

Neon Red

A neon sign glows lonely in the midnight fog. In the central city plazas, where everyone goes but no one lives, all that is here hibernates and dies at night like a forest in winter. On your approach, you are illuminated by the red crossed gloves shining above you but you are not exposed. This is good.

You flip the number wheels on the u-lock across the door until it reaches 8-8-8-8 and it opens without sound. The inside of the gym, too, is illuminated by nothing but the neon reflections from outside. Silhouettes of famous boxers decorate the wall of heavy bags and banana bags with lines of texts beneath. You remember them from when you would observe during the day: Sonny Liston, George Foreman, Jack Dempsey, Muhammed Ali, Mike Tyson. Their names have been spoken here many times by many tongues, though you never learnt what they mean and never got close enough to read the words. They do not matter here in the dark. They are only bloodless shadows now, turning to face you as you walk in.

Here, between the door and the mats, you leave your bag, your shoes and your school uniform as what they carry would taint this sacred ground. You face the shadows, who cross their arms and wait. Behind you, on the opposite end of the gym is a wall of mirrors. You do not turn around. You are not ready.

The same routine as every night. For your warmup, you skip, counting from one to five-hundred-forty in your end, taking a break every one-hundred-eighty seconds to do ten push-ups, ten squats and ten crunches. On your first night here, you felt sweat running down your arms and legs, you could hear your heartbeat deep in your ears and you could see your breath in the dust kicked up by the rope. On your third month, you could still hear your heartbeat though it now spoke different words, telling you not to stop, to never stop again. Now, on your last day here, you hear and feel nothing at all.

You tie the rope between two banana bags. In your promise, made long ago, you would prepare until the rope reached the bottom of the bag, lowering it by two centimetres every night until there was nowhere left for it to go. Do you remember that moment, when you spoke those words into the air? You said it out of fear then, scrambling for an excuse to hide longer within the neon light. Now that the promise gives you nothing but frustration and restlessness, now that the rope finally reaching the end of bags fills you with nothing but impatient fervour, do you still remember what feeling fear is like? You bob and weave under the rope, from left to right, then right to left. Your knees pop and buckle, your muscles squeeze your bones and threatens to burst out of your skin. Once more, you count to five-hundred-forty.

Now, you do bag work. Every single combo you have ever seen through the windows over months, you do nightly. From the most basic jab-jab-cross to the jab-cross-weave left-left hook-weave right-right hook-left uppercut, you do every one every night until numbers lose meaning. During the day, when the boxers, the *athletes*, train, they would do two or three a day for two hours a day. But they are training for competition. They train here only for sport. They are not like you. You are preparing for war. Your form was perfected not by words from a trainer but by your nails cutting into your palms and your shoulders ripping out of their sockets. Your fists were strengthened not by wraps and gloves but by your knuckles quaking against the leather. Your skin was hardened not by punches designed to win but by the soles of boots designed to maim. The sound of your fists striking the bags get louder and louder. But no matter how much you put into your strikes, no matter how far beyond human limits you go, it is not enough. You cannot replicate the sound of flesh against flesh, the sound buried into your bones, the sound you desperately want to hear. When you feel every strand of muscle in your body rip apart and rebuild. You stop and turn around.

This is the first time you have ever looked into these mirrors. The neon sign, flickering outside, shows you, in the glass, only a vague red light cast into an inhuman shape. At the top of the shape, there is what you know to be the head only by your imagination. Within the head, two colourless depressions turn into three when you open your mouth.

“Let’s settle this, you and me, once and for all,” you say.

The shape says the same words but does not respond.

“You will regret this moment for the rest of your life,” you say.

The shape says the same words but does not respond.

You bare your teeth and smile, the pit reforming into a crater, exposing glowing shards within. You cannot decide which form that would strike more fear. That is okay. That is not something you need to decide right now.

