

New Fillings for Joe

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His mother wanted him to become a dentist but, for as long as he could remember, Joe had wanted to be a fighter. A boxer. Destiny would one day transform him into a brutal killing machine and he knew it. Everyday, from junior high up, he ran straight home from school in order to start training. Inside the ten-foot square ring that he made out of a couple pee-stained mattresses and a frayed bunch of shipping ropes, Joe transformed himself from a seventy-pound sixth-grader into a blood thirsty animal. There, wearing a blue pair of Superman Underoos and two left-handed cooking mitts, he danced in front of the mirror with his shirt off and threw his best Mohammed Ali combinations. Joe always flashed a great big smile to his imaginary crowd. It was a nice smile. Joe had perfect teeth.

In time he made his way to a real gym, and the training paid off. In high school, Joe boxed so well he made it to nationals. His third opponent, "Crunchy" Ray Billomore, weighed over 300 pounds and ate a full bag of cat litter before each fight. Joe sat and watched him do it. If nationals had taught him anything it was this: he was no longer the best. He might have been in Carlton County, but here there were at least a thousand guys who were just as good as he was, if not better. When Ray knocked Joe's tooth out in the fifth it became a painfully obvious fact. As he came to he was spitting blood and, for the first time in his life, he was very afraid. Joe didn't like losing at all. Up until nationals he had a perfect record. He gave the crowd a flawed smile, took his silver medal, and decided he would never box again.

Since his career as the future heavy weight champion of the world was over, Joe needed a new plan and dental school seemed like the next logical step. Competition, though, was harder than he imagined. His grades were good but not that good. He wondered if he could make it.

"Follow your dreams," his school guidance counselor said to him nervously during lunch one day.

"I don't know," Joe replied.

"Complacency will get you nowhere, son," Mr. Vanderhouse continued. "First it's a second-rate job, and then before you know it, it's drunken night after drunken night in the bathroom stalls of a male strip club tea-bagging for quarters."

"What's tea-bagging?"

"Never mind. I'm sure you'll do fine in dental school."

Joe did want to be a dentist, but it seemed very unrealistic. While chewing on a tiny bite of his sandwich he thought about the future and weighed his decision carefully. There had been a lot of ads on TV saying Carlton County had a shortage of dental hygienists. It wasn't as attractive as being an actual dentist, but it would do. Besides, thought Joe, the world needed people to clean teeth.

Two short years later, Joe had himself a job and a certified Associates Degree in the art of dental hygiene. At Dr. Eikenbaum's office his duties were to greet patients and help them plan a clear route to the blissful land of oral cleanliness. "Floss daily or your teeth will hate you for it later," he instructed them.

When it came to fillings Joe always recommended silver. This was because, although they weren't quite as good as gold, they were less expensive and easier to manage. "Go with something you can handle," he would say. "There's no sense in getting into something that's over your head." Joe had silver fillings himself.

The tooth cleaning business, as luck would have it, didn't pay as well as Joe had hoped. This made rent difficult to come by and extra money even scarcer. The cost of living in New York was criminal. After Joe's father died of pneumonia, he found himself swamped with medical bills and heading toward financial devastation. The future looked bleak and hopeless. Joe even caught himself walking by a Mr. Pattywack's once. In order to relieve some of his ever-burdening financial stress, Joe took out a small loan from his friendly Italian landlord, Mikey Stenant. But when the time came to return the money, Joe was still broke and unable to repay it.

"Joe," Mikey said. "You're a nice kid."

"Thank you."

"If you don't got the money right now. It's OK. Forgettaboutit."

"Forgottenabout."

"Other people do this to me? I dunno. Maybe I get kinda mad."

"Sure."

"I might lose my temper."

"Who wouldn't?"

"Maybe, I drive my Buick over their fuckin' head or smash their balls with a goddamn hammer. Something unpleasant."

"..."

"But, you...I like you."

"Well I try to be punctual with the rent. It's the least..."

"I'm just gonna shoot you in the knee caps. You won't even feel it."

"That's certainly very considerate of you, but is there another way we could settle this?"

As it turned out, Mikey made money on the side booking fights every third Saturday of the month. He knew about Joe's history as a boxer who went to nationals and gave him another option for paying back the money. This option, one which didn't necessarily involve Joe's dismemberment, was for him to fight in an upcoming event and take a dive in the fourth round.

