

Punching Air

BEN BROOKS

Dead fish floated in close to shore. There were so many of them that Tommy could have reached a pole out and dragged a net through the water and, without moving his feet – just by swishing the net this way and that – could have filled it up. A big net. And he could have filled it a bunch of times.

Little fish, not a whole lot bigger than sardines.

It was funny how all the fish floated to the top when they died. You didn't see them when they were alive, and then as soon as they died they bobbed right up. It was just the opposite way with people. A person swam about near the top. And even if he dove down deep, he had to come back up for air. But if a person drowned, that's when he sank down, disappeared.

There hadn't been any dead fish the day before. Tommy knew, because he had been there then, too. He had walked the same path down to the lake. There was just the water, slate-gray, then by the beach tiny little waves bubbling white and foaming into the sand. He had wanted Deirdre to come with him while he went away to think things through, but she wouldn't come – and looking out at the fish now, he was glad she wasn't there. The fish barely moved, only bobbed back and forth slightly in the water. The breeze rippled the surface of the lake, and that's what made the fish move as much as they did. They were so light, floating there.

It was just as well Deirdre had stayed behind. Dead fish in such

numbers – so hopeless – didn't bring much comfort. They wouldn't have made things better with her, either.

Tommy was a fighter. He was a boxer, had been, until Leanne made him quit. Leanne and the doctor. He got a blood clot, that's why – it didn't show up until nine days after a fight – and the doctor said it would be too dangerous for Tommy to continue his profession. He couldn't afford to get another blood clot, you didn't fool around with those. So it would be crazy to fight more. The doctor said Tommy had been lucky, lucky they had detected it, but it didn't feel lucky to him. He hadn't wanted to quit, but Leanne said he had to. For three days his arm had tingled, just past his elbow, and he couldn't feel anything in his fingers except for heat. He even tried sticking himself with a needle, but the fingers were numb. The tips of them felt hot, that was all, and a little bloated, like they were infected, but it didn't look like there was any infection. They looked pretty normal. Leanne said he could do something else besides box, he wasn't a putz. He wasn't a dummy. Tommy was only twenty-six then, but it felt like he had been fighting for so long already. And he had been – he started when he was twelve, his parents had sent him to the gym to toughen him up. He had won that fight, too, the one that ended his career. He took a few punches to the face in the first two rounds, but he had battered the guy. Ricky Martinez. Of all the matches, all the fighters, his was the name Tommy remembered now when he thought about boxing. The referee had had to stop the fight early, in the fifth round. Blood was coming from about four places on Martinez's face, little red streams and rivers that ran together so you couldn't tell where one

started and where another one joined in, and his eyes were swollen to slits. His mouthpiece hung loose. Tommy hit him and he could still feel how his glove slipped on the blood, even when he punched him solid. It was one of those fights where at the end, he was just swinging his arms wild. It felt so good when he connected. By then he didn't have to worry about Martinez hitting him in return, counter punches, he was just backing away, covering up, on legs that had slowed to nothing. Leanne had been there – she came to all Tommy's fights. He always knew where she was sitting, too. He looked over at her between rounds and sometimes, even though he was supposed to be concentrating on his opponent, he took a peek while the fight was actually going on. Just for a second. But now Leanne was gone. So was Paula. So was Deirdre, too.

Just around the edge of the lake the water glowed red and yellow, reflecting back the colors of the leaves on the trees. All the rest of the lake was dull, gray. And there were the fish, floating. Countless, endless. Tommy didn't know what kind of fish they were. He had never been there before, to that lake. He had a little cabin, two rooms, one to eat in and one to sleep in. He was supposed to be thinking, he was supposed to be figuring things out for himself, but that was not something Tommy did very often. He wasn't even sure he knew how to. It had been Deirdre's idea, to get away, to go somewhere new to think. When she'd suggested it Tommy thought it was a good idea and they would go together, but at the last minute she'd said she wasn't coming. She'd said she wouldn't be there when he got back, either.

Tommy Macklin. He wasn't a putz. Leanne had told him he didn't

have to be a fighter, but now she was gone. She didn't like being with Tommy after he wasn't a fighter anymore.

The path led from the cabin to the lake, and then it opened onto the beach. The beach was not a wide one, the trees growing nearly to the water. There was sand, a thin strip of it, and the sand was gritty, packed hard. Some of the leaves had fallen already, and they stuck in a slippery mat where the sand was wet. As Tommy walked, he kept his eyes on the water. Though he wasn't running – he moved his feet at a normal pace – the lake seemed to be spinning around. He realized it was because of the bright color rimming the edge, the way the color moved and blurred, red into yellow, yellow back into red.