The sun is coming up now. It is threatening your world of neon. It is time to go to war. It will not be your first time. You have stood up before to those who have understood only violence and have seen only people on their knees with lowered heads. You have won battles and you have lost battles. But you have never won the war. Those who only speak with violence, when answered with violence, can only respond with violence. You did not know this before; you were not ready before. You are ready now. In physics, you learnt that Newton said an object in motion can only be made still with an equivalent opposing force. In history, you learnt Sun Zi say an enemy can only be pacified by removing their ability to wage war. In here, you have earned the power to end them in finality. They will respect you because all humans respect pain. You put on your uniform and thread the lock through the door handles, scattering the number wheels. You look back one last time, the shadows are the walls are no longer looking at you, back into the shapes of boxers, you completed their lessons. It is morning. There is no time to sleep. It is time to go to war.

Goodbye for now

Your fingers tap on your desk to the end of the school bell. You have no memory of what happened between when you left the red space into the real world to this current moment. They do not matter. This is the moment you've been waiting for. When the teachers leave the classes with their bags tucked under their arms, without need to think about this desperate, decrepit space after their paycheques are secured, you hear the same sound of clattering between tools of wood and metal against the windows of every classroom. You wonder what they would be this time.

By the time the sound reaches your room, all the students have scattered except for the ones who are not allowed to. They enter your room. They are nine students holding mops and brooms over their shoulders like glaives and spears. They are wielding the tools of servants like the sceptres of kings. The students already in the room stand up and bow to them, hiding you behind them. You have thought about how strange this is in the past right? How they stand at eye-to-eye, eat in the same room, were born in the same years and wear the same white uniforms save for the red scarves, yet these people prostrate themselves before these nine like as if they were a pantheon of gods towering over them. Do you know why this is the case yet?

It is simple, you should know it. These nine people, students, children, have the best grades so the teachers praise and defend them. Because the teachers praise and defend them, the parents love them more than their own sons. Because their own parents love them more, the other students kneel before them and kiss the ground they walk on while offering them their blood and tears. Why is this? All humans respect pain. So do they.

"Alright cunts," their leader raised the broom over the students cowering before them and held out his free hand. "Time to pay up."

As his hand is filled with fives and tens, one of the cowering kids, named Piggie by the nine but supposedly something else by his parents, raises his head, a suicide in its own right, but then he spoke.

“Big Brother, I’m really sorry, but my mom said she won’t give me money unless I tell her where it’s going.” He takes the leader’s outstretched hand into both of his own. “Hey, look, I can give you double next week, it’ll feel better to spend it all at the same time, right? Confucious says frugality is a virtue-“

The broomstick breaks and splinters against Piggie’s temple. He crumbles to the ground and holds his hand to his head, but is unable to keep his blood inside his skull.

“You fat sack of shit.” The leader sticks the broken stick into Piggie’s back. “You think I want your money because I need it? I can buy your whole family.”

He rips up the bills already in his hand and sprinkles it over Piggie’s broken form and crouches down beside him. He stares into Piggie’s eye but Piggie does not meet his gaze.

“You think someone like me would be friends with you for free?” He slaps Piggie’s back; his hand is heavier than its weight and pushes the body deeper into the ground. “I simply want what’s fair. So you go home and tell your whore mom who you owe money to how much you owe.”

He stands up and looks around. The other kids do not draw his attention. You do not draw his attention. The only thing worthy of his sight is the broken stick in his hand. He smiles. He does not deserve to.

“Guys, I have an idea.” He points at Piggie. “Take off his pants.”

“The fuck,” one of his pawns say. “I don’t want to fucking touch him.”

“What?” The leader turns his entire body around. For a moment, the first of his underlings look just like any other student in this room. “You think I do?”

Look at him, smiling and holding his chest out. He does not think there is any danger in this world. Even the perceived pawns mean nothing to the self-perceived king. It is disgusting, it is putrid. He is just like any one of you. No, he is lower than you. He is less than human. He has not been tempered and honed by life like you have. He is a spider who heard the screams of children and imagined himself emperor over humans.

You stand up. Your knees knock the desk over in front of you and your hips knock the chair over behind you. Every pair of eyes not focused on the ground turn around to meet you.

“The fuck is the matter with this guy?” Pawn 1 says, freed of his king’s gaze.

“What’s your problem, pissf*g?” The broken stick is turned over to you. “Need another lesson from your betters?”

