THE NORMAN MAILER/JOSÉ TORRES SATURDAY MORNING BOXING CLUB

AND MY WAR WITH RYAN O'NEAL

JEFFREY MICHELSON

The excerpt below is chapter 28 in Laura Meets Jeffrey *(New Blue Books: 2012), an S&M romance the author slipped into after he fell in love in a brothel. —JM*

Other than fucking, my other great physical passion was boxing. From 1976 to 1984 when I moved to London England for a few years, I was part of a group that boxed about twenty-five fall, winter and spring Saturday mornings a year at the Gramercy Gym on 14th Street. The regulars were me, former Light Heavyweight Champion of the World José Torres, Norman Mailer, Norman's son Michael, and Norman's nephew Peter Alson.

We were joined by a revolving group of artists, writers, actors, lawyers, TV directors, college students, stockbrokers and even a Kennedy for a while. Most had boxed before. Some came fresh to learn. We all wanted something more exciting than tennis.

I was never blessed with much physical grace or more than normal coordination. What I brought into the ring was great stamina, fair size (just under six feet and 175 pounds), a low fear of punishment, and an aggressive willingness to mix it up. At my best I could be daring in attack and stubborn in defense.

I was an awkward boxer without much poetry, which in boxing can be its own reward. Being awkward makes you harder to read sometimes, often harder to hit and less likely to telegraph your punches. Ken Norton and Joe Frazier are two famous boxers who are considered awkward in style. Mike

THE MAILER REVIEW. VOL. 6, NO. 1, FALL 2012. Copyright © 2012. The Norman Mailer Society. Published by The Norman Mailer Society.

Tyson is another obvious example. What he lacks in grace he makes up for in power and courage. And teeth.

Saturday morning boxing protocol was simple. You'd fight a round or two, or rarely three. Sometimes José, our coach, would suggest a match between two of us.

A pact between fighters would be made as to the level of contact. One might say, "Let's just practice for a round or two, I want to work on my jab," or "I want to work on my defense so come at me and I'll just defend." Or maybe we'd agree on light contact and sometimes full contact. We all wore mouthpieces and cups. Headgear was available. But I hated headgear. It interfered with my vision, was annoying to wear and the extra size made for a bigger target.

Everyone wrapped his hands with long strips of cotton fabric to protect against injuries induced by punching. Wraps make it less likely you'll hurt your thumb and reduce the risk of a fracture to one of your wrist bones. They maintain the alignment of the joints and add strength to your punch. Mostly I just loved the ceremony of wrapping before a fight. It's always a tense scene in every boxing movie. In real life you are the warrior preparing for battle. For real. Not a video game. Low tech. You against him. May the best man win.

The object of our fights wasn't to destroy our opponent, but to gain advantage. The main difference between us and most amateur or school boxers was that we hardly ever went for that fourth killer punch or combination after we had already stunned our opponent with a great two-or-three-punch attack. And we never went in for the cold-hearted fifth. Knowing you could have finished him off sufficed. He knew it. You knew it. The other boxers and friends watching knew it. That was enough. Nobody kept official score because we all knew the score. It was boxing's version of catch and release.

Maybe you'd come in with a medium tap to exploit that second opening, or rarely, a third or fourth opening, but it was bad form to come back with a haymaker. Sometimes it happened when tempers flared, but losing your temper is more likely to harm you than help you in boxing, so tempers are tempered. It's part of the Zen of Boxing.

Some trainers preach that a professional boxer needs to be having fun because boxing is a job, and nobody can do a great job if they don't like what they're doing. Losing your temper means you are not having any fun. More important, losing your temper takes you out of the fight, steals your energy,

and wastes focus on emotions. Your opponent becomes a personality rather than just some force with a specific set of fighting tools trying to kill you.

