

Lily Gontard

The Fighter

It's easier to fight bare chested, David learned that from his favourite movie *Fight Club*. He'd seen it fifteen times. He liked to watch it frame by frame to see if he could find the porn spliced into the movie. *Fight Club* got him into boxing, he had the body for it, he was a lightweight. He didn't like sports where you had to run all the time like soccer or football, but he loved hockey and he loved to lace up for a game at the rec centre. His body was made for hockey and fighting because he was lithe, strong and fast. He had good teeth, not like some guys in the rec league, and always wore a mouth guard.

He was in the yard with his shirt off, letting the sun love his skin, turning it from light brown to copper. He was smiling his perfect smile at his Nanna with her worn red handkerchief around her head and knotted under her chin. She was sitting in the shade working a bead onto a needle and thread. It didn't matter how hot or cold it was, she always wore that handkerchief or another one just like it. "Yer goodlookin' alright boy," she said, made a clicking sound with her tongue. "Break 'dose girls' hearts."

He blushed and lowered his head, still smiling.

"Yer gonna' go to college come fall. Yer smart. Don't go gettin' int' trouble like yer pa'," she said. "He's no-good son-of-a-bitch."

David lived in a three-bedroom bungalow with his mom, two younger sisters and his Nanna. His mom worked shifts as a cleaner at the mine in the NWT: four weeks on, two weeks off. Nanna and David took care of the girls, Tasha, 10, and Bernadette, 8. The girls were from his mom's second marriage.

David's dad was serving time in Vancouver for killing a guy in a bar fight in Yellowknife. His dad followed the guy out of the bar, jumped him and slammed the guy's head into the pavement until he was dead. The coroner said that David's dad kept pounding the guy's head against the pavement long after the guy was dead. His dad was

a "Bad drinkin' white guy. Don't go drinkin' like dat, hear? Just get int' trouble," Nanna said, when she heard her son-in-law had been jailed for manslaughter. "Someone bett' lose dat key." The story was mentioned on the local radio and TV news and got a paragraph in both papers.

His mom didn't do much better with his step-dad: an accountant doing time in minimum security for defrauding the supermarket he worked for. David's mom wrote to him in jail and sent pictures of the girls. When she was off work, she slept most of the time, she was pretty tired of the world she'd been dealt. First pregnancy at thirteen. Married at eighteen. Divorced by twenty. Second pregnancy by twenty-three. Second marriage at twenty-four. Third pregnancy right away. She got her tubes tied after Bernadette. "No more," she said on the day she came home from the hospital. "Three'll do me for life."

"Yer gonna regret it," Nanna warned. "Yer gonna be wantin' babies from da next one comes 'round."

"Lot you know."

"Seven, girl. I brought dem out all livin' but one. I know well."

When Travis McKearney went looking for David, he had two things on his mind: his money and how he was going to get it from Richard Dixon, "Big Dick" as he was known. Big Dick was an average-sized guy, older, about five-ten, slim, a hundred and seventy or so, but he was slippery in a fight. And nasty. He liked to pull tricks. He got into a fight outside the 202 over a girl he'd been dancing with. The girl had a jealous boyfriend who didn't like that Big Dick was monopolizing her on the dance floor. It was two-stepping, harmless kind of dancing and Big Dick was a good dancer.

The boyfriend was drunk and swung a sloppy punch at Big Dick in the parking lot, but didn't think about it first and ended up with a fork in his gut. Big Dick kept a fork in his sleeve, lots of people knew that, but the boyfriend didn't. It wasn't just any dinner fork, "It's a fork for eating fish," Big Dick said when he first showed it to Travis. "Fits kind of perfect up your sleeve." He'd altered the fork by trimming and sharpening the tines so it was like getting cut by four short blades. Not enough to kill you or send you to the hospital, but enough to stun you and put you off Big Dick for a while. When Travis saw what Big Dick did to the boyfriend, he was amazed by how much a man could bleed from his stomach and still not die. It was like getting your knuckles cut up. Blood everywhere, but no damage.