“Let’s fight,” you say. You have practiced many lines in the red world, but none of them came to mind before these two words left your mouth. But that is okay. Think about what you will do next, do not think about this. Look at him, you did what you meant to.

“What the fuck did you just say.” The leader’s smile is gone. His face betrays only frustration, hatred and contempt. For once, for just a little bit, he understands you.

What is scarier? Mouth closed, teeth bared, wide smile? You never figured it out but it does not matter. In this moment, you cannot stop yourself from smiling. Blood rushes through your veins, crashing like waves against the atriums of your heart. Your hands ball into fists and relaxes into palms. You bounce your weight from leg to leg. You can no longer be contained by your body.

“Outside,” you say.

His goons are gawking and laughing but he, their king, is not. He throws his stick on the ground without looking. It bounces off his victim’s back, who does not respond.

“Okay.” He is no longer blinking. “Let’s go.”

As you walk to the courtyard, the king leads from the front while his pawns surround you, four in front and four behind. The eight push you around and trip at your feet but their leader does not even turn to look at you. He has you, an indomitable force, to his back and does not even think to look back. Does he not think these goons he has under him would protect him from you? The sun breaking through is blinding. You do not see the walls, the doors, the windows. You see only your enemy, but your enemy does not recognise you. He is still looking down on you. He still does not think you are a threat. Prove him wrong. Make him fear you. Kill him. Kill him now.

The moment the door opens, in the last millisecond before your eyes are forced to adjust to the light, you shout words you do not hear, push the pawns away from you and kick the king down the stairs into the dirt. Before you can see, you jump down the stairs behind him. You do not allow him to get up. He must stay in the ground. It is where he belongs and it is your responsibility keep him there. You climb atop him and lock his weak, frail form between your legs. You can't tell if your eyes are closed or if your eyes are open and has simply stopped working. All you know—and all you need to know—is the feeling of the outline of his face slamming against your knuckles. None of this is what you practiced at the gym. You don't even remember the hundreds of combos you practiced thousands of time. Look at how pathetic he is. You don't even need to use what you have learnt. This is the difference between you two. This is how much better than him you are, a fact he now knows.

You are interrupted by a wooden stepladder turning to pieces against the back of your head. A pole of some kind, you can't tell what, is broken against your back. It is a beautiful and enlightening pain. You can tell where your enemies are and you can feel the fear in their actions and the cowardice in their tools of violence. It is a clarifying pain. Whether you finally opened your eyes or if your sight has simply finally decided to return, you see the world once more. It is clearer than it has ever been. You see every uneven spot of the ground:

every anthill and crater. You see every crutch for those who do not rely on themselves: every cleaning tool and trash can. You see the eight little cowards, all holding something, yet not approaching, only circling around you with wide stares and open mouths. You see the human hues dripping down your hands and face. It is reflected by the red light that has been cast upon the world. You see nothing but neon red.

Now you see the truth. You had thought you, tampered by neon, had broken through the red world into the real world. But it was the neon red that has been unleashed onto the world by your hands.

You duck in and out and weave through your victims. They swing at you only when you approach them. But their strikes are higher than the rope, tied to the bottom of the banana bags, and slower than your fists, reaching for their expressions of fear. And their skin, unscarred and unmarred, is much softer than any of the bags, held up by the shadows on the wall. At first, you aim for the noses and jaws, but you realise your mistake. The unconscious cannot respect pain. You move down to their body, keeping yourself too low for them to strike you back, but you allow those outside your peripheral to land hits on you from behind. You allow them to hurt you, so they know they cannot harm you, so you know where they are, so you can move from one to the next, giving each one the time to catch their breath before you get back to them.

This is easy, you notice. But you realise it is not because of what you learnt at the gym. It is what they have taught you. They were the ones who taught you where the liver is, where the softest ribs are. They taught you how strikes at the jaw dazes you, how strikes at the nose blinds you, how strikes at the forehead hurts the head more and strikes at the inner elbow disables your arms. They have taught you this through many lessons. This current moment is another lesson but in which you are the teacher. You are teaching them what you have learnt: what their place in the world is.

In the past, you thought this moment would be of vengeance. You doubted your capability and you doubted the righteousness of your mission. There is no need to doubt now. You see this is not vengeance. This is knowledge and this is justice. This is righteousness in its purest form. Your mission is not only justified, it is divinely mandated.

