

BETWEEN THE WHALE AND DEATH

RANDY ROBERTS

NOT LONG AGO I heard the familiar opening of the Gillette Cavalcade of Sports song, and it took me back to Friday and Saturday nights when I used to sit close to my dad watching boxers on a black-and-white TV and listening to his tales of Fritzie Zivic. He—my dad—was overweight and bent by rheumatism and something called Marie-Strumpell disease. He walked with a cane and slept sitting upright on a mammoth pillow, and I think he lived in constant pain. But it didn't touch his eyes, which were blue and pleasant, particularly when he told stories about Fritzie, Pittsburgh, and Josie the Whale.

The first tales I remember were about the whale. He told them at dusk after fine, long summer days as shadows lengthened into night. He told them to my two brothers and me, and no Homer ever had a more rapt audience. We listened to every word, imagining the world of Josie and believing everything he told us. We just assumed that he knew what he was talking about, not only because he was our dad but because he had been a lifeguard before World War II and had served as an underwater welder during the war. Dressed in one of those Jules Verne outfits with the bubbled, windowed headgear, he had descended far beneath the surface of the ocean and did something with torches to sunken ships. Now exactly how one could light a torch underwater

was as mysterious to me then as it is now. I have never tried to discover anything about the process, content to allow it to remain as a symbolic reminder that there are limits to human knowledge. Anyway, it seemed to my younger brother and me—and we discussed it in our bedroom long after we were tucked in and the light was turned out—that any man who had been a lifeguard *and* served in the Navy was fully conversant with things nautical, a category that included whales and such.

I really should say something more about my dad. He lived then, as he still does, in a mythical world, one consisting entirely of vague memories, stories, rumors, and wild speculations. The lining of his heart must have been about as thick as tissue paper, rendering him hopelessly prone to heart attacks. And back in the days before heart transplants, bypass surgery, artificial hearts, angioplasty, and whatever else they can do today, there was not much a father could do about a bad ticker, except, I guess, stop smoking and lose weight, two palliatives that my dad failed at miserably. The point of this medical aside is that when I was seven or eight his heart began to fail. He had a series of heart attacks—maybe six or seven—and spent considerable time in the hospital. Toward the end he couldn't work or even negotiate steps very well; in fact, he vacated his second-floor bedroom and spent all his time on a hospital bed in the living room. I think he probably did this so he could remain in the center of the family and watch TV with us at night. When I was twelve and my brother was ten, he died—died in the hospital in the early morning of Saturday, November 16, 1963.

That morning when my mom told me he died was sad. It is still sort of a blur, but I think I remember that aunts and uncles materialized out of thin air and there was plenty of food to eat. He was buried on Wednesday, and I think I went back to school on Thursday, though I don't really remember. But I do remember Friday, or at least a few minutes of Friday afternoon. I was in seventh grade, and the senior high had a rehearsal for a play scheduled to open that night for long-suffering parents and patient relatives. We, the junior highers, were given the choice of attending the rehearsal or going to our regular classes. No-brainer, right? I went and did what I expect every other male seventh-grader did—talk with friends, throw spitballs, check out the eighth- and ninth-grade girls, and generally make a lout of myself.

Then—and this is the moment I remember clearly—a teacher came on stage and said the president had been shot. Everyone laughed, suspecting it was the subplot of the drama that none of us was paying the slightest attention to. The teacher said it again, and we laughed again. Slowly, though, he impressed upon our smiling faces that what he was saying was not part of the play and that John Kennedy really had been shot. With that the show went on, at least until the same teacher walked on stage again and told us that the president was dead. Then I'm not sure the play did go on. I'm not sure what I thought or what I did next or how I got home. I just know that I didn't go back to school for almost a week, and that the same aunts and uncles and cousins again mysteriously reappeared around the house. And I still have trouble separating in my mind my own personal loss with the larger national loss. It was almost as if watching Kennedy's funeral on TV I was watching my own dad's funeral.

But the fact that my dad had his first heart attack at thirty-five and died at forty doesn't really tell much about him, except to a cardiologist. If his death became confused during our national tragedy, his life is also shrouded. He was born in Pittsburgh, but for some reason at some point he got himself deported to New Kensington, a factory town slightly to the northeast of the 'Burgh. I don't know why or when, and neither does my mother. Perhaps he absconded with the church funds; maybe he ran off with a senator's wife; I hope he didn't kill a man. I'm fairly confident that he didn't move to New Kensington for the waters of the Allegheny River, which as I recall were Coke-bottle green except for the areas right around the factories. There the waters were a thick, sluggish gray. I do know that before the war he played football for New Kensington, lifeguarded, and then worked in a factory. He probably thought his life was pretty well set. But the war changed all that. After it ended he spent time in a veterans' hospital, and there was no chance that he would ever lifeguard or work in a factory again. But he was smart, and aided by the GI Bill he went through the University of Pittsburgh in a flash and became an accountant.