Fighting is about instinct and not thinking. Once the bell rings it's best if it's all autopilot. Your game plan, based on you or your coach's perceptions of your opponent's strengths and shortcomings as matched to your tools and weaknesses, takes intellectual awareness. Stay away from his lightning quick right. He gets tired out quicker than you so make him move a lot. Work his body and wear him down before you try to take him out with a headshot. In the ring, this thinking needs to be driven into your subconscious and modified into instinct. Lose your temper and your game plan goes out the window and a different instinct, blinded by anger, takes over. Once at the gym, we were all compatriots on the same team and nobody wanted to do real damage. That was the convention.

My fights with Michael Mailer were consistently the most punishing. Norman said it was because we were too equal. Michael and I liked mixing it up not because we hated each other but because we loved each other. I had known him since he was three-and-a-half years old when we lived in the same house. I'd carry him on my shoulders sometimes and go shopping. He was curious about everything and I'd answer questions.

As boxers we had different skills and advantages. He was a teenager, faster and a more refined boxer. I was early thirties, bigger, heavier and stronger. We were equally brave so altogether it was a brutal combination. Norman had us fight less as the years progressed when the damage and the Saturday afternoon headaches got more intense. (As a postscript: In 1987 when I came back from playing in a rock band in England, when Michael was at Harvard and had fought in Golden Gloves contests, and he was closer to me in size and strength, we boxed a round in his basement in Provincetown and I was totally outclassed. I couldn't wait for the bell to ring and refused to fight a second round. I quit boxing that day. I knew I didn't have it anymore.)

The overriding joy of boxing, beyond the primordial mano-a-mano triumph of winning, is that you are never more alone, never more tuned into your own body, never more self-reliant and in control of your own destiny. Sex may be more enjoyable, but boxing is more exciting.

Your vision changes when you fight. All your eyesight abilities join together to concentrate on one job in a very small area: his fists and their relationship to you and your fists and their relationship to him. That's all there

is. It's like the distance/velocity screen on the inside of the Terminator's bio-electrical optics system, except without the heads-up display.

You know exactly when you are within his reach, when he is within yours. This doesn't mean you are always right or are fast enough to react but whatever you can do, you're doing. In some small way your life depends on you and ancient fight/flight programs deep inside your hard-drive activate your catecholamines. It's as real as anything gets for middle-class guys, barring a mugging at gunpoint.

There is no outside world—just your feet, your hands, your wind and some other guy trying to hurt you. Maybe he makes a certain breath sound just before he throws a right. Maybe he wipes his brow with his left glove before a right hand uppercut. Maybe he telegraphs his cross with too much recoil. Maybe he bluffs a left jab too often just before he throws one. Everything means something. It's chess and Grand Theft Auto and playing football and a hockey fight.

Your head is empty except for the challenge in front of you. It's not just visual focus. It's complete focus. Time also changes. You cannot believe how long three minutes can be if you get hurt in the beginning of a round and you know he's hot and you're cold.

Every bodily system is maxed out or shut off to let other ones work harder. If you are not used to it, you'll be exhausted in under a minute. Some guys are exhausted immediately after the first time they're hit. Guys in good shape from singles tennis or running marathons would come down to the gym, try boxing and be out of breath in forty-five seconds. With a guy throwing punches trying to hurt them, their adrenalin burns up and they are quickly spent.

No activity in the world burns calories faster than boxing. I don't mean hitting the heavy bag or jumping rope, I mean being in the ring with someone else who wants to smash your fucking head in.

I could box six rounds at my best. Most of the Saturday morning civilian boxers could go three or four, maybe five. What it takes to go ten or twelve professional rounds is inconceivable. (They used to have fifteen-round fights, but they stopped them; too many serious injuries after round twelve.)

One of the benefits of boxing is that you must work out, you must run, and you must not smoke. There are no options. You cannot fake it. The best reason to make sure you work out and don't smoke is so you don't get beat up on Saturday. It's point-blank motivation. A sign over the door of the gym

where we boxed said: CONDITION IS A STATE OF BODY NOT MIND. I loved it. I read it every single Saturday. It was dead on. It doesn't matter how psyched up you are if you are not in shape. In boxing you can't cheat life.

