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*The Meritocracy*

Inside the Meritocracy. The smell of sweat turned stale for having never been wiped up pervades the place. It practically makes the atmosphere and holds the bricks together. The *ra-ta-ta-ta* of the speedbag being rocked. When the bell goes off the round ends. There's something eternal about the place. As old as the sweat.

The ring is much smaller than official size. At most it's only about ten feet by ten. So it is absolutely paramount to control the centre of the ring. From the centre of such a small ring you can literally keep your opponent on the ropes. Have them sidestepping in a wide arc around you, getting nowhere.

The specific symphonics of the bell jingle as the door swings open and closed; *ka-chunk-ching!* Everyone craning their neck to see who's the newcomer, to see if it's a *Tough Guy*.

The thrill before the buzzer goes off. Not knowing how good the other guy is. How strong his mind and his will are.

*The Sweet Science*

First off, boxing is a martial art where the idea is to punch your opponent. Punches are only legal if they land within a designated region on your opponent's body – running roughly from the front and sides of the head and torso down to the area directly below the belly button. Shots anywhere else are illegal and can result in penalties to the offender.

This is the concept of the sport. You must defeat your opponent. If you are successful in defeating your opponent, then you are the winner. Winning can be achieved in one of two ways. The first is to outscore your opponent, which means to land more blows in the designated area per round, winning round after round, such that the scoring body, which usually consists of three judges, decide in your favour. Of course, another way of ensuring victory is to knock your opponent out. To be knocked out is...to fall to the ground and be unable to rise, unassisted and coherently, in the ten second count of the referee.

All of this occurs within the space of a square ring, enclosed by four rows of parallel running ropes, in a time frame of three minutes per round, over a period of twelve rounds, or until someone hits the floor and doesn't get up.

2

*The Philosophical Pimp*

One of his hobbies is: he goes to different walk-in clinics around town to check himself out for STDs. When the doctors ask him about his recent sexual activity he goes into specifics, bragging about his exploits, smiling at the dirty details. He figures the doctors like it too. Brightens up their day.

The self-loathing philosophical Pimp, writing deprecating poetry in his dilapidated loft in the hood. The smell of cigarettes stuck to the peeling wallpaper, half bottles of anisette and sour wine.

“Consumption is the new form of sacrifice, and materialism is the religion. No more burnt offerings at the altar, no blood splashed on its sides. Now it’s credit card swipes and long receipts, and a much speedier return on investment.”

3

*In the Meritocracy*

My sparring partner is a fat Italian goes by the name Aurelio. Good guy. Big heart. Every time I punch him in the gut he belches. Heavy smoker too, so every few rounds he’s got to take a break.

*Good guy* – I say he’s a good guy, and I don’t even like the phrase. Everyone says it – *he’s a good guy*. Yea, he’s a good guy, you’re a good guy, I’m a good guy. Everyone’s a good guy. I don’t like to hear it...I don’t believe it. But with Aurelio it’s unavoidable. He’ll have me lined up for a straight and then just land short. Do stupid things like hold back his blows or put his arms behind his back.

I tell him, hit me! Don’t worry, I want to be hit! But the guy’s heart is too big. Maybe it’s because he’s a father.

Aurelio got married young. Well, he got his wife pregnant young, and so he got married young. He comes to the Meritocracy mainly to avoid his wife. Sometimes he does it even to spite her. Regardless, we’re all here to box, sweating all over each other, grown men with dangerous habits.

11

*A conversation with Pimp*

“If the soul is not immortal, then man has no reason to be moral.”

Why is that?

“Take it however you like. Resurrection, heaven or hell, reincarnation, eternal existence in the universal splooge...if there is no *life* after life, if being bad or good isn’t *rewarded* in the next world...then what reason do we have to be moral?”

Go on.

“Suppose then that we don’t follow morals for any religious reason. Say instead we take the Kantian sort of approach, not to name drop philosophers, because damn them for laying claim to ideas, but regardless, say we take the approach that morals, or maybe we should call them ethics...that ethics are good and worth abiding by precisely because they are reasonable, and that, seeing as we live in a society, and for all of us to semi-peacefully *co-exist* in this society, and for the general betterment and flourishing of this society, we shouldn’t steal and lie or kill.”

I see.

“Now let me ask you a question. Say somebody, in their dealings with you, fails to abide by these quite reasonably laid out set of ethics. This person has broken the ethical law, as it were. Does this mean you are no longer obliged to be ethical towards them?”

You shouldn’t be obliged in the first place. It should be your choice.

“I’m sure you’re right. But if it is your choice, if it’s that easy, what motivation do you have to abide by these ethics? Suppose everyone around you decided to steal from you and lie to you

and harass you and just generally be an unbearable nuisance. Why would you still treat them ethically? If the soul is not immortal, that is. If there is no God. Why, you'd be the ultimate fool!"

29

*The Melancholy Boxer*

Death to all the sycophants.

The earth is set firmly in place and cannot be moved.

Sometimes, I do crazy things without thinking about it. I'll be generous to a fault, say. Make someone uncomfortable with a gift. And they always react the same, with scorn, to counteract any love. Why is love such an unwelcome guest in this world? Like an ugly person with stinky feet and bad breath...

But ah! So be it. Now that I think about it, I could never be mad for my fortune; simply a man who lived and died. What more could I want?

There is no greater wisdom or source of peace and happiness than contentment with what is. Not *what could be*. I could go on about that all day. And definitely not with *what should be*. That one's a doozy. A never-ending headache. 'If only the world was how *I'd* like it to be...' My goodness! What delusion! The man who takes such thoughts seriously will never be happy. And I speak from experience.

The truth about life is that it would have been better not to live at all. Death is the ultimate panacea and natural state of man. But here we are and this is it and the only thing for it is contentment and never-ending patience. Let that be the salve that cools the burning rash of life. And if I'm meant to be Lonely then so be it. That is what is, after all.

30

*The Weigh-In*

My God, my God, why have you abandoned me? I have cried desperately for your help, but still it does not come. I spend the whole day calling to you, but you do not answer; at night too I call, but get no rest. I am no longer a human being...I am a worm, despised and scorned by everyone! Everyone who sees me mocks me; they stick out their tongues and wag their heads.

'He trusts in the *Lord*' they say, 'Let the *Lord* rescue him, then. Let the *Lord* help him, if he delights in him so.'

My strength is gone, like water spilled on the ground. All my bones are out of joint; my heart is bruised like an old banana. My throat is dry as dust...my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth. You leave me here, dead as the dust. An evil gang surrounds me; like a pack of dogs, their strength in numbers, closing in, bit by bit, snarling and snapping at my hands and feet. All my bones and interior organs are left on display. My enemies just look on and stare. They gamble for my clothes and divide them amongst themselves.

The door to the sauna slams open. Yuri is standing there, all done up in the matching track suit he's made for the fight; a big "Meritocracy" logo on the heart and back. He looks me up and down in my garbage bag, dripping buckets.

"Get ready. Now is time."