's relatives in rural mid-Michigan, and I'd jumped at the chance to skip out on one of her family's endless get-togethers so that I could play poker at the local Indian-run casino.

“A few times,” he said, leaning back to get comfortable.

I looked over into his designer shades, the kind with the tint that descends from the top to the bottom of the lenses in so gradual a fashion that you hardly notice you can't see the wearer's eyes. “Play much poker?” I asked him.

He smiled. “Sure. You know. Like, what else would I be doing, vato?”

Once again, like a blow to the cerebellum, his statement struck me dumb. I didn't really know Javier, so of course I had no clue as to what else he might have been up to had he not decided to be playing cards at that moment. I made the incorrect assumption, as most poker players might, that he was just some dumb kid who'd wandered into the casino to gamble, perhaps with the notion he might walk out of the place a rich man. But poker, particularly Texas Hold 'em, is no game for dumb kids. It's not really gambling, although I'd be lying if I were to tell you that luck plays no part in the game. Hold 'em is

more an exercise in timely aggression, strategic calculation, assessing one's opponent, sizing them up like a predator roaming the Serengeti might, and then moving in for a precise kill. A healthy serving of intelligence and strategic thinking go into assuring that you don't lose a boatload of money. It didn't occur to me until later that evening that boxing was a nearly identical endeavor, and that to Javier I must have appeared more a meal than a fellow predator.

We were nine players, all men, sitting around a card table in cordial discussion, trying with varying degrees of wit and will, to take each other's money. For my part, I'd gladly risk defeat in exchange for an opponent's money, although I can't say I've ever equated dollars to victory. Victory lies in depriving the defeated of something they ardently desire. Not being without a heart though, I must admit I wondered, immediately after Javier sat down, whether this young man had enough disposable cash to be playing in this game. To my surprise, he pulled a wad of hundreds from his tight trousers and bought \$2,000 in chips.

Not two hands after he'd stacked his new checks Javier called out to a burly young guy sitting across the table from me, a guy I had berated a few hands before for having played his hand poorly, "Hey, man. Don't I know you?"

The target of Javier's question tipped up the brim of his Detroit Tigers baseball cap and stared. His lips spread a little, and his nose, obviously broken several times in the past, crinkled up as he sniffed at the smoke-stale air. "Shit. I don't know."

"You ever box Golden Gloves?" Javier asked.

"Yeah. Randy Waverly. I used to box out of Phil Arceneaux's gym in Detroit."

"Shit. I used to box for Phil Arsenal, you say his name is Arceneaux?"

“Yeah.”

Javier spoke in a loud voice, as if he was trying to call his history to the attention of the entire card room. “Dude!” he beamed, “Arsenal was like a father to me, bailed me out of jail once, but I been thinking his name was Arsenal my whole life.”

“It’s Arceneaux, you know, like French,” said the burly prizefighter across the poker table.

Shit-frozen hell, sitting at my poker table were two guys who made their living by punching other guys so hard that they’d either fallen to the canvas or given up, having been judged inferior. Alpha males these two, their bodies composed of muscle, bone and testosterone, and I’d had the nerve to insult one of them. As the two fighters recounted brawls and various episodes of mayhem in which they’d played a part I could feel the aggression with which I normally played poker shrinking into a tiny corner. I refocused my strategy. I would have to lie in wait, play the snake and not the lion.

The other players at the table grew quiet. The two boxers kept right on smiling, exchanging views in their loud voices, the prisons they’d been in, the money they’d made in the ring, guys they’d fought, women they’d fucked, the increasingly callous remarks challenging any of the other players, or in fact anyone in the card room, to take issue with their tone.

Thirty minutes after Javier sat down, a young woman with curves like the orange hourglass on the belly of a black widow entered the card room and crept up to our table. She rested both her hands on Javier’s shoulders, and then wrapped her arms around his neck, pressing her body up against the padded back of his chair.

“C’mon, baby. I’m playin’ here,” he told her without turning around.

She spoke softly in his ear, and since I was right next to them I could hear what she was saying. “You promised me you wouldn’t play poker, baby.”

“Lighten up,” Javier said, in his more familiar boisterous voice.

“Baby,” she said again, this time the lilt in her tone implying this was a familiar point of discussion between them.

Javier spun around fast, knocked the girl’s arms off his shoulders. “Shut the fuck up, will ya!”

The young woman stepped back, a hurt look in her eyes. Frankly, all the players around the table were a little surprised given that since he’d sat down Javier had been nothing but cordial and good-natured. He twisted in his chair and peeled four green 25-dollar chips from one of his stacks, and then he turned back and handed them to the girl. “Go play slots or somethin’. I’ll text you when I’m done,” he said.

