

THE BOXER

The signs were all there for the educated eye, starting with the footwork, the timing, the breathing. There was no snap to his jab, no crack in the right hook that his opponents had feared in the past. His gloves were increasingly used to shield and defend places not protected by headgear. The sparring partner danced around the aging boxer, effortlessly throwing punches at the shoulders, head, and midsection. Jake knew what he was watching as the two men continued working the ring. He had been a trainer for long enough to recognize the decline in his client, who stood flatfooted, only occasionally being the aggressor.

Last month Jake told himself that a different schedule, a more experienced training partner, or moving to another weight classification would improve things. A month was not enough; it would never be enough. He wanted to look away as he rested his arms on the top rope of the boxing ring, knowing it was time to move from training to transition.

Jake moved to the man's corner after the bell sounded and put a stool in the ring. "How you feeling, Sam?" he asked, placing a towel over the man's sweaty shoulders. The boxer rested his elbows on his knees, stared at the canvas, and didn't respond. Jake asked if he wanted to go another round, and the fighter shook his head. Jake nodded at the sparring partner to let him know the session was over.

Jake rubbed the towel on the man's back and said, "Take a shower and come to my office."

Jake had been a trainer for so long that he had become a fixture at the boxing gym in Brooklyn. He trained professionals and amateurs over the years and, at this late stage in his career, mainly worked with younger boxers, both men and women. Like most trainers, Jake had an eye for talent. He also knew when the talent had succumbed to age and punishment. His relationship with Sam had lasted longer than most aspiring fighters who had come to him over the years,

and Jake admitted to himself that affection and loyalty had clouded his view of Sam's future in professional boxing.

Sam Simons was a proficient boxer who had enjoyed limited success as a middleweight and later as a welterweight when he was in his twenties. Back in those days, Jake watched Sam fight one of his boxers in a match at Barclays Center, and he appreciated his determination, focus, and stamina. Sam had won that night in a split decision. His professional record was 15-0, with seven knockouts against ranked opponents. The fight card listed him as Sam "Lefty" Simons because he was a southpaw.

A few months after the match at Barclays, Sam showed up at the Brooklyn gym where Jake was training, and they talked. Jake immediately liked the kid and took him on as a client, and the relationship became a partnership, almost like family. Jake quickly saw that Sam's gift was his speed and his determination. He often invited Sam to his home for dinner after a training day and got to know the boy. They talked about boxing, sports, the future, and almost anything involving the culture in New York City. Sam resisted talking about his family history, but Jake got enough details to know that he was from West Virginia. What he didn't know was that Sam was not the boy's real name.

Sam was the youngest of three boys in a family of seven children, and when he was in grade school, his father and oldest brother were killed in a mining accident. His mother had six children to raise and took in laundry to support the family. He didn't talk much about what happened, but Jake listened as Sam explained that West Virginia was a hard, dark place. The coal dust gets in your hair, nose, and eyes. It smothers a person's ambition to see more than a life spent working in darkness. The company-owned family home had broken doors and windows, a leaky roof, and disabled cars sat for months in the driveway. Clothing was passed down from older to younger children. In the social order, even in a mining town, the family was considered the poorest among the poor. Sam got into fights at school for reasons that he could not understand, but he was winning the fights.

*I am just a poor boy
Though my story's seldom told
I have squandered my resistance
For a pocketful of mumbles*

During his first year of high school, a youth pastor gave Sam a pair of gloves and encouraged him to join a boxing program for teenagers in the church's basement, where he learned to become a boxer. He also learned how to overcome fear in and out of the ring. After each round, the youth pastor would remind Sam, "The Lord says fear not," and send him back for the next round. People started to pay attention to Sam's boxing achievements as he defeated even older and more experienced boys from neighboring towns. The following year, Sam faced opponents on Saturday mornings in six-round exhibition matches at the high school gymnasium.

It all ended one day at school when an older boy, who was repeating his Senior year, started heckling Sam about being afraid to fight without gloves. Sam walked away from the bully as an expectant crowd gathered in a hallway. The boy jeered, and the crowd laughed as Sam retreated to his classroom. After the final class of the day, Sam went to the boys' bathroom, hoping to avoid another confrontation. His antagonist saw Sam and followed him, signaling his entourage of eager boys and a few girls who didn't want to miss the entertainment. He called Sam names, encouraged the crowd to join the taunting, and stood in the restroom doorway. Sam decided not to resist, said nothing, and headed for the restroom door when the boy grabbed Sam and shoved him into a urinal. Sam regained his balance, turned, and faced his opponent. The boy said, "I hear you're afraid to fight without gloves."