But nobody my dad knew in Pittsburgh and New Kensington was ever just one thing. It seemed to me growing up that by definition a man was a person who could do many things, and any male who just did one thing was incomplete. My uncles, for example, could drive

trucks, repair engines, build houses, and fix just about anything. My dad's friends—men with names like Eddie George and Nick Eddie, and nicknames like Sailor and Marine Ed—did many vaguely defined things. My mother used to tell me that this or that one worked in the big Alcoa mill, but they never seemed to go to work, and their nondescript homes were filled with all sorts of good things to eat and games to enjoy. They luxuriated in a universe of unemployed abundance, laughed a lot, and really seemed to enjoy life, though occasionally they would leave their homes and families for a few years.

Exactly what these men had to do with my dad I am not quite sure. The thought never crossed my mind when I was young. I've got a few hunches now. What I know with some degree of certainty is that my dad—Pitt grad with "almost" a master's in economics—ended up in Democratic politics. He ended up there, I think, shortly after I was born. And because he ended up there we ended up in Camp Hill, just across the Susquehanna River from the state capitol in Harrisburg. At the age of five I was an exile, separated from all save my nuclear family, cast adrift in a sea of Republican Penn State, Philadelphia Phillies, and Philadelphia Eagles fans, people who called pop "soda," John L. Sullivan "John L. Sul-li-vin," duntun "downtown," gumbands "rubberbands," and insisted upon extracting the *r* from "warsh" and "Warshington." They didn't even have a plural of "you," and cocked their heads a bit when I said, "Watch yunz guys doin'?" Odd WASPish people, really. They were friendly, but in a colder way, never laughing from the belly like Sailor and Marine Ed.

It was not so much that I thought I was out of place in Camp Hill; I *knew* I was out of place. The teams I pulled for—and just assumed everyone else in America pulled for as well—were the Pitt Panthers, Pittsburgh Steelers, and Pittsburgh Pirates. Conversations with new friends proved my innocent assumption groundless. Added to this was the fact that my dad was a Democratic politician in a town that went 87 percent for Goldwater in 1964 and most likely 100 percent for Eisenhower in 1952 and 1956. The notion that "Everybody Likes Ike" undoubtedly originated in Camp Hill. Why this was so, I don't know. Perhaps it was because the army of Robert E. Lee was in Camp Hill when it swung south toward Gettysburg, a sort of we-were-that-close-to-being-sacked-by-them-damn-Confederate-Democrats-and-saved-

only-by-the-Party-of-Lincoln. Or maybe it was because wealthy Camp Hill residents nursed grudges against Roosevelt for the 1935 "Soak the Rich" revenue act. But whatever the reason, except for my friend Bobby Chrencik whose father worked with his hands, everyone I knew was a Republican. This first hit me in 1960 when a straw poll in my third-grade class at Lincoln Elementary School—a name, incidentally, that supports my Civil War thesis (the other two elementary schools named after presidents in Camp Hill were Hoover and Eisenhower; not even a bone thrown to a Democrat)—went two for Kennedy, everyone else for Nixon. Bobby and I just shook our heads, feeling a bit sad, I guess, for Mr. Kennedy and his lovely wife.

My dad tried to compensate for my family's otherness by giving my brothers and me life lessons in the guise of stories. He was one of the world's great storytellers, at least that's how I have preserved him in my memory. The earliest tales I remember were of Josie the Whale. Now as my dad told it, Josie was a most extraordinary whale who could be counted on when a sailor "got into a pinch." And thinking about the stories, I can only conclude that my dad must have been a singularly maladroit sailor who spent most of his career in the Navy getting into and out of pinches. Every story began with him getting into a pinch. Perhaps he was watching a sunset and forgot to "go below" when his submarine dived beneath the sea, or was concentrating on a poker game and fell overboard when his destroyer hit a Pacific wave "as big as the Empire State Building," or was repairing a battleship "one hundred miles under the sea" when a shark bit through his "hundred-mile air hose." Whatever the case, it was always dire.

At this point when the three Roberts boys were so afraid that he might not survive that we allowed our ice cream to drip onto our hands, his stories became interactive. "So I thought to myself," he would muse with a contemplative air, "should I call Josie or shouldn't I call Josie?" And we, his Greek chorus, would shout, "Call Josie! Call Josie!" only to be cut short with a stern "Who's telling this story, you or me?" That would shut us up, and we would draw our knees and arms together in suspenseful and eager anticipation.

