

Bleeder

Jamie Halsey has a cardboard sign that says: Knock Me Out, Get Your Money Back. It never happens, he hardly ever gets hit. Jamie works a corner on Charles Street downtown from the lunch rush until business lets out for the day. He has the sign, a stool to sit on, an alarm clock, a cigar box and an old pair of sixteen-ounce gloves. Businessmen looking to unwind after work pay five bucks for three minutes. He puts their money in the cigar box. They put on the gloves. They try to punch him in the face. They chase him around and flail like crazy. He ducks. He bobs and weaves. They turn purple and take off their jackets. They punch like girls. He doesn't punch back.

He wears his old trunks and a T-shirt with the sleeves cut off. He's getting fatter now, almost 215 pounds, but his arms still look strong. His gut is starting to pooch out over the lip of the trunks. He wears his old boxing shoes, red leather with tassels. He doesn't wear a cup.

Business geeks line up three-deep for a shot at Jamie. Some come just to watch. They wave fives. Cheering and taunting each other. They fiddle and watch their own feet when they hand him the money. Jamie takes the cash and wears them out. He slides and jukes. He makes them look like fools. They eat it up. They all say he's the best street performer they've ever seen. Way better than some hippie with a saxophone. Nobody cares to ask his name. For Jamie, it's not the same as the old adrenaline, but it's pretty good.

Back when Jamie was fighting for real he moved well with a piston jab. He was good enough to win a piece of the world title at cruiserweight, a fight in Brussels, but lost the belt in less than a year behind the fact that he bled too much. Jamie has sharp bones in his face. Every time he fought there were cuts and blood. The doctors said it was ruining his nerve endings. They said if he kept on his face would start to puff and sag like a monkey. He retired from fighting before he was ready and moved back to Baltimore with lumps and lumps of scar tissue around his eyes, all stretchy and brittle like a spent balloon. His skin covered with little white zippers that will split open and bleed for no reason at all.

One Friday evening a guy with a limp and a cane and a pretty girl on his arm shows up on Charles Street. The guy hobbles up to Jamie with a five in his little claw hand. He says he wants a go. Jamie stands there, looking past the guy, eyeing the girl. Jamie makes it obvious, not caring if the guy notices. The girl has a wide, tired face and blonde hair that comes in strings to the middle of her arms. She's wearing a long wool coat and leather boots with pointed toes and heels. Jamie gives her a smile. She looks away, back to the crippled guy and makes a face like she just saw a dog run out into traffic.

The guy shakes his money in Jamie's face. He's a little wormy guy, young and dressed up in a suit and tie just like the other rich boys, but he's got a face like a ferret and one half of his body is twisted up and shriveled. Jamie says, "No way."

You can't do the dance with a cripple. It's a no win. It's like fighting a woman who thinks she's tough. Jamie tells the guy to get lost. Jamie looks up and the girl is looking at him, her face asking him not to embarrass the guy.

The crippled guy frowns. He says, "You won't do it because I'm impaired." That's his word, impaired.

Jamie says, "You could get hurt. I don't need the headache."

The guy leans against his cane while his claw goes into his pocket. He pulls out another five and Jamie tells him no dice. The guy goes to twenty, then fifty. The money starts to change Jamie's mind. Plus the girl. He wants her to watch.

The girl grabs the guy's good arm. She says, "Honey let's go." Looking at Jamie when she says it. Her voice is dry and crumbling. Jamie tries not to blink when she says it, realizing the girl is the crippled guy's wife, not his keeper.

Jamie takes the money and puts it in the cigar box. He tells the little guy, one minute only. The guy gets the girl to hold his cane while he pulls the gloves onto his hand and his claw. Jamie sets the alarm clock. Jamie says, "Let's get this over with."