Travis knew all about Big Dick's little tricks and to get his money he needed some backup. He'd seen David at the gym, punching the bag,

doing crunches, running a good pace on the tread mill and he'd bought him a beer a couple of times at the bar. Seemed like a good kid, like someone who'd just go along. He'd heard David was a good fighter and he wondered how fast the kid could be.

Travis parked his truck in front of David's house. Nanna sat in the shade intent on her beading.

"Hey," Travis said to the old woman.

She nodded.

"David around."

"Hmph," she replied and nodded toward the house.

"Thanks."

Travis knocked on the screen door and walked in.

"David?"

David came out of the kitchen with a beer. "Hey, man."

"I need some help. You got some time."

"Yeah, sure. Just gotta give Nanna her beer."

"That your gran out there."

"Yeah."

"She must be a hundred."

Inside the truck, Travis turned down the radio.

"What's going on, man?" David asked. He knew Travis from the gym and they'd talked some in the bar, but they never really hung out.

"I got some work for you."

"Paying?"

"Nah. I just need you to watch my back, you know."

"Uh, yeah."

"I got to get something of mine from someone who doesn't really want to give it to me."

"Your ex?" David heard that Travis and his girl broke up.

"Nah, she can keep the shit. I got the dog ... the truck ... that's all I wanted. No, it's business."

David didn't know what kind of business Travis was in and he figured it was too late to ask and he didn't want to look stupid.

"Okay."

"Smoke?"

"No thanks, man. I'm training." David rolled down the window and rested his arm on the door frame. He loved summer, the heat, swimming

in the lake, the girls, summer dresses. He loved it all. "It's Morris Jack's birthday tonight. He's having a party at the airstrip."

"Uh-huh."

"You going? He's getting a couple of kegs."

"Maybe I will. You know Richard Dixon?"

"Nope."

"Big Dick?"

David shook his head.

"That's who we're going to see."

Travis and David drove along the river. There were a couple of people fishing and some sea kayakers paddling upstream.

"They'll never catch anything there," David said.

"Uh-huh. You ever done that?"

"Fishing?"

"Kayaking."

"Nope. You?"

"My brother's into it. He does whitewater stuff—he's going in a rodeo."

"Didn't know there's a rodeo for that."

"Uh-huh." Travis turned onto a gravel street that led away from the river. "My brother's got no fear. You should see the shit he does in that boat. Fucking blow your mind."

"Yeah?"

"Uh-huh. Mom's always scared he's going to drown himself." Travis stopped the truck in front of cabin that looked like it was half-sunk into the ground. He left the engine running. "Come on."

As a boxer David had one weakness. His coach said it would keep him from going any further and if David wanted to get anywhere, he had to get over it. The sight of blood made David cry. He couldn't help it. If he cut an opponent's lip with a punch, David's eyes started to water and tears worked their way from the tear ducts to the corners of his eyes and started running down his face. It didn't stop him from boxing, he kept throwing punches, but they weren't controlled and his aim was bad. He usually ended up losing the fight because of points and not from a knock-out.

He tried different things to stop the crying. He squeezed his eyes, almost closed shut, but then he couldn't really see what was happening in the ring. He saw a motivational speaker on TV who was hawking self-improvement tapes and David decided to record motivational tapes for

himself. "Don't cry when you see blood. The guy's not dying, it's just a little blood." He repeated over and over to fill a ninety-minute tape on both sides. He'd play the tape on continuous play so it ran all night on the eve of a fight. Half an hour before a fight, he'd find a quiet place and say to himself over and over, "Don't cry, it's only blood. He's not dying." If there wasn't any blood, he won the fight. If there was even a little blood, his or his opponent's, he'd start to cry.

"Bett'r you cry than not feel nothin'," his Nanna said to him after a match. "Bastards don't know nothin' 'bout cryin'." She went to his matches when his mom was home from work and could watch the girls. "Yer pa' knows nothin' 'bout feelin'."