He could go the whole way around the lake, though it looked like that might take him a while. He wondered if the fish were floating on the other side, too. It was eerie, the way they just hung there, and the way they had all appeared overnight, too. They hadn't been there the day before. In death their bodies bent, the tips of their snouts and their tails submerged slightly, and their arched centers hovering just above the water.

Maybe it was time he changed his name, he thought. Grew up. Tommy was a boy's name. He could be Thomas. Or Tom. There was nothing wrong with Tom. Tom Macklin.

Deirdre had told him not to try calling her while he was at the cabin, and Tommy didn't argue. He didn't know why she left. He never hit women, it wasn't that. He knew there were some fighters who did, it was just their way, but he never had.

Maybe it was his job, he thought. He cut keys at a hardware store, and maybe she didn't want to be with someone who cut keys all day.

He didn't know, even, what he was supposed to be thinking about, what he was supposed to be figuring out, why he was there. It had been Deirdre's idea to go away, not his. He could change jobs, get out of the store, but he couldn't go back to fighting. He thought he could still take a punch all right, but he was too old to box. At least, too old to try to pick it back up after so many years. He was thirty-six now. Too much of the muscle was gone, the tone, he was now just flab. He still worked out, but not the same way. He would have had to shift up from a welterweight to a middleweight, too. And he'd never move his feet fast enough. He would just be a target for quicker boxers with faster hands. Like Ricky Martinez had become – he had been a target for Tommy. Martinez had quit too, though he had stuck around for two or three more fights after Tommy. They weren't friends exactly – it was hard to be friends with someone you had hit so hard, and who had hit you back so hard – but Tommy saw Martinez around town. When you got into the ring with someone you had to hate him. That was the first thing Tommy had learned – he was only twelve then. You didn't have to hate the person he really was, his first coach had been careful to say, but you had to hate the person who was in the ring with you. Otherwise, your punches wouldn't mean anything. Otherwise, when you had an opening you would hold back. And you would hesitate with your best combinations. "If you hesitate with your combinations, you'll get killed. He'll slip in between your punches and finish you." That's what his coach had taught Tommy, an ex-boxer himself, slicing through the air with his own fist while he talked, his face grim, his neck stiff and alert for a phantom glove coming in.

He felt older than he should. In years he was still young, if he looked at it by sheer numbers, but not in any other way. That was one thing about boxing – they all said so, everyone who did it. It didn't always happen while you were still fighting, sometimes after you stopped. Every punch added up, that's what it was. Every blow. The body wasn't built to take blows, and it stored them up. Then they came back again later, every single one of them, opening out in the exact same spot they'd landed, maybe exploding. Sometimes Tommy felt them return in his sleep, in his dreams, flinching, his leg kicking out, waking up Leanne next to him, or Paula, or Deirdre. That's why you hit first, hit hardest, and why you always kept your feet moving.

Tommy sat staring at his bowl. In it was hash from a can, and the plume of steam had stopped rising from the mound. The hash lay there in a big lump, congealed. He wasn't interested in eating. Some of the shavings of meat were bright red and others were brown, and the tiny cubes of potato were gray. Yellow kernels of corn were mixed in, too. Tommy poked at the mound with his spoon, and he turned over the top portion of it. The hash was soft, cutting into it with the spoon was like turning earth on a wet spring day. Or digging a grave. Tommy had dug graves. When he was young, when he was first boxing professionally, his manager had found side jobs for him. Things to do that would bring in money, that would work Tommy's body and keep him fit, and also that would make Tommy realize that fighting wasn't the worst way in the world to make a living. Every time when he came home from the cemetery, Leanne made him take a shower before he could touch her. She wouldn't let Tommy into bed with her until he had washed it all off.

He never saw the dead bodies, never even saw the caskets until after they were laid into the holes. Once the grave was dug his job was done for a while. They left a big hole for the funeral, a hole with sharp corners and steep walls, and went off for coffee or a beer. Later, after all the words were spoken and the flowers dropped in – after the wives and husbands and children and parents and friends had all left – he'd come back to close the grave up. He kept his feet away from the edges of the hole while he worked. Looking down into the grave always made him feel dizzy.

The head wasn't built to take blows either. Those found a way to come back as well.

The wind whooshed through the trees outside. It sounded like a storm was coming. The cabin wasn't air-tight, and when the wind gusted from a certain direction, Tommy could feel the cold breeze on the back of his neck.