Reluctantly, he chose to fight.

On even nights, Joe started running home from the office to insure he wouldn't get killed in the ring. On the odd ones he rode his bike. At first it was hard and he wondered if he had made the right decision. Ray Billomore seemed to be on his mind more often than usual. He plagued Joe's dreams with visions of cat litter and chipped teeth. But soon Joe

started to feel good about being active again. He put all his attention into building up his mind and body. It was something that went beyond simply fighting for the well being of his knee caps.

For strength and stamina, Joe lifted weights, jumped rope, and ate two raw eggs for breakfast each morning. To increase his agility, he worked his speed bag while reviewing dental charts and took yoga to improve his flexibility. Joe even danced in front of the mirror once or twice.

The day of the fight came so fast it caught Joe off guard. In the locker room he threw up after his trainer offered him some tea. He was terrified. The first round was rough and each blow brought visions of bright spinning silver stars. By the second round, Joe was Mohammed Ali again. He was dancing like a butterfly and stinging like a cement truck. His feet swept him around the ring in two Converse tornadoes that flowed smooth enough to put Michael Jackson out of a career. It was physical poetry. He hadn't felt this alive in a long time. Joe remembered what it was that made him want to box all those years ago. In the third round he knocked his opponent down twice and, much to his landlord's dismay, he decided he wasn't taking a dive. As soon as this was realized his opponent, Greg McDonnell, was laced up with a role of quarters in each glove. Every punch he threw hit Joe like a steel hammer, making him reel and stumble. By the fifth round he was spitting up handfuls of teeth, his silver fillings spilling out and coating the ring with tiny dental caltraps. Joe refused to go down.

"Joe, are you fuckin' retarded?" his landlord pleaded. "You're gonna get your goddamn brains knocked out. Open your mouth and take a look at this mirror."

When Joe looked inside, he saw only one bare tooth still standing. It was wading alone in a pool of his own blood, and it didn't take a certified dental hygienist to realize Joe was in trouble. All his other teeth had been knocked out, fillings and all, leaving him with a geriatric grin that was premature by at least fifty years. In spite of the tremendous damage that had been dealt to it, the tooth refused fall. It stood valiantly when it should have collapsed painfully. Oblivious to its own flawed existence, the ridiculous incisor remained whole and intact. It was the most horrible and inspiring thing Joe had ever seen. As he sat staring at his one lone tooth, Joe vowed he would never take another dive in his life.

The bell rang again and Joe fought like a dying mule. Each quarter-filled blow he received buckled his knees and sent him spinning for balance. They came in such rapid succession that Joe began to wonder if he was fighting a person or a bus. A right hook in the middle of the eighth round was accompanied by a sickening crunch that split Joe's nose and sent him tumbling head over heels to the canvas. The rest of the round followed in a similar fashion and it became apparent there wasn't much left in him. Joe decided to end the fight like a true sportsman. Picking himself up slowly, Joe wiped the blood off his face and gave the crowd a winning one-tooth smile. The referee, as well as several people in the audience, winced over the horrible state of his bloodied oral cavity. Joe took the opportunity to sock his opponent in the groin. Greg McDonnell stumbled back in cross-eyed agony, but with the

help of fifty quarters he sent Joe down for a ten count. When Joe regained consciousness, he was reborn. His tooth was still standing and he felt great.

For breakfast the next morning, Joe treated himself to a glass of orange juice and two bottles of aspirin. Aside from the broken nose, the various bruises, and fact that he now had only one tooth, he felt better than he had in years. It was wonderful. Joe decided he would turn over a new leaf. At work he told Dr. Eikenbaum he was quitting in order to enroll in school again. A school located very, very far from his apartment building. The dentist said he would be missed, but was happy for him all the same. As Joe smiled and shook his hand, Dr. Eikenbaum noticed the frightening mess his mouth had become.

“Jesus, Joe. What happened? You looked like you swallowed a horse shoe.” “Quarters,” said Joe. “But I still got a chopper here.”

“That tooth is going to have to come out you know,” Dr. Eikenbaum said. It’s chipped up pretty badly.”

Joe told him he had other plans. He told him he was thinking about new fillings instead. He told him he was thinking about gold.