Now why not call Josie, you might ask? That's where the life lesson came in. It seems to me now that he was telling us that in this world there are no free rides, no fairy godmothers, and nobody gets nothin'

for nothin'. Maybe he was talking about his life, maybe about his political universe. But one thing was as certain as taxes: Josie was nobody's dupe. Oh sure, he could get my dad out of his pinch, but there was always the bill. Josie, evidently, was the Earl Long of whales, functioning by a strict "You goose me and I'll goose you" code.

My brothers and I loved Josie's bill. My dad had a weakness for large quantities of food, and he could eat more than any person I knew, but even he was not in the same league as Josie. That whale's appetite was gargantuan; it was Homeric. When my dad called Josie, the whale would be on the spot instantaneously, but the mere act of that superwhale response seemed to light his gastronomic fires. "Sure, I can get you out of your pinch," he invariably whined, "but I'm awfully hungry." Then it started, a string of demands that would have strained the powers of Hercules. Fifty dumptrucks of French fries, seventy boxcars of cheeseburgers, ninety barges of hot dogs, a hundred sixteen-wheelers of ice cream—just chocolate and vanilla, for no self-respecting whale would eat strawberry. Then, when we had reached the limits of our culinary knowledge, my dad would add, "And Josie was just getting started."

My dad's pinch varied from story to story, but Josie's demands remained remarkably constant, though I suspect the numbers changed. If my dad left any of the basic food groups—cheeseburgers, hot dogs, French fries, and ice cream—unmentioned, his chorus would immediately chime, "What about the hot dogs?" or "What about the ice cream?" only to be stopped dead with "Who's telling this story, you or me?" Only the boldest cricket would make a sound after that withering admonition.

As my brothers and I grew older, my father began to tell us about Pittsburgh—I suspect to remind us that our roots were not embedded in the Republican soil of Camp Hill. His father, I think, was a Welsh coal miner—or son of a Welsh coal miner—who died very young. That was really all I ever remember hearing about my paternal granddad, until after my dad's only sister died and the family papers, meager as they were, were sent to me. I surmise that my relatives thought that as a historian and writer I might be interested in them. They were right. From the few documents I gathered that my granddad's name was Charles, that he was born in 1897 and died in 1929, and that on three

separate occasions he had enlisted in and been honorably discharged from the U.S. Army. From his discharge papers I learned that he had served with Gen. John "Black Jack" Pershing during the Mexican Border campaign, with the American Expeditionary Force on the Western Front during the Great War, and with the joint American-Western European force that landed in Murmansk and Archangel in an effort to "influence" the Russian Revolution—altogether an interesting trifecta. But since he died when my dad was only five, he played no part in my father's dramas and I don't know what he did, saw, or thought about any of the places he visited in uniform.

Pittsburgh seemed more interesting to my dad than the circumstances of his own family, and he passed on a greater sense of place than personal history. Camp Hill lives in a perpetual summer sunshine of perfect lawns and the smell of freshly mowed grass. It is an old, small town with a quaint main street, agreeable parks, and pleasant homes. During the time I served there local Blue Laws prohibited bars and the sale of alcohol, and the main duty of policemen seemed to be finding dogs who had wandered away from their homes and corralling teenagers who were out past curfew. It was a town without locked doors, where nobody lived more than a short bicycle ride from anybody else, and realtors did not sell to Jews and blacks.

The Pittsburgh of my dad's memory was a dark, strange dream-scape. Since he was fatherless at a young age, I entertained some vague impression that Pittsburgh adopted and raised him, nurturing him in a placenta of soot. I now know that for some seventy-five years Pittsburgh shocked and appalled visitors, most of whom insisted upon informing the rest of humankind that the city should be shunned. "It looked like hell, literally," said the American communist journalist Lincoln Steffens, echoing an earlier description of Pittsburgh as "Hell with the lid taken off" by writer James Parton, who may or may not have been a communist. To English novelist Anthony Trollope it was "the blackest . . . place I ever saw." To writer H. L. Mencken it was a landscape "so dreadfully hideous, so intolerably bleak and forlorn, that it reduced the whole aspiration of men to a macabre and depressing joke." It was a city of smokestacks and mills, a steel, coke, and ugly town.

To hear my dad talk, though, it was a land fully magical, filled with

shadows and streetlights that had to be turned on at noon. His Pittsburgh was not a wretched place at all; if anything, it was *recherché*. When I later read about Sherlock Holmes's fog-drenched London or looked at misty Carot landscapes, my thoughts eased toward his description of Pittsburgh. Somehow I never connected the city's peculiar lighting with the pollution that its factories belched. I recall him saying that it was a "land of silhouettes," and imagined it as a place where nothing was ever seen distinctly, where people moved by each other invisibly, and buildings always appeared incomplete, some with bases that ended abruptly after a few stories, others with tops that seemed to sprout out of clouds. Occasionally a person might spy the top of a bridge, but mostly the rivers seemed flooded by a lighter river of fog. And, of course, all sounds were appropriately disjointed—streetcars bumping along muffled tracks, the novocained peal of church bells, voices that never got nearer, only faded away. My dad could not have described a place more unlike sunny Camp Hill, or more apt to transfix my imagination. I date my love of low, overcast skies and foggy days to his tales.