Two days inside, rain flinging itself at the windows. It sounded like small sticks, twigs, beating against the glass, hour after hour.

The empty cans of hash were lined up on the windowsill behind the sink. Tommy had had a failure of imagination when he had done his shopping for the week.

Every time he opened the door to go out, the rain drove him back inside. He wanted to lash out at it. Once he'd closed the door again, the toes of his shoes wet, he wanted to pummel the walls. Like body blows, he would step in close, and with his elbows cocked, strike quickly and hard, one two, left right. He could hear the walls suck in air, see them bend over, cave in, the whole cabin collapse.

When the rain stopped and Tommy was finally able to go outside again, the dead fish were gone. They weren't floating by the edge, and they hadn't washed onto the shore. They were nowhere. It was as if a giant vacuum hose had swung down from the sky and sucked them all up. He didn't think dead fish would sink to the bottom again, but he wasn't certain. Floating there, they had seemed to be getting lighter and lighter – maybe they had risen through the air on their own. A stream of sardines on their way to heaven.

In those two days of rain, almost all of the remaining leaves on the trees had fallen.

Winter was coming. Back home, Deirdre was gone.

Deirdre was the third woman Tommy had lived with, though he hadn't married any of them. Leanne, Paula, Deirdre. Deirdre worked in a beauty salon. She cut hair, shampooed it, colored it, rinsed it, set it, brushed and combed and teased it into new shapes. She wore her own hair long, and she was forever doing something different with it. Deirdre had thick brown hair – it was the rich color of pecan shells – and if she let it hang loose it nearly touched her belt. In bed Tommy liked to wrap his hands in it, starting with the ends. Her hair was softer than the tape he had used when he was fighting, the tape he wrapped himself in before he put on his gloves – but he wrapped his hands the same way in her hair, around and around, until Deirdre told him to cut it out, he was pulling on it and it hurt.

He didn't know why she was leaving. She was still there when Tommy left for the lake, but she told him she would be gone by the time he got back. She had already begun to pack her things. She'd go to her sister's for a while, but he wasn't to call her there, not while he

was away. He could call if he wanted when he returned, but Deirdre was not going to come back to him. She made that clear. She'd said something about getting on with her life, but Tommy didn't understand. She was talking to him as if she meant her life had stages, distinct stepping-off points, and that she had been standing at the edge of one for a while and now it was time for her to take the next step. But Tommy didn't understand how Deirdre knew that it was time. Or how she would know when she had come to the last stage, the one she was finally meant to stay in. When he pictured himself standing at an edge and trying to take a step across to the next stage, all he saw was a hole in front of him. Rectangular, chiseled deep into the ground, the sides of the hole moist. Maybe the hole had a casket lying in it already, and maybe it didn't, maybe it was waiting for one, or maybe it was just open there in case Tommy didn't step far enough across it, in case he fell in.

The lake was empty. The water was gray, dark, smooth in the windless air. The trees along the shore were nearly bare, though here and there one retained its leaves, or some of them, still bright and golden in the sunlight, or a deep red. Tommy stood curled over the edge, peering down, but he couldn't see inside the water, not even where it was shallowest, at the shore. The waves that broke by his feet were tiny, and they left little bubbles. The bubbles clung to the sand for a moment, then they popped as the next wave settled in. Sometimes Tommy got the bubbles with his feet before they exploded, stamping at them and squashing them, but mostly he was too slow.

He had only one more day. Deirdre had booked the cabin for

him. He had been doing his thinking. He had been trying to think. He had been trying to figure things out, but he was afraid that nothing would be any different when he got home, except for Deirdre being gone. Tommy wasn't a putz, but she hadn't told him what it was that he was supposed to be figuring out. The whole trip had been her idea. In the end, she had insisted on it.

He put the last two cans of hash in the pot together, and lit the burner. There was no point taking any food back with him. After he blew the match out he let it fall onto the floor. The propane seemed to have an air bubble in the line, or maybe the tank was running low, and the stove burner made popping sounds. It sounded like it was farting. Tommy hoped there would be sufficient fuel left in the tank to heat his last meal. He had run too much water into the bottom of the pot. He hadn't wanted the hash to stick and burn again, but now it would be soupy.

Tommy was no more tired of the hash than he was of everything else. He pushed his spoon in and stirred it around while it cooked.