After boxing we were all noisy celebrating our testosterone in the locker room and at lunch we tasted the laughter of gladiators who had survived. Four to ten of us would head out to a local greasy spoon, take over the back room and relive our best moments of the matches, trade filthy sexist jokes and enjoy camaraderie that you can only get from sports that are this violent. You can't get it from golf. Guys fighting a weight problem like Norman and myself, enjoyed only a few gourmet meals more than we did our hamburger-dripping-with-fat, any guilt absolved by diet amnesty earned from a morning of boxing.

Boxing is a way to earn self-respect, deepen the dialogue inside, add gravitas and take yourself seriously. You walk differently every moment of the day and your level of self-respect is visible to others and your vibe elicits deference.

When I was with Laura, I tested the old boxer's myth about the benefits of sexual avoidance. Also, I wanted to see how drugs would affect my game. So I boxed once after staying awake all night at an orgy. I boxed well rested without sex. I boxed once on speed, once on coke. I never boxed on pot because I could tell that was a no-no. The last thing you need is some mind-altering drug that will affect your sense of distance and time.

I surprised myself by boxing well even after a sleepless night of sex. I couldn't box as many rounds as usual but the rounds I boxed were more than decent. I felt like a warrior and fought like one. The drugs had strange effects. With speed I was more aggressive and certainly had more stamina, but I made more defensive mistakes and missed more than usual. I felt invincible. I took more of a beating because I actually wasn't more invincible. It's like the "Sign Over The Door" said.

I understood why the Nazis gave speed to their fighting men. You don't need to eat, you don't need sleep and you're irritable and aggressive. But, they lost the war because the reality of war is also just like the "Sign Over The Door."

Doing coke made me more defensive and less offensive. I didn't like that. It made me feel too self-conscious, which for boxers is the kiss of death. I boxed only one round and quit for the day. Boxing is about letting go, living on the edge of instincts, not intellectualizing them. You don't have time to

think. Thinking about the actual fighting while you're fighting is bad. Being conscious of your game plan is like taking more than 3.8 seconds to read a billboard when you're driving. It's a message, but it's not there to distract you from your driving. After those few tests I always boxed straight.

You can't process thought as fast as you can react. Boxers train hard and that's where thinking comes in. You fight a zillion practice rounds with your coach, in our case José, yelling stuff like "Keep your hands up," "Stop pulling back with your jab and telegraphing it," "Keep your elbows in," or "Stick and move, stick and move." Practicing is about thinking. Fighting is about being. It's the great physical existential equation. That's why many intellectuals love boxing and that's why no stupid boxers become world champions. To be great, you need to have the machine, the attitude, the brains, and the skill.

Unless you had a miserable headache, which is how many of us spent Saturday afternoons—and evenings, and sometimes Sunday—or unless you were injured, sex was definitely enhanced. This was true for me and for several fellow boxers. We talked about it. Sex or not having sex, as far as I could tell, had no effect on boxing. But, boxing does have a tremendous effect on sex.

Sex, as we contemporary American Homo sapiens interpret it, unlike boxing, is one of those activities that goes beyond the Sign On The Door. With sex, the state of your physical plant is superseded by who you think you are. No fuck makes you feel more "man" than the fuck after boxing, headaches notwithstanding. Even losing a few rounds gives you a tough-guy edge. And winning is pure aphrodisia. Self-respect makes everything more intense.

After expending all that energy and releasing all those hormones, with an emphasis on epinephrine and norepinephrine, then taking a long shower, eating a good meal, and taking a restful nap or a leisurely walk, you're loaded for bear. You have made a prodigious offering to the God Of Manliness and in return your balls will be thrilled to pump you a special load.