I coveted that singular image of Pittsburgh until some time during my junior year in college. Then I happened across a history of Pittsburgh with hundreds of photographs and text by a number of noted historians. The text portion was about what one would expect from such books, a sort of onward-and-upward saga of a great city, where dedicated leaders solved problems and progress triumphed. The soul of the work, however, was the pictures and the marvelous captions written by editor Stefan Lorant. The chapter that caught my attention focused on Pittsburgh between the wars, the magical period of my dad's youth. And there it was, everything he had said—a photograph of Wood Street at 3 P.M. with streetlights burning into the fog and looking eerily like 3 A.M.; a noon street scene where the smog has transformed everyone into silhouettes; a postcard called *HIGH NOON* where everything is black except the whites of a few people's eyes. Everything considered, the photographs were enough to make me wonder if somewhere in the blue Pacific there was a hamburg-eating whale.

Lorant's captions captured the mood of the images. Under one congested street scene he noted,

The city grew into a jungle. The skies were dark. Traffic was in a snarl. The days seemed like nights. White shirts turned into black in minutes. There was smoke and smog and grime.

In another photograph that is so misty I initially thought a row house was an old Mississippi steamboat and a street was the edge of a river, Lorant commented,

There was an eternal mist, and everlasting fog in the air. The silhouettes of the buildings and those of boats were soft, at times hardly visible, more felt than seen. The figures of humans as they walk through the streets seemed unreal, like a fairyland. The world was quiet, one could hardly hear the steps of the men who emerged from the fog, coming out of nowhere and disappearing into nowhere. The city had about it a dreamlike quality—a fantastic and romantic paradise for photographers and painters.

The captions read like one of my dad's tales, though how he forgot the white shirt detail is somewhat mysterious.¹

Maybe he didn't mention anything about shirts—white or black—because Pittsburgh's peculiar conditions were not an end in themselves; rather, they added atmospheric details that served a grander narrative. You had to know something about Pittsburgh to understand the sort of men that it produced, and you had to understand the sort of men that it produced before you could understand the handful of Pittsburgh men who became gods and champions—or champions and gods, they were really the same thing in my dad's eyes. They were boxers, these gods, with names like Harry Greb, Billy Conn, and Fritzie Zivic. I don't know where my dad developed his love of boxing, and I don't know whether he passed it on to me or just told me stories about Pittsburgh fighters because he noticed that I was fascinated by the sport. And, quite frankly, I don't care which—chicken or egg—came first. I'm content with the memory of sitting close to him watching the *Friday Night Fights*, which provided the perfect context for his Pittsburgh narratives.

As I said, I don't know how or why he came to boxing. He must have fought some before the war because I recall him telling me about

boxing in the Navy. In one fight he battled a "real fighter," smaller and lighter than himself, who put him in such a pinch that not even Josie could help him. "He kept his chin tucked behind his shoulder and never looked at my head or hands," I clearly remember him saying. "Just watched my feet and knew from them everything I was trying to do." The idea that a fighter could watch another fighter's feet and know when he was going to throw a right or a left, a jab or a roundhouse, appealed to me enormously. I hadn't the slightest notion of the physics of the process—nor, I suspect, had my dad—but I had no doubt that such mapping was possible. Maybe that was why the sport was dubbed "the sweet science." I often thought about how it was done, and tried it several times with painful results during my own youthful pugilistic career.

One thing that made me certain that it was possible was the stories my dad told me about Harry Greb. Born in the Garfield section of the city, Greb was the perfect prototype of a Pittsburgh fighter—tough, smart, dirty, odd, and . . . well, real tough. He started fighting professionally in 1913 and stopped when he died in 1926. *The Ring Record Book and Boxing Encyclopedia* lists 294 fights for Greb, but like most boxers of his era he probably fought many more. And he battled and defeated most of the best middleweights and light-heavyweights of his day—such men as George Chip, Jack Dillon, Frank Klaus, Battling Levinsky, Gunboat Smith, Tommy Gibbons, Tommy Loughran, Tiger Flowers, Mickey Walker, and the great Gene Tunney, the man who took the heavyweight crown from Jack Dempsey himself. He fought in a style that bordered on savage, an all-out attack that involved the offensive use of his fists, elbows, knees, thumbs, head, and teeth. If he could have figured out a way to clobber his opponent with his Adam's apple I'm sure he would have used that part of his anatomy as well. As Greb—nicknamed the "Human Windmill" or the "Pittsburgh Windmill"—liked to say, "Prize fighting ain't the noblest of arts, and I ain't its noblest artist."²