The neon red is pulsating and burning itself into your eyes. This colour and its glow are alive, demanding you carry out its mandate and complete its justice. But your muscles, too, are burning. You can't keep your hands as high as they were. The neon red in your veins is spilling onto your clothes and your ground. Your weight is on both your feet, now flat against the ground. Ignore it. You are not getting tired. Your body is only responding to how weak they are. Your body is realising it does not need to expend effort. So, continue. The neon red is taking over, let it. What once showed you the world for what it is is now blinding you from everything with it. Ignore this too. It is okay. You do not need your vision in this moment. You can win without it.

When the colour fades and gives way to sunlight, the eight are on the ground before you. They are on their backs or they are on their knees. They say words you do not hear and offer their blood, tears, snot and vomit to you in hands pressed against each other, while the all the remaining students surround you. The only one who still looks at you is their leader-their former leader. He stares at you from the ground with hatred and defiance, though his body has already proven itself unable to defy you. He was the one who christened you with your name, who gave word for your inferiority. But he did it out of ignorance and arrogance. Now, you must christen him the same way he christened you, but you will do it out of truth, out of the superiority you have already proven. You remove his red scarf, the king's crown. You pull down your pants and christen him *pissf****t*.

Your body is not responding to you properly. You have taken damage. Do not let it show. Stand up straight, walk properly. Go home. You have done well. But you may receive a new mission soon.

See you then.

The desk lamp bounces off your head. Its bulb scatters, glass shards cut into your skin and glass dust digs into your eyeballs. It keeps you from expressing and blinking. That is good. It will keep you alert.

“What the fuck were you thinking, you stupid little bastard?” Your dad shouts at your from across the room. “You put your hands on an honour student? Have you ever tried putting your hands on a pencil?”

He throws the two dining chairs against the wall and sweeps the pile of mail on the table onto the ground.

“I told you to be like him and what do you go out and do? Start a fight? Are you so stupid that the only way you can reach your betters is by dragging them down to your level.”

He genuinely believes what he is saying. He thinks that worthless piece of shit is better than you. He is just like them, the goons who followed him, the students who bowed to him, he is not different. He does not deserve your respect. He does not even deserve your contempt. He will not deserve your mercy.

“Don’t even bother trying to justify yourself! His parents called me, told me everything.” He pauses his rampage to cover his face with his hands. “Sneaking up on them, pathetic, not even enough of a man to fight properly.”

“Why did I-“ He pounds his chest. “-put so much time into raising you?”

“Why did I-“ He claps his hands together. “-work so hard to put you in school?”

“How did I-“ He grabs his crotch. “-make the mistake of creating someone like you?”

What right does he have in thinking he's better than you? Just because he's older? Just because the word 'parent' applies to him but not you? That word means nothing. He doesn't know what you've been through, he hasn't been through what you've been through. You're better than him. He doesn't know it. You should teach him.

"Not going to say anything?" His voice finally quiets to the point it no longer bounces from wall to wall. "Fine, I'll make sure you never say anything again."

He picks up a chair he threw. Look at him. Like I said, he is just like them, he cannot rely on himself either. He calls himself your father? He is nowhere near the man you are.

He is approaching you. He is swinging the chair at you. By the time it lands, the backrest of the chair will hit you on the temple. But the chair is slow, so slow. You feel like you could count to five-hundred-forty a hundred times before it reaches you. You know your hands will reach his throat before it reaches you.

In the eternity before between now and then, your blood rushes through your veins, your hands ball into fists and relaxes into palms, your weight bounces from leg to leg. You close your eyes and when you open them again, the chair is only a modicum of distance closer. But now, the glow of the neon sign, far off into the city centre has entered this zero-bedroom apartment. Its light embraces you.

In the neon red, you see the truth, this creature before you belongs beneath you. The same smile you saw in the red shape in the mirror breaks apart your face. Go and deliver divine justice, the neon demands it. Do not worry, you will be victorious and you will bask in the glory you deserve. I will keep you safe. I will give you power. And this time, when your mission is completed, I will never leave you again.