She was obviously embarrassed, but took the chips she’d been given, turned and walked with a deliberate, almost vengeful gait out of the card room and back into the casino. After the young woman was out of sight, Randy, the other boxer piped up from the far side of the table. “That’s fucked up, man. You got a woman that fine you oughta’ be tappin’ that shit,” he told Javier, and I realized we were all probably thinking that same thought, but Randy could say things like that out loud, having more of a light-heavyweight frame and being nearly two bills of nothing but muscle. Even if he’d wanted to make a thing out of Randy’s comments, Javier might think better of it.

As it happened, Javier laughed it off. “That’s my wife, man. Fuckin’ Latino blood. She can’t go an hour without her hands all over me.”

“You’re married?” I asked him.

“Three years. We got a little boy, Sancho. He’s stayin’ back with his grandma till after the fight.”

“When are you fighting?” I asked.

“Next Saturday down in Lansing.”

“I’ve gotta know,” I went on, “What’s the most you ever made for one fight?”

Javier grinned. “Made 21 ‘G’s for fighting Max Carter last year.”

“That’s a lot for one hour of work,” I said.

“Damn straight,” he replied.

I wasn’t really all that impressed. There were times when the hedge fund I co-manage made me that much in under one second. Still, to a working class grunt like Javier, I’m sure that seemed like good money.

“So, what comes after Saturday’s fight?”

“Out to Vegas for a year. My manager’s workin’ to get me on the next Mayweather card, fightin’ Umberto Ortiz. If I can beat him I’m set for life.”

“Shit!” said Randy. “You’re gonna fight a former champ right after he just been beat? That’s suicide, bro. You better watch your ass. He just come off that big loss to Coolio Green. He gonna be lookin’ to bounce back.”

“Yeah, but you haven’t seen me in the ring, vato. I’m undefeated. I push my record up to 18 and 0 and I’ll be taking matches for six, maybe seven figures for the rest of my career.”

“You step in the ring with Ortiz and the only thing you’ll be takin’ is your nourishment through a straw, dude,” said Randy.

I think we all expected Javier to counter with some fierce comeback; some comment laid upon a foundation of real, or perhaps manufactured bravado. But Javier's lips curled down, and he hung his head. "Yeah," he said with quiet resignation—the first time he'd used a quiet voice since he'd sat down at the table. "Could be."

We played poker. Javier was silent for more than two hours, folding most of his hands, raking in big pots every now and again, victories that didn't seem to make him very happy. He'd smile that kid-like smile, rubbing at the back of his neck, stack his new chips and then click up against them using the immense gold ring he wore on his right ring finger. At one point he looked over to me and started babbling in a low voice.

"I've got a chance to train other fighters. It's not good money, but it beats havin' my head beat in, you know?"

I didn't know what to say. He kept talking.

"I know the game, I'm 27. I can show a fighter the right moves. I know how to pace myself in the ring. Seventy-seven amateur fights, I ain't never kissed the canvas once."

"So, that's good, right?" I said.

"Never boxed no former champion, vato. What if Ortiz takes me apart in front of my woman? My little boy'll be toolin' that up on You Tube for the rest of his life, watchin' his old man gettin' took out by some has-been. Shit. Ain't no good life fightin' for a livin'."

"Man, at least you were going after your dream," I said. "No matter what happens, at least your son's going to know that."

“You think that’s been my dream? Beat down guys who can’t defend themselves? Shit, I only do this ‘cause I’m good at it. It feels good to be fast and lean and mean. It’s all I know how to be. It’s a gift. But, what I gotta do with it? It don’t seem right to me. I don’t know. The way I feel about Ortiz, I guarantee there’s been guys I took down felt the same about me before they stepped in the ring. But I still beat the fuck out of ‘em, beat ‘em down like dogs. I don’t wanna be no dog, vato. Like I said, ain’t no good life fightin’ for a livin’.”

I remember thinking of Javier, his slick black hair reminiscent of this crow I’d seen, flying between the gray granite buildings of Wall Street. I could see the gaps in the bird’s wings where great feathers were missing, and although the bird soared rooftop to rooftop, the effort to do so with its diminished capacity for gliding made me wonder how long it would be before it could no longer fly. How many greasy black feathers would it have to lose before it could no longer take flight, and would it know it had become flightless before it leapt boldly, one last time from its high perch?

The dealer dealt the cards. The table conversation turned to different subjects. It was Final-Four weekend and Michigan State had miraculously broken through to the end of the NCAA Tournament and was slated to play Duke later that evening. Randy had placed a \$1,000 bet and had gotten Michigan State plus 5 1/2 points. Javier laughed, told him he’d made a sucker bet—it turned out Javier was right. Michigan State went on to lose by 20 that night.