My dad gave me the general outlines of Greb's career, but I searched for confirmation in books and magazines about fighters. If sixteenth-century Protestants learned to read so that they could interpret the Bible, I mastered the mystery of words so that I could study

the history of boxing. In Tunney's autobiography—one of the very few boxer autobiographies that was probably written by the fighter himself—Greb received high praise. "Few human beings have fought each other more savagely or more often than Harry Greb and I. We punched and cut and bruised each other in a series of bouts, five of them."

Writing more than a decade after he retired, Tunney said that the memory of his first fight with Greb remained "terrifying." Tunney climbed into the ring that night with hands that had been fractured and "imperfectly mended." A trainer shot the sore and swollen hands full of Novocain just to allow Tunney to compete. To make matters worse, a sparring partner had cut Tunney's left eye during a training session, and it too had healed imperfectly, forcing the same needle-happy trainer to inject it with adrenaline chloride to prevent it from "bleeding too much if reopened by Greb's punches." Unfit but numbed, Tunney answered the opening bell and stepped into a nightmare.

"In the first exchange of the fight, I sustained a double fracture of the nose which bled continually until the finish," Tunney noted factually, robbing Greb of all agency by his shameful use of the passive voice. "Toward the end of the first round, my left eyebrow was laid open four inches. I am convinced that the adrenaline solution that had been injected so softened the tissue that the first blow or butt I received cut the flesh right to the bone. In the third round another cut over the right eye left me looking through a red film. For the better part of twelve rounds I saw a red phantomlike form dancing before me."³

Greb won the first fight, and the American Light-Heavyweight title with it. Tunney did better in their next four bouts. In their last match Tunney had Greb in trouble, and during a clinch Harry mumbled, "Gene, don't knock me out."

"Pain and punches meant nothing to him—the cruel mauling, the bruising punishment," Tunney commented. "But Harry, hopelessly beaten, didn't want the folks back home to read that he had been knocked out. I was never paid a higher tribute. Here was one of the gamest and greatest fighters of all time laying down on his shield, admitting defeat and knowing that I would not expose him."

Between my dad and Tunney I obtained a pretty complete portrait of Greb. My dad knew somebody who knew somebody who had kind

of known Greb, and what filtered down to him was that Harry had been as mean as a hornet. "Would fight anybody at any time for money or just to fight" was the way I heard it.

Tunney also suggested that Greb was inclined toward moodiness, adding that he was "oddly vain" as well. "He was concerned about his looks. Strange that anyone so careful of his face should have selected prizefighting for a profession." But that was Greb, and before each fight he carefully slicked down and combed his hair, then powdered his face with a powder puff. In his own unique style, Tunney commented, "this was one of the strangest eccentricities I ever observed in the realm where fists thud into the human visage."

Tunney and my dad disagreed about the end of Harry Greb. The great fighter said that vanity did in Harry: Greb was so sensitive about his flat fighter's nose that two months after he retired, "like an aging society beauty, he resorted to plastic surgery." The operation killed him. My dad said that the operation that killed Harry Greb involved his eyes. "By the time he retired, Harry Greb couldn't see anything out of one eye and hardly anything out of the other," my dad said. I imagined that Greb—not unlike the foot-watcher my dad fought in the Navy—was so good that he had some sixth sense, that he just knew when to duck and when to swing, that like the blind pinball player in the musical *Tommy* he boxed by a sense of touch. All that the *Ring Record Book* says for the end of Greb is "Died, October 22, 1926, Atlantic City, N.J., following an operation."

I never got a chance to raise this point with my dad, and I still have no doubt that Greb did fight practically blind, but I suspect that Tunney was right about the operation. For one thing Tunney knew Greb; my dad was only three years old when Greb died. But even more convincingly, I can't imagine why anyone would go to Atlantic City for an eye operation. To New York City or Boston, sure. But Atlantic City? A guy goes there for a vacation, and perhaps after a day on the beach, an evening gambling, a night with a woman, and a few too many drinks, a nose job sounds like a good idea. I think that even Harry Greb would have put more thought into an operation to restore his sight. (In fairness to Atlantic City, the fate of Tiger Flowers should be noted. Flowers was a fine middleweight who in 1926 took the title from Greb. He

was the last person Greb fought. The next year, however, he too needed an operation and had it performed in New York City, with the same results as Greb's. So maybe the moral for the 1920s was that middleweights should avoid operations.)