"You heard wrong," Sam replied.

"You afraid to fight me then?" he asked.

Sam looked around and said, "I'm not afraid, but I don't want to fight."

The boy grinned, turned his head to the crowd without taking his eyes off Sam, and said, "I think the great boxer is afraid to fight bare-fisted." The sound of laughter and shouts echoed in the bathroom and hallway.

"Tell you what," the boy said. "I'll let you walk this time, but it's gonna' cost ya. Got any money?" The crowd howled as Sam shook his head.

When the noise turned to silence, the boy stepped closer to Sam and said placidly, "I asked you if you've got any money."

"No, I don't!" Sam replied calmly.

The boy's eyes flashed as he raised his fists, stepped fully into the bathroom, and stood a head taller than Sam. The crowd formed a circle. "I said it was gonna' cost you," he sneered.

The boy took a swing at where he thought Sam's head should be and was himself hit in the face by a lightning right hook that dropped him to the tile floor. The crowd pushed back from the sudden violence.

The boy didn't move as blood flowed from his nose and cut below his left eye. Another boy screamed that Sam had killed the kid, and a girl started to cry. Sam stared at his victim, who was motionless except for his blood that ran to a floor drain. He could hear his heart pounding, and he started to perspire as he realized students were running to the high school office for help. The thought of having killed someone gripped Sam, and he gave in to fear.

He ran the half mile from school to the church looking for the youth pastor. The pastor was not anywhere to be found. Sam believed he was out of options, so he decided it was time to leave town and ran for home. As usual, his mother was doing laundry and did not hear Sam enter the house. He went to his room, grabbed some clothes and personal items, and put them in an empty flour sack. As he headed for the front door, he saw his mother carrying a laundry basket and shouted at her, "I am leaving, I am leaving." She dropped the basket and started after her son, but there was no sign of him as she reached the front porch.

He ran to the railroad, hopped on a coal train headed north, and never looked back.

*When I left my home and my family
I was no more than a boy
In the company of strangers
In the quiet of the railway station
Running scared*

Several nights later, a hungry, dirty, and tired boy from West Virginia hopped off a freight train at a station in New York City. The only things he had with him were his clothes, the flour sack, and his name, which he changed. He stumbled in the dark through the tangle of rail lines and boxcars until he found the railway station. He climbed up on the platform, walked to the unlocked doors, and saw the place was almost empty. Nobody looked up as Sam opened the door. His footsteps were greeted by echoes in the station lobby and the scraping sound of the wooden bench sliding on the slate floor as he sat down. A man wearing ragged clothes was sleeping on a bench across the lobby, using newspapers as a pillow. The sound of a toilet flushing came from a distant hallway, followed by a woman's voice whispering. Then it was quiet. The boy decided to lay low for the night and get some sleep.

He woke to the first sounds of commuters arriving at the station. In the daylight, Sam could see he was in the cavernous main waiting area of Penn Station. He concluded that, for now, New York was his destination.

*Laying low, seeking out the poorer quarters
Where the ragged people go
Looking for the places only they would know*

The man sleeping on a bench across the lobby was gone, and the metal doors to stalls and coffee stands were now open. The smell of coffee reminded Sam that he had not eaten in the past few days. Sam wandered among people briskly walking in multiple directions to and from trains and subways. He came upon a tourist kiosk, helped himself to a map of the City, and headed to an exit. Once outside the station, he noticed a man in a business suit holding

a paper cup of coffee in one hand and waving at a cab with the other. As the cab drove to the curb, the man discarded his cup on top of a newspaper stand and got into the cab. Sam quickly picked up the cup, labeled "Simons Coffee," and drank the still-warm contents, figuring he had to learn how things are done in the city. He was in the company of strangers in his new home with a new name. Bill Stuart from West Virginia was now Sam Simons from none-of-your-business.

Asking only workman's wages, I come looking for a job

But I get no offers

Just a come-on from the whores on 7th Avenue

Sam walked from the station in the same direction that most of the cabs were driving, hoping to find a hiding place or even find a job. He slowly walked several blocks on 7th Avenue, taking in the first daylight sights and sounds, watching people going to work, and shoppers crowding the sidewalks. He saw stairs going underground to a subway station with a gate at the bottom blocking his view, but not his imagination of what a subway might look like. There were signs everywhere, some attached to massive buildings that reached up to the sky. He tried to understand the lights at intersections; some seemed to be directed at buses and cars, and others were at people crossing the streets. Every time he stepped off a sidewalk, it seemed a car honked its horn.