I looked to the side, took in the sharp triangle that was Javier’s unbroken nose, the powerful grin on his face, the sum of him. I began to feel bad for Javier. He was a smart kid, out of place in his own skin, caught between a life of the body and a life of the mind,

his soul stuck shuttling between fear and grace. I tried to visualize his struggle, his fight to emerge from anonymity. There was something noble about it, something that made me want to watch him, admire him. But still, that didn't attenuate my desire to beat him. In fact it only heightened my need to separate him from the cash he'd earned with his blood. I put Javier's problems out of my mind, tried to concentrate on having a good time doing something I enjoyed.

Finally, after having waited about four and a half hours, dumping hands to both Randy and to Javier, I picked up a monster: a pair of kings in the pocket. I decided to play them slow and hope one of the fighters stayed in the pot with me. (They'd both amassed deep stacks of chips by that time with their aggressive play.) Disguising a big hand like that, not betting initially like I had good cards, it could have turned out bad for me. If an ace fell after the first set of common cards was dealt, (the flop,) it would be almost a guarantee that my leverage over the other players had turned to dust.

Flop came out: King, six, seven. I couldn't have scripted it any better. Javier made a big bet. Randy and I called. Everyone else folded. Next common card, (the turn,) came another King, giving me quads, four of a kind. I now held a hand that was unbeatable, commonly referred to as "the nuts." The origin of the phrase is lost in antiquity, but I've come to think of it as meaning, having the balls to bet anything with the secure knowledge that you can't lose. Still, Javier bet into me, half his stack of chips, over \$1,800. Randy and I just called. The last common card, (the river,) came another seven.

Poker players are a strange lot. A guy can be the biggest hothead you've ever met, a loser cut from the coarsest cloth, and yet, when faced with a hand where he's been

outplayed, juked out of his socks like some second-string freshman guard, he will often write off his loss as a mistake that *he* has made. In no way is his loss an affront by his opponent. The guy sitting across from him, rubbing his hands together and taking his money is only the pitchfork, not the devil.

So Javier bet one last time. I raised him all-in and Randy folded, but Javier gladly shoved the rest of his chips into the pot and called. I revealed my hand: four kings. Javier revealed his: four sevens. I raked in a pot of over \$7,000, took all Javier's money, likely the exact event Javier's wife had feared. I couldn't be sure, but I imagined losing this sort of money would be life-changing for a guy like Javier. As I reveled in the glory of my victory, gathering the various colored chips into a great pile and then scooping them over to my little corner of the poker table my victim simply smiled his childlike smile, even patted me on the shoulder. Again, he must have figured I was not the one responsible for his undoing, just the conduit through which fate had acted—the pitchfork, not the devil.

“Nice hand, vato! I'd have never guessed you'd be sittin' on kings. Lucky for you,” said Javier.

“Naw, man, lucky for you,” Randy told him. “You just won the bad beat jackpot, dude!”

I hadn't realized this myself, but many casinos run a special jackpot, kind of a gradually building pool of cash that is paid out to a player who draws a big poker hand, but then still loses to an even bigger hand. The jackpot is huge, and in Javier's case, by losing with his quad sevens, the Soaring Eagle casino paid him \$41,500, more money than he'd ever made in a boxing ring. I was happy for him. All of his trepidations and misgivings about having to take a lowly job as a trainer would be forgotten after he

cashed his big check. The pressure of having to make a crucial life decision had for the moment been lifted from his shoulders. Javier must have felt a lightness that night, a kind of salvation through defeat. Those deadly feelings of impotence and vulnerability should never have to bubble to the surface of a man's psyche. Emotion should never cloud his pursuit of excellence. That evening the weight of all that money squeezed down upon Javier, and for better or for worse, wrung the doubt about who he was right out of him.

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The fall came. I couldn't resist flying out to Vegas to see the Mayweather fight, especially when I saw, printed in a tiny plain font in the listing of one of the insignificant undercard matches, the names Javier Francis Black Feather and Umberto Ortiz. I thought it might be fun to go watch Javier box, to see him in action, doing what he did best. Instead, I find myself here now, ringside at the MGM Grand, contemplating my close proximity to disaster.

Seven rounds in—Javier obviously winning the bout—and out of nowhere an Ortiz right cross lands flush on Javier's temple, turns his legs into two pillars of jelly. Another blow to the solar plexus and Javier is down for the count. A shame really. Amidst the throng and press of spectators only moments after the final blow has landed, I realize it's a blow that will decide for Javier that which he could not decide for himself.

I wonder, if I hadn't played that one hand of poker the way I did, would Javier have chucked all this in and taken a job trying to teach others something he'd have only learned tonight inside this ring? It'd be interesting to look in on this kid five or ten years

from now, find out what he makes of things. Perhaps there would, again, come salvation from defeat. Perhaps it's Javier Francis Black Feather's fate to try and to fail, to be shown the way, like so many of us, not by what we achieve, but by what we do not. I always want to believe things will work out for the best. Then again, I had my money on Ortiz.