Oddly, I remember my dad talking more about Greb, a fighter of his dad's generation, than Billy Conn, the darling of Pittsburgh boxing in the 1930s and 1940s. Of course, he discussed the night of June 18, 1941, when Conn fought Joe Louis for the heavyweight title. Nobody gave Conn a chance. He was only a light-heavyweight, matched against the most lethal heavyweight in the history of the sport. But for that one night Conn was almost perfect, as far into the zone as an athlete is likely to get. For most of the match he stuck and moved, making Louis look slow and vulnerable. At the end of the twelve rounds, Conn was even on one scorecard and ahead on the other two. All he had to do to become the new heavyweight champion was to win one round and not get knocked out.

Conn knew this. The secret to boxing Louis was not getting hit, he later suggested.

That's the game. Get out of the way. I knew that you had to keep moving from side to side and keep him off balance and never let him get a good shot at you because he was a real dangerous man. Keep away from him. Just move in and out. Feint him out of position and whack him and just keep going. Left hook and a right cross, a left hook to the body and a left hook to the chin—all in the same combination, *bing, bang, boom!* Real fast, like a machine gun, then get the hell out of the way. . . . But every time that you lead with one hand you have to know to keep the other one up so you don't get hit. You can't let him get set to get a clear, good shot.⁴

In the thirteenth round he forgot. In the previous round he had hurt Louis and the idea of winning by a knockout had invaded his imagination like a Mongol horde. Between rounds he told his cornermen, "I'm going to knock this son of a bitch out. Don't worry about it." Then in the thirteenth he landed a few more good shots. But Louis wasn't hurt nearly as much as Conn suspected. "He was waiting for

me. He'd have never hit me in the ass if I didn't make a mistake and try to knock him out." Overconfident, Conn gave Louis an opening, and Joe snatched it. "He hit me about twenty-five real good shots." With two seconds left in the round the referee stopped the fight.

How he almost beat the great Joe Louis became the central tale of Conn's life.

Of all the times to be a wise guy, I had to pick it against him to be a wise guy. Serves me right. He should have killed me. What a bastard I was. . . . I was twenty-three years old. I didn't have any sense. He was knocking everybody out, see? Here I come along, I'm a middleweight, and I almost kicked his ass for him.

Conn sometimes pondered what defeating Louis would have meant to his life. Maybe he would have held the title for six months or a few years. Maybe he would have been the champion during the war. But Louis tended to discount Conn's ideas. "How was you gonna keep the title for six months when you couldn't keep it for 12 rounds?"

If the Louis-Conn fight was the climax to most stories about Pittsburgh boxers, it was only a prelude to the hero of my dad's grand narrative. "Conn was a great boxer," he would venture. "Should have beaten Joe Louis. Did you know he fought Fritzie Zivic?" That was the name all his fight stories meandered toward. Fritzie Zivic, son of a Croatian immigrant. Fritzie Zivic, whose nose the great sportswriter Red Smith compared to a mine cave-in. Fritzie Zivic, unquestionably the dirtiest fighter ever to scrape his laces across another fighter's cut eye.

The way my dad talked about Fritzie gave me the impression that he knew him personally, but I don't know that for sure. Perhaps he had met Fritzie's father, who owned a saloon in the Lawrenceville section of Pittsburgh. Maybe he knew one of Fritzie's older brothers. Besides Fritzie, there was Pete, Jack, Eddie, and Joe, and all save Joe fought professionally. The two older boys, Pete and Jack, represented the United States in the 1920 Olympics in Antwerp, though neither won a medal. Pete placed fifth in flyweight competition and Jack placed fourth in the featherweight classification. But none of the other Zivic boys went very far as professionals.

"Fritzie Zivic was a Depression fighter," my dad once said. That meant two things. First, he fought often because hard times had shrunken the purses. Zivic began his career in 1931 under the reign of Herbert Hoover, and by 1933, when Franklin Roosevelt took Hoover's title, Fritzie was fighting once or twice a month. Most of his fights took place in Pittsburgh, but as he got better he started to roam, battling in smaller towns such as Holyoke, Kent, Johnstown, Canton, and Steubenville, as well as such fight cities as Chicago, Los Angeles, St. Louis, and New York City. I loved reading the names of his early opponents, names that seemed exotic and wonderful, names of fighters I had never heard of and whose biographies I could invent. Just in 1933 alone he fought U. S. Carpentier, Patsy Henningan, Don Asto, Joe Pimenthal, Gus Vagas, Homer Foster, Vincent Martinez, and Rudy Ayon. That was before he traded blows with Louis Carranza, Perfecto Lopez, Young Joe Firpo, Laddie Tonelli, Johnny Jadick, Kayo Castillo, Dom Mancini, Freddy Chenoweth, Jackie McFarland, Gene Buffalo, Tony Falco, Cleto Locatelli, Gaston LeCadre, and, of course, Eddie Cool. How could I have resisted the sport? In all of Camp Hill, there was not one Carpentier—though there was a "Diamond Jack" Carpenter—to say nothing of a Perfecto Lopez or an Eddie Cool.