I did notice one thing—in retrospect. The more I followed Laura down the path of S&M, the more aggressive I became as a boxer and the more chances I took in the ring. My style got more frontal, more risky. I took more hits, and gave more. I used to feel bad if I hurt someone. Then I didn't feel bad. Then I liked it. Then I lived for it. I became less generous and more exacting. I felt tougher and thought I was becoming a real fighter. I enjoyed more and more the breaking of eggs for the omelet, which is the psychic bottom line.

José Torres once told me that when he was a kid he liked fighting and hurting other boys. He liked punching them in the face. Maybe being a sadist was the necessary part of being a winner in boxing. I was getting better and stronger and all the hot sex was making me feel more manly. It was only later that I realized that I was just becoming more violent. In every way. A couple of times in the ring I paid for the extra aggression.

The 1980/81 boxing season was memorable because one of my regular opponents on Saturday mornings was Ryan O'Neal, the actor, and one tough Irish son-of-a-bitch. He was in terrific shape, with lots of great natural eye/hand coordination. He played racquetball several hours every day and had great wind, which is the boxer's secret weapon. He was a little bigger than me and a whole lot meaner.

I liked boxing Ryan. He had more reach, a half-classy style, and it was always an uphill battle. Plus he was an Irishman I could legally hit. Don't get me wrong. I love the Irish. I love Ireland. Two of my best friends are Irish. I love how green the country is, their lighter than drizzle "grand soft days." I love Bloomsday, many Irish writers, and the complexion of Irish women. As a horseman I adore Irish horses; their big boned well-muscled Thoroughbreds, Irish Drafts, and crossbred warm blood sport horses. And I can listen to U2, Thin Lizzy, Van Morrison and Irish accents all day long. I loved the Irishman that lived inside Norman Mailer.

It's just that when I was a kid growing up in the Dorchester section of Boston, there were a few clans of Jews and Italians, a few blacks, and vast hoards of Irish. Most of the times I got beat up it was by some kid named O'Donnell or O'Connell or McMartin. The chance to hit an Irishman made fighting somebody better than me extra worth it.

Also fighting someone better than you is how you get better. An added bonus, and I must admit to irony if not sadism, was that it was satisfying to be able to punch someone that good-looking, like Ryan, in the face.

One Friday night a few months before I met Laura, when I was living with Sherry, my Texas Tornado, I was stoned on some killer weed and watching TV while she was out with her friends. She'd left her nail polish on the side table. It was candy apple red metal-flake just like you'd see on a reconditioned '55 Chevy. I picked up the bottle, shook it and turned it upside down like a kaleidoscope. I opened it and took the brush out with a gob of polish on it. I looked for a place to paint it and settled on the nail of my left big toe. I painted the toe. I let it dry. I painted it again and again until it had the

depth of an excellent auto paint job. I went to bed. Sherry came home drunk and randy. We had sex. I went to sleep. I woke up the next morning, went to the gym, fought, showered and got ready for lunch.

As I was coming out of the shower Ryan noticed my big toe on my right foot, pointed it out to Norman and said to me, "What the fuck is this, Jeffrey?'

I just stood there.

I paused, looked at my other unpainted nineteen nails, and then said, "Okay, I admit it. I'm five percent gay." Norman looked at me with an extra wide smile, then looked at Ryan and said, "I'd even admit to that."

During lunch I told Ryan I was going out to L.A. for a shoot that week and he offered to let me stay at his beach house in Malibu. I got to meet his sixteen-year-old daughter Tatum and one of her drop dead gorgeous 90210 girlfriends. The beach house also had the first walk-in closet-sized shower I ever saw with a dozen high-pressure heads.

Ryan once invited me to the opening of a Broadway show and at the party afterwards at Sardi's, I came over to say thanks. He was more than half in the bag. He grabbed me, set me down next to him, put his arm around me, and told his table filled mostly with fawning groupies what a great boxer I was. He said I had "a lot of heart."