He walked until he saw a church that included the name of the denomination he recognized from home. Inside, a church secretary asked if she could help him, and he said he was looking for something to eat and identified himself with his new name for the first time. Observing his clothing and seeing his flour sack substitute for luggage, she asked him why he was alone in the city. As Sam started making up a story about being temporarily separated from his parents, she started taking notes. She was too conscientious for Sam's liking, so he started backing out of the church office. The woman put down her pen, looked Sam in the eyes, and said, "Don't leave without a housing voucher, just in case you don't meet up with your parents as planned."

She reached into a desk drawer and pulled out an official-looking YMCA certificate, which she signed and dated. Sam took the document, left the church, returned to 7th Avenue, and consulted the map he picked up at Penn Station to find the address listed on the certificate.

Within a few blocks, Sam noticed a change in the neighborhood. Single women were standing along the sidewalks, smoking, and wearing clothes that his mother would have said were inappropriate. Even more startling, the women looked at him and smiled as he walked past. They were young women, maybe a few years older than himself, wearing heels and makeup. A woman walking behind Sam said, "See anything you like?" Unsure whether the question was directed at him, he kept walking.

At the YMCA, the boy presented the housing voucher, lied about his age, and was shown to a large room with folding cots, blankets, coffee, and restrooms. He also found something he did not know he was looking for or needed. On the second floor of the building was a gym with a boxing ring. This was as close to home as he had been since the day he killed a boy in West Virginia.

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After the sparring session, Sam showered, changed clothes, and went to his trainer's office. "I'm just feeling a bit tired today," he offered. "Now that I think about it, I missed breakfast this morning," he added, and picked up the cup of coffee Jake offered and sat down.

Jake continued to look outside at the winter weather and said nothing.

"I've been thinking a couple weeks off after this next fight would be good. Maybe get out of this weather. Lorna has been talking about going someplace warmer," Sam added.

"How is she doing?" Jake asked at the mention of Sam's girlfriend.

"Great, thanks for asking. She sends her best." The two men sat without talking for a few minutes.

"Sam, she wants you to quit," Jake said without looking at his friend.

Sam started to object and then retreated from that reflex at the suggestion he retire from boxing. "I know," he said.

"She has a good job at the port," he advised. The statement carried Jake's continuing advice that Sam should marry Lorna before she receives a better offer.

"Coach, what's on your mind other than my love life?" Sam asked cautiously.

Jake took a deep breath. "You've been at this game ten years. Your record is 43 and 9. I know guys that would love to have those numbers at the end of their career."

Sam looked at his hands and waited for his anger to pass. Finally, he said, "We got a match next month at the Garden."

"You've lost your last two fights. I know they were by split decisions, but they are losses," Jake urged and waited. "You broke your nose in one of those losses," he noted.

Sam slammed his left fist into the palm of his right hand and stood up. "It's been broken before," he said with exasperation.

Jake sat at his desk and looked up at his friend. "I got a call from the promoter for that Gaden match, and he wants to move your fight to the end of the undercard," Jake advised. "I think they want to cancel but don't want to say that yet."

Sam thought briefly and then asked, "What are you telling me?"

"I'm saying we don't need any more losses."

Sam leaned over the desk and looked at his trainer. "I can train harder. Is that what you want?" he demanded.

"No, I don't!" the trainer insisted.

Sam considered how to respond. "This is all I know. Fighting has been my life since high school. Do you want to take that away from me?" he pleaded.

“No, I don’t!” he replied again. “Sam, the promoters see what I see. It happens to the best fighters.”

Sam walked out of the office and slammed the door. Jake moved to the window and watched his client walk down the street to a city park and stand alone in a clearing. The trainer looked away, not wanting to see the boxer cry.

*In the clearing stands a boxer
And a fighter by his trade
And he carries the reminders
Of every glove that laid him down
Or cut him till he cried out
In his anger and his shame*

The next day, Sam called Jake’s office, and Jake let him know he was glad he called and asked how he was feeling. “I’m feeling fine,” Sam advised. And I have a favor to ask of you.”

“Anything!” Jake said. “What is it?”

“Can you help me pick out an engagement ring?” he asked. “I don’t know where to begin.”

*Then I'm laying out my winter clothes
And wishing I was gone, going home
Where the New York City winters aren't bleeding me
Leading me, going home*