Being a Depression fighter also entailed knowing one's craft. Twenty or so matches a year taught boxers how to fight and fighters how to box, and if it didn't, their careers usually ended abruptly in a hospital. Boxing was not without its home-court advantages. When Fritzie was away from Pittsburgh he faced angry spectators, hostile referees, and blind officials, as well as Depression-hardened opponents. Say he was in Pico, California, fighting the aforementioned Rudy Ayon, and Rudy gets "cute" with him. Maybe sticks a thumb in his eye or hits him real low. The referee says he didn't see nothin'. The officials are yawning. The spectators are laughing and cheering. Well, Fritzie had better have a contingency plan or a pipe in his glove. Fritzie eschewed pipes—I think—but he was always ready to fight fire with fire. If an opponent wanted to modify the Marquis of Queensberry rules a touch, that was fine with Fritzie Zivic.

My dad insisted that Fritzie "almost never fought dirty first," but there was something in his blue eyes—and maybe a hint of a smile—

that made me doubt that assertion. Reading about Fritzie did nothing to ease my suspicions. And on the subject of boxing I was something of a savant—my family would say idiot savant. I subscribed to only two magazines, *Boxing Illustrated and Wrestling News* and *The Ring*, and read them more or less from cover to cover, including letters to the editor and the agate-type fight results, but seldom anything on wrestling. Occasionally the name Fritzie Zivic would appear in a story. In 1959, for instance, *Boxing Illustrated* ran a feature entitled, "The Fine Art of Dirty Fighting." It included an action photograph of Zivic as well as a drawing of him with glove-thumb horns sprouting from his head. "You got to fight dirty," noted Fritzie. "Look at the three best fighters—Jack Johnson, Jack Dempsey, and Harry Greb. All dirty fighters." Why? "Because fighting is a dirty business, both inside the ring and out."⁵

Every instinct I have, however, tells me that for Fritzie dirty fighting was more than a retaliatory response to overzealous opponents or a rough-and-tumble business. I suspect that, like other Pittsburgh fighters, he was not above a preemptive strike every now and again. That's exactly what my dad hinted had happened in 1936 when Fritzie met Billy Conn. "I didn't see the fight, but I heard that Zivic threw the first low blow" was the way he began the story. I can't remember all the details, but I do recall a rather anatomical discussion of thumbs, elbows, and groins, and of tactics that would have made Fritzie's Olympic brothers turn their heads in shame. Years later, when I decided to check on my dad's—or my—memory, I looked for an account of the fight in the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*. There boxing writer Harvey Boyle commented that the match "was to be a nice pleasant boxing bout between pals, but as it worked out, the boys used everything but knives, with the result that the town was treated to as swell a boxing feud as you would care to gaze at."⁶

Conn later remembered the fight as a learning experience. Zivic "was a great teacher," Conn recalled. It "was like going to college for five years, just boxing him 10 rounds. The minute you did something to him, he would holler and scream, you'd have to have the police to keep him quiet. He put an awful face on me, busted me all up with everything. He did everything but kick you."

Zivic recalled that Conn was a smart boxer but "couldn't knock your

hat off," a point not lost on Joe Louis. "I thought I won the fight," Zivic insisted. "The referee gave it to me and the papers gave it to me but Conn got the decision of the two judges."⁷

That was the nature of Depression boxing. A fighter fought often, and if he was good he won most of them, but rare was the fighter who won them all. Today's champions are manufactured. On the way to the top they fight toothless once-weres and clawless never-will-bes. They pile victory atop victory like firewood in a shed. The idea is that at some point they will fight for the title with not a blemish on their record. Back then a loss here or there didn't make much of a difference. During the Depression everybody lost sometime, everybody could identify with a losing struggle. Even the great Joe Louis hit the deck before he won the title. And Fritzie Zivic was no Joe Louis. He was knocked out four times in his career, lost sixty-one decisions, and fought ten draws.

That didn't keep him from getting a title shot. On October 4, 1940, he battled Henry Armstrong, one of the finest fighters in the history of the sport, for the welterweight championship of the world. At the end of 1938 Armstrong had held three world's championships—the featherweight, lightweight, and welterweight. He was "Hurricane Hank" or "Homicide Hank," the windup fighter who started punching at the opening bell and just kept on going until the fight ended. He fought and beat the best at a time when the best were around to fight—Baby Arizmendi, Chalky Wright, Barney Ross, Lou Ambers, Ceferino Garcia—names mostly forgotten now but feared then. He even knocked out Fritzie's older brother, Eddie. "None of that bothered Fritzie much," my dad speculated.