Saying a boxer has "heart" or courage is beyond saying he has craft or the luck of genetics. It's about personality, not just talent. And it's not a compliment given out lightly by one boxer to another, even if one is more than half-drunk. The looks I got from those girls couldn't be bought with money. One of them found me attractive enough to take home for a one-nighter.

So I liked Ryan. It's hard not to like a talented charismatic movie star who treats you well and gives you compliments in front of slinky skirts and you get to fuck one of them. My problem with Ryan was in the ring. This was because his defense wasn't nearly as good as his offense. If you were willing to risk punishment you could get inside and hurt him. Then he'd get pissed—not lose his temper, just raise his temperature—and come back and savage you. And he had the tools to do the job. It was almost as though he needed getting hurt a little to get going.

One Saturday morning Ryan brought Farrah Fawcett down to the Gramercy Gym to watch him fight. She was a little shy and wore no makeup at all but was still the ultimate teeth-and-hair babe. That day, in front of his poster-babe, he and I decided to go two rounds of medium-hard contact. The first round was lots of dancing and a few good no-damage shots both

ways. He was showboating for Farrah a little and I let him get away with it. Why not? Bringing women in to watch was permitted, but it was a rarity. I should have known he might be extra brutal that day but wasn't smart enough to adjust my game plan, or smarter yet, to avoid fighting him altogether.

In the second round after a no-big-deal series of trades I hit him with a left to the body, right to the face combination that stung him. Then I saw that pissed-glare in his eyes and in the split second he took to recompose himself, I saw another opening and banged him with a hard right cross to the mouth.

I had already scored against him and could have—should have—probably been more forgiving, especially in front of Farrah. He half smiled around his mouthpiece then stormed at me with a bombardment, two three-punch combos one after another. I backed up and defended without sustaining any real damage. I thought I saw an opening as he was moving back and then, "Fwapp! Fwapp!!" He hit me with two in a row, killer force, straight lefts to my head, then neck, connecting so hard I could barely breathe. I back-pedaled and fended off his blows as best I could, caught in the slow motion twilight zone of every second taking at least half a minute.

I could tell something was wrong with my neck but I didn't want to stop the fight. I hid behind my fists to protect my face and neck and took half a dozen bruising explosions to my body. Then an uppercut to my chest just between my elbows lifted me and made me wheeze. I was in pain all over. Finally the fucking bell rang.

Ryan was awesome, relentless, and I was beaten badly. I was spent. I was hurt and talking funny—like speaking through a gravel filter. If I had been alone, I would have been crying. Even in such a macho environment I couldn't hold back a few tears. It was obvious I needed medical attention. José looked scared. Ryan looked scared. Norman looked scared. Farrah look horrified. I left, hailed a cab and went directly to the hospital. I cried all the way.

The doctor said I had a bruised larynx and a broken blood vessel in my neck that might need surgery. He said we could wait a day and see whether the swelling went down, but that he wasn't hopeful. Then, right in front of me, he made a call and booked the O.R. for Sunday. I left the hospital thinking that I was a schmuck for misjudging Ryan and for not having the sense to pull that second punch in front of his girlfriend. Lots of guys would have killed for Farrah Fawcett who weren't even sleeping with her!

When I saw the doctor the next morning he said he saw some improvement, that my injuries looked slightly more promising and that we could put off surgery for another day. God knows where the improvement was because I was puffed up, in agony, and could barely speak or swallow.

Next day felt even worse for me but I was a bit less swollen and I looked much better to the doctor. He said I was coming along nicely, and that my voice would come back to near normal even if the one injured larynx didn't heal. He said that mysteriously one larynx compensates tonally for the other and in most cases the regular voice comes back. I never knew that larynxes were such devoted and clever friends to each other.

