

Poking the Bear

A son takes a stand

Michael Coughlin

Marco Ruas looked like a surfer. The dark specks of hair on his chest and legs blended into skin that had been bronzed by years of running on the beach. He was lean but athletic. The tiny black speedo would've made him look even taller but for the towering giant standing only an arm's length away. Paul Varelans was every bit of his billed six feet, eight inches, a pale white Goliath in a wrestling singlet swinging his arms in windmills at Ruas's David. As Varelans lurched forward, Ruas calmly looked his foe up and down in a split second and danced a few feet to the left or right as needed. With one arm extended towards the big man, Ruas judged the distance between the two of them. Then he kicked. And kicked again. And again. In all, the Brazilian crippled the American with a dozen kicks. He kept at it until Varelans crumbled to the cage floor.

"Why do you watch the same fights over and over again?" asked my younger brother. He sat cross-legged next to me on the floor of my bedroom. He had thin hair, greasy to the touch, falling down past his eyes. The only light in the room came from the TV.

"That's how you take out a bigger man. Look at how he steps into the kick," I replied, consciously not taking my eyes off the TV, wanting him to see how focused I was. "He turns his hips but keeps the leg back as long as possible, like a—"

"Rubber band snapping. Yes, Mike, I know. And he's trying to kick through the leg too, I bet."

I punched him in the arm. He punched me back. We stared at one another, trying to figure out if we were going to fight or go back to watching UFC 7; teenagers having a pissing contest while posters of Batman watched. Then, with the click from a light, the rattle of chains catching, and the rumble beneath our feet, the garage door opened. They were home from dinner.

"Crap. Okay. I'm gonna go walk the dog," my brother said. He sprang to his feet. "You coming?"

“I’m coming.”

A slight crackle danced in the air, like the last few drops of rain after a storm, as the Zenith TV settled. I slapped the eject button on the VCR before heading downstairs.

Shuffling through the kitchen and forcing her half smile, my mother heralded his arrival. Dad threw the keys to his Lincoln Town Car on the table, barely missing the calculus notes I’d left out for him to review, before dropping his maroon-tinted Knights of Columbus jacket to the well-worn wooden floor. My brother grabbed it up before the dog—the dog Dad had fought for us to get over my mom’s objections—might sniff it or something, anything that could give him a reason.

“Where’s the fucking paper?”

Everyone froze, three prisoners of the same surname all wondering which of us the guard had addressed. My mom looked at my brother. My brother looked at me. I looked at Dad.

“Hey, asshole.” Dad’s words slurred into one another, his eyes half-closed but trained on me, his beer-battered voice still heavy with power. “You take my fucking paper?”

I backed up a few steps as my dad approached the gate that wouldn’t have kept any other dog in the kitchen except for our dumb Dalmatian. People simply stepped over the 16-inch high divider. Dad kicked it down, tearing the purple mesh netting with his right foot. My brother had to hug Lady for her dear life, lest she make an ill-advised run to freedom.

“You fucking moved it, didn’t you?” Dad growled at my mom, his stubble-speckled jowls flapping. “You always have to clean everything up. Nothing can remain in the same God damn place for more than an hour with you, can it?”

“Maybe you moved it somewhere?” my mom offered up as a shield for us three.

“I fucking did not. It was right there on the table and now it isn’t, is it, you dumb bitch?”

She shrank. All that remained was her short brown curly hair and oversized glasses. My mom is a tidier by nature, always making sure coats are hung on the proper hanger, dirty dishes don't sit for more than a few minutes. She even washes out her Diet Coke cans because, in her words, "that makes it easier for them to be recycled." If she moved the paper, she'd know when she did and where she put it.

My right calf muscle twitched.

"Don't say that to her!" I said. Dad was as tall as a chandelier and as wide as a keg of beer. I was thin like the stem of a wine glass. I took a half step forward.

"What the fuck did you say to me, boy?" Dad would sometimes revert to a kinda rural South Dakota dialect when he was particularly angry.

"You lost it and you know it."

"Fuck you, you little ungrateful shit. This is my fucking house."

As my lips stiffened, the words *my fucking house* lit up my memory. I dashed upstairs like I was Jackie Robinson stealing home in the 1947 World Series. Surrounded by framed oil paintings of naval battles and thank-yous sent by nuns from Catholic Charities, right next to a two-foot-tall gray computer—the first one on the block with a CD ROM drive—and underneath a blocky monitor that had a prayer to St. Rita taped to the side: the paper, sitting on a leather-topped cherry-mahogany desk in the middle of his office.

For all his faults, Dad wasn't stupid. A degree in chemical engineering coupled with twenty-five years of practicing law meant he knew almost everything, and what he didn't know, he was clever enough to argue around. I've had sex that wasn't as satisfying as that moment when I finally knew he'd have to admit: he was wrong.

"Here's your paper," I wailed, my voice unable to even crack. "You were the one reading it in your office and you left it there. Apologize."

"Don't you ever tell me what to do, you understand, you little turd?"

I flung the paper at his chest. His once half-opened eyes now

bulged from the sockets. I spotted his right hand clench into a fist, the gold high-school class ring he never removed jutting out.

“You. Were. Wrong,” I said.

The evidence said it didn’t matter how drunk he was, he had no case. I was right. He had to apologize, and more important, he would have to admit his mistake.

“Fuck you.”

He charged head first, like he was going to sprout a horn and gore me. With each step, the carpet muffled the cries of the straining floorboards. As my mother raised a hand to say *no* and my brother fought to control the dog, I planted a foot and whipped my right shin into the outside of his left knee.

It wasn’t the loud slap of flesh hitting flesh. It was the disturbing thud when bone meets muscle and ligament, like a butcher tenderizing a slab of beef with a baseball bat. The leg gave way and the rest of the gluttonous body followed. His head hit the edge of the couch, glasses crashing into his face, lenses shattering, and the frames cutting his cheek. Thick blood that no water would clean seeped into the off-white carpet.

Minutes later, as I was shaking uncontrollably and crying into my hands, desperate to vomit but unable to do it, my mom gently knocked on my bedroom door. She sat down on my strawberry-red blanketed bed and told me about Al Anon, a support group for spouses of those with drinking problems. She’d started meetings six months into their marriage. It was the first time I heard her call my dad an alcoholic.