Zivic prepared to fight a war in the shadow of a war. The major news of the day featured the German air blitz of England and the Brenner Pass meeting between Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini. The two Axis leaders met on the day Fritzie fought to discuss their winter military plans and how they would cope with an American intervention. Given Hitler's passion for boxing, I also like to think that they swapped opinions on the big fight. While foreign correspondents speculated about the outcome of the Brenner conference, New York sports-writers hinted that Fritzie needed a major ally if he hoped to defeat Armstrong. Henry knocked out seven opponents that year, and he was

a 4 to 1 favorite to defeat Zivic. Even the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* reporters predicted that Zivic would not go the distance.⁸

But upsets did happen, and hope was alive in Pittsburgh—hope that Fritzie Zivic, like Frank Klaus, George Chip, Harry Greb, Teddy Yarosz, and Billy Conn before him, would bring a title home to the city on the three rivers. A large group of locals—including brothers Jack, Eddie, Joe, and Pete—followed Fritzie to Madison Square Garden to cheer him on, and many thousands of others tuned in their radios to the 10 o'clock broadcast of the fight. My dad's storytelling ability always led me to believe that he trained up to the city with "the little, great one," but I don't think he ever really said that. Perhaps he just had a good eye for the radio.

Over 12,000 fans watched Fritzie perform surgery on Henry Armstrong. Less than two weeks before he fought Zivic, Armstrong had defended his title against Phil Furn, winning with a knockout in the fourth round but suffering a cut. The cut was still red and tender when he began his fight with Zivic, but Armstrong's manager was brave and greedy and he wanted the payday. Fritzie went after the eyes, slashing Armstrong with uppercuts and quick, glancing punches designed to peel skin. Zivic later recalled he began the fight with every intention of fighting clean. It wasn't so much that he had had some sort of conversion epiphany on the road to New York, just that he knew Armstrong was a favorite at the Garden and he didn't want to be disqualified for dirty fighting. So he took the pledge: "Today, I will not foul." It was Armstrong that started the rough stuff—so said Fritzie, so said my dad. "He hit me low, choked me, give me the elbow, and everything," Fritzie recalled. Arthur Donovan, the referee, didn't say a thing. In the sixth, Fritzie fell off the wagon. He dug a hook into Armstrong's groin. "Pardon me," he said. He whacked him low again. "Pardon me," he apologized again.

Donovan saw what was happening. Separating the fighters, he said, "If you guys want to fight like this it's okay with me." Fritzie's heart soared. He hiked his trunks up to just below his nipples and went to work on Armstrong's eyes.

I busted him up, cut him here and cut him there. I'd get him in the clinch. He'd have his head down trying to give you that head,

I'd come up on the side. When the eye was cut, I'd rub it with the laces to open it up a little bit more. Then he's watching this cut and I'd cut this [other] eye. His mouth was cut real bad. He was too proud to spit the blood out. He swallowed it. Swallowing the blood made him sick.

Armstrong's face and chest were covered with his blood. Zivic's cheeks and shoulders were covered with Armstrong's blood. The upper lids of both of Armstrong's eyes were cut badly, and his eyes swelled so much that he had trouble seeing. He looked like he was fighting with two bruised plums in his eyesockets. But he kept fighting and bleeding. Moments before the final bell ended the contest and his reign as welterweight champion, Fritzie floored Henry. A Pittsburgh sportswriter said that at the end of the fight Armstrong's face "looked like dripping hamburger. . . . He must have been virtually blind from blood and the swelling of his eyes."⁹

Armstrong's memory of the title fight differed from Fritzie's only in culpability. Zivic "was just a nasty fighter, just a foul fighter," Henry recalled. "He did everything foul."¹⁰

Many of Fritzie's opponents felt the same way. But Zivic never lost a fight on a foul—came close, but never lost one. My dad seemed as proud of that accomplishment as Fritzie was, though the boxer wore the distinction like a badge of honor. "[The public] put a label on me as a dirty fighter, but I never lost a fight on a foul in my life. I'd give 'em the head, choke 'em, hit 'em in the balls, but never in my life used my thumb because I wanted no one to use it on me. But they accused me of that. I used to bang 'em pretty good. You're fighting, you're not playing piano, you know."¹¹

But Fritzie did win one fight on a foul. It was his first match after winning the title from Armstrong. It was against Al "Bummy" Davis in the autumn of 1940. Fritzie's wife, Helen, told me that Bummy started the "dirty stuff." I don't know.

My dad never told me about that fight. He died before he got around to it.