A few days later the swelling was down fifty percent. The doctor said I'd be good as new in two to three weeks. Four weeks later I went back to boxing and the week after that Ryan came to the gym. I ventured into the ring with him for two rounds of light contact. Whether he was gentler, which I believe he was, or I was less infuriating, or because we adhered to the rules of lighter contact, it went well. We had a good time and traded some decent blows without blood or injury.

The next week I went two rounds of full contact with him, held my own pretty much and gave nearly as good as I got. I hit him really hard in the middle of the second round with a right hand lead that split his lip. A tiny trickle of blood appeared. I felt vindicated. Then scared. He licked the blood and smiled at me without that pissed-glare. He came back and hurt me with a series of body punches but didn't go head hunting. Neither of us pulled a punch, but neither of us went for a kill. I would say I lost by a close decision.

One Saturday morning five months later when I am living with Laura, I decide to bring her down to the gym to watch. She, being a peace-loving, mostly vegetarian, hippie-hooker cokehead masochist, doesn't like fighting and in her own warped jealous way, admits that she doesn't want to watch me hurt someone who isn't her.

Ryan, whom I hoped wouldn't be there, is. He flirts with Laura as he does with every pretty girl. Laura is not a big fan of his and is not too impressed. She doesn't send much back to him. It annoys him slightly. Great. Just what I need. Ryan O'Neal with a prickly edge.

> "Fighting's not my cup of tea," says Laura. "I don't get it. I don't really understand why two people would want to throw punches at each other. Norman used to say, 'It's about courage. You never

know what you are going to do until you're standing there and someone's throwing a punch right at your face. It gives you a certain kind of strength and courage that there's really no other way to get; you never know what you would do unless it's happening.'

"Jeffrey was always kind of macho. I don't think he ever showed any kind of fear or hesitation in any situation. He had this machismo thing, where if somebody came up against him, he would always kind of be ready to meet them more than half way. He would always be in their face with, like, 'Oh yeah?' It was an important thing for him to always show strength. Boxing was where he could prove it and his personality was looking for a place like that.

"Boxing is nauseating to me. It's so not where we are going as the human race evolves. But it fit in with Jeffrey's Chinese zodiac birth symbol, the dog. He was like an alpha dog. Alpha dogs are like right up there ready to fight if necessary. And it works in dangerous situations, like some of the sex clubs we would go into could really be quite dangerous. But it made me feel comfortable because Jeffrey's vibe was 'Be nice and I'll be nice. Try to fucking mess with this and you'll be sorry.' Jeffrey wasn't looking for trouble but he wouldn't put up with any bad vibes toward him or me."

My first round that morning is with Norman's son Michael. We fight as we often do to a damaging dead-on draw.

Then I box a practice round with José Torres. Boxing with José is a blessing. He is so good he nails your every opening with a little signal tap. He never hurts you. He never hurts anyone on Saturday morning. He just points out your vulnerability and then tells you how to correct it. You can come after him with all your heat because it is impossible to touch him. It's like racing across the Atlantic, me in a single engine prop plane and him at Mach 2 in the Concorde. He hadn't fought in the ring in two decades but still is in possession of all the reasons he was World Champion. Boxing with José is better than slow-motion videotape and computer-enhanced training devices. He is a genial litmus test for everything you do wrong.

After sparring with The Master, I stupidly accept Ryan's challenge of two rounds of medium contact. Right away I can tell we have two different ideas

of medium contact. Ryan is throwing really hard stuff and rather than wuss out in front of Laura and ask him to back off, I crank up the volume. He comes at me. I move in on him. We are both on fire. It is full contact. I know after one minute into the first round that this will be a real chore. That is okay. I'm up for it.

Next, I'm looking up at the ceiling. I never see the punch. I never feel the fall but I am on my back. I lose a moment in time. José tells me to relax and breathe. I didn't get knocked out but I sure did get knocked down for the first time in my life. It's just like the scene in movies with the circle of people over you and the light in the middle. I notice how filthy the ceiling is. Laura is crying. Ryan looks down with real concern. José is half-laughing, the proud rodeo dad smiling over his kid who just got bucked off his first Brahma bull. I start to get up and José laughs and says, "Stay down. This isn't fighting for money."