It wasn't raining, but it was a wet night nevertheless, dew and mist collecting on everything, even inside the cabin. The air felt cold, raw. Tommy had pushed a towel against the bottom of the window sash, behind the empty hash cans, one of the places that the wind leaked in, but it wasn't enough. It was as if someone had poked the cabin with holes – too small to see but plenty large enough to feel – or else punched them through with tiny fists and rock-hard knuckles.

He missed fighting, that was what it was.

He missed it. He missed feeling the unyielding bone of forehead

and cheek against the bones of his hand, his glove between them barely cushioning his blows. He missed finding the softness of the gut, the most vulnerable spot on almost any fighter, and the ribs, thin and so easily cracked, and he missed the squash of a nose under a straight-on punch. Tommy had learned early that though it looked better to connect to the head, it did more damage to sink a blow into the body. His fist rising upward, driving one organ into another, forcing the air from his opponent's lungs, making knees buckle, a pair of legs sag. The shots to the head might do more in the long run, over years, but within the course of the fight at hand it was the body Tommy had always gone after. He was known for that. He only went to the head to force his opponent to open up his crouch so he could go after the body again, or if there was blood on the face, or if it was time finally to go for a knockout.

Sometimes when he was preparing for a fight, he would go away like this. But in those days he didn't go off by himself. He would bring Leanne with him. And his manager would come too, not for the whole time, but enough to make sure Tommy was working hard. He would remind Tommy it wasn't a vacation, but Tommy had never minded the work. In those days he didn't walk the paths through the woods, he ran them.

He missed it all. He even missed the feel of getting hit himself, the blows coming in.

He stirred his hash until it was hot all through, then switched off the burner. At the very top of the mound was a single kernel of corn, yellow and bright, like a beacon, with smoke coming out of it. Tommy ladled the hash into a bowl, an extra large helping, and he plunked a

spoon into it. If he had been with Deirdre he would have used a fork to eat, but she wasn't there. He was by himself.

The lake was empty. No dead floating fish, just water, and gray spectral mist rising out of it. The sky was pink and the sun was still not up over the treetops. There was a loon somewhere – Tommy couldn't see it, but it was calling to him. The morning was cold and he was hunched up in his sweatshirt. He felt the bite of the air in his nostrils with each breath he took in, and on the tips of his ears. If the answers he was supposed to be looking for were in the lake somewhere, he didn't see them.

He was packed to go back. There was a single bag at the cabin – his old canvas bag, the duffel, from his boxing days, something he could carry at the end of his arm or if he got tired, sling up onto his shoulder.

When he got home, Deirdre wouldn't be there. He knew that. Her half of the closet would be empty, also the two drawers of the dresser that had been filled with her clothes, and the right side on the top of the dresser where she kept her jewelry and knickknacks. Her hairbrush would be gone. On clear mornings like this, when the sunlight came in through the bedroom window, a bar of light would land on the dresser top – the long tangles of hair caught in Deirdre's brush would glow like fresh threads of silk spun out of a spider's belly. That was before the silk was shaped into a web. Deirdre brushed her hair at night, but she didn't take the time to clean the hair back out of her brush until she got up the next morning.

The answers weren't in the lake, they weren't in the sky, and they

weren't in Tommy's head either. If they were somewhere among the rising curtains of mist, eerie and thick, Tommy couldn't see them.

He balanced the duffel bag on his shoulder with his left hand, while with his right he threw a series of crisp punches through the air. Body blows. Tommy wanted to make a wind with his fist, so hard and fast that he could hear it whoosh. He stopped walking a moment and brought his fist close to his face and looked at his knuckles. Those knuckles had once been swollen all the time, gnarled, like knots in tree roots. They were still hard, but now you couldn't tell by them that Tommy had ever been a fighter.

He would go back to cutting keys. That was all. A wall of keys was mounted behind the counter of the hardware store, the blanks ordered in neat rows on a pegboard, and Tommy knew right where to look to find each different blank.

As the morning warmed up the day lengthened – swarms of insects found their way into the sun, above the dirt road. Gnats. Now Tommy punched at them. His arm sent the bugs scattering again and again, but each time they re-formed their swarms. He stopped walking and tried to focus on a single bug, isolate it with his eyes, concentrate with his mind, zero in with his fist, but it was impossible. Buzzing about – up and down, side to side – the gnats all tangled together. It was as if the swarm was a single organism and not made up of discrete animals. They were like those thoughts and pictures in Tommy's head that he couldn't unravel, pull apart. But there were three miles between the cabin and where he would pick up the bus home, a full hour's walk, so he still had time to try. □