Ryan O'Neal, my nemesis, had struck again!

I get up glad knowing I don't need to fight him another round. I feel fine. No pain. No swelling. He just hit some knock-down button on me I never knew I had. José says that it's often the punch you don't see that shuts out your lights.

Laura stops crying when she sees I'm all right. We go back to our apartment. I take a shower and then a nap. I awake, eat, and Laura and I make love. She is very tender, submissive as usual. I am the wounded gladiator being cared for by his loving slave girl. In boxing, even coming up short in front of your woman has its own charm.

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In 2009 just after I started the rewrite and edit for this book, Mike Lennon, Norman's friend, archivist and now biographer told me about a piece Norman wrote for *Esquire* magazine in 1993 that I didn't know existed. It's an account of my battle with Ryan O'Neal, the one witnessed by Laura. As Norman recounted:

"Getting in the ring with Ryan O'Neal became not only the focus of each Saturday but the point to what some of us had been half looking to do for years, that is, get extended a little in the ring. Ryan could be mean as cat piss. Even when he was carrying a man, he would punish him, and when he had dislikes, he liked to take them out on the opponent. In spite of every love affair in his pri-

vate life, public fodder for more than a decade to the gossip columns, Ryan had his dry spot the Puritanism of the Irish. He took a secret dislike to the bearded editor of the porny magazine.

"The editor was awkward in the ring, so it was not hard to play tricks on him. He had surprising stamina, however. Until Ryan came along, the pornographer had, in fact, the most notable stamina of any of us. Maybe Ryan equated that ability to sexual prowess and disapproved of its presence in so unworthy a vessel, maybe he just disliked hirsute New York lumpen intelligentsia, but in any case, he all but disemboweled the man, throwing a cruel left hook until the editor collapsed, still conscious, in the middle of the second round, wholly unable to go on. What made it worse was that the pornographer's ladylove, a good looking girl who worked in a massage parlor, was witnessing it all at ringside.

"I happened to be next in the ring with Ryan, which proved to be my good luck. After every discharge of mean feelings, Ryan would turn angelic. A little ashamed, I expect, of what he had just done to the pornographer, he was not now boxing like a movie star—he certainly did not protect his face. Since the man he had hurt happened to be a sweet guy, extraordinarily optimistic about life (which is probably how he had gotten into pornography in the first place), I liked the editor. When I saw him take this beating, I recognized that I saw him as a friend. If this seems something of a digression, let me say that it helps to carry the auctorial voice around the embarrassment of declaring that I boxed better on that day than I ever did before, or since. I was in a rare mean mood myself, mean enough not to be afraid of Ryan, and it is very hard to do any kind of good boxing against a superior without some premise to carry you—I was feeling like an avenger. And here was Ryan boxing with his face. It was hard not to hit him straight rights, and he reacted with all the happiness of seeing a beloved senior relative get up from a sickbed. In our first clinch, he whispered, 'You punch sharper than anyone here'."

"'Go fuck yourself,' I told him."

Ryan was easier on some boxers than others. One of our semi-regulars was Sal Cetrano, a good-natured teacher from Brooklyn. Ryan hit Sal so hard one Saturday morning that he broke Sal's jaw. At lunch afterwards Norman called Ryan on it and asked why he chose to be so hard on Sal and me. Ryan answered he was the same with every boxer. He said that every time he got in the ring he'd look at his opponent, glare at him and repeat the same thing in his head, "You raped my mother."

I fought Ryan several times after he knocked me down, but always with more defenses, more respect. I haven't seen Ryan in years, there was a falling out between him and Norman after the movie *Tough Guys Don't Dance*, but every time I see Ryan in a movie and he's in a fight scene, even if he's the good guy, I always root for the guy hitting him.