David heard that some people used hypnosis to cure illness and unconscious behaviour. He was researching hypnosis on the Internet and found a site for a hypnosis centre in East Northport, New York. The centre offered hypnosis over the phone. David thought about it and went as far as filling out the online questionnaire, but he couldn't convince himself to press the submit button and debit his credit card of one hundred and forty dollars, American.

He continued his search and found a psychological self-help site hosted by a Dr. Clayton E. Tucker-Ladd, a psychologist with impressive credentials as the head of several psychology departments at American universities. On Dr. Tucker-Ladd's site there were detailed instructions on how to do self-hypnosis. It didn't seem too hard, you concentrated on one thing, blocked everything else out, told yourself you were going to be hypnotized for a few minutes, started to chant your mantra, your eyes rolled back in your head and you were out. To get back all you had to do was count backwards. He read that it wasn't really like in the movies, that nothing bad could happen when you did self-hypnosis.

"If he moves sudden-like, just grab him. Hold him," Travis said. He didn't knock on the door or ring the bell. He opened the door and walked right in. "Watch his hands."

The first time David tried self-hypnosis was at the end of June. He had a fight lined up with a guy from New Hazelton who was just starting out and getting experience by doing the circuit with his club.

On the eve of the fight, David waited until his Nanna and sisters were asleep. The only way he could tell if his sisters were really asleep was when they stopped giggling. He lit a candle in his room and sat on a blanket on the floor. He started deep breathing and began speaking to himself.

"You are going to take a nice trip to a place where seeing blood doesn't make you cry. I am going to count backwards from ten and when I reach one, you will be in that nice place where seeing blood doesn't make you cry." He said this twice, not sure if once was enough, then he started counting backwards from ten. When he reached one, he was still wide-awake and nothing had happened. He decided that he was too nervous and that he needed to relax and do more deep breathing.

He spread a blanket out fully on the floor, lay himself down and started to do deep breathing. He woke up in the morning with his Nanna standing over him.

"Why's you not in yer bed?"

During the fight, he threw an upper cut that connected perfectly with his opponent's jaw, but the guy had his tongue in the wrong place and blood began pouring out of his mouth. David started to cry and his punches went wild. He lost the fight.

Travis was yelling at Big Dick in a voice David didn't recognize. He couldn't even make out what Travis was saying; his voice was a roar and Travis seemed to have grown twice his size in stature. Big Dick had been taking a leak when Travis kicked the bathroom door in, grabbed him by one arm and dragged him down the hall and into the living room, leaving a trail of piss on the carpet and walls.

Big Dick was hunched over in the corner of the room with his underwear and shorts around his knees. David didn't know what to do with himself and stood there feeling embarrassed for the man who was about as old as his own dad, and who was just shaking and whimpering in response to Travis' tirade.

After his loss to the guy from New Hazelton, David decided to commit himself to learning self-hypnosis. For seven nights in a row he lay a blanket on the floor of his room and sat cross-legged and tried to hypnotize himself. On the first two nights nothing happened. On the third and fourth nights he fell asleep. On the fifth night, he thought he'd woken up in the midst of something that wasn't sleep. On the sixth night he was one hundred percent certain that he'd hypnotized himself. On the seventh night he attempted to hypnotize himself not to check his email for two days. For the two days that followed he had no urge to check his email. He had succeeded. He started nightly self-hypnosis to control his crying.

"Come here and hold him," Travis commanded.

It was the first thing that David had understood coming from Travis' mouth since they entered the cabin. David complied. He twisted Big Dick's left arm behind his back and pushed Big Dick's left hand up between his shoulder blades.

"Get him on the floor."

David forced the man to the floor.

"Don't—" Big Dick protested.

Travis took hold of Big Dick's free hand and pinned it to the carpet with his knee. "You're a fucker." Travis pulled a straight blade from the sheath on his belt.

David didn't know what made him throw up, the blood or Travis trying to cut off Big Dick's pinky. He threw up all over the back of Big Dick's head, let him go and ran from the cabin. Travis was quick after him. "You stupid fuck," he said and hit him across the head and got into the truck. "Come on."

David leaned over and kept throwing up.

Travis revved the engine. When David didn't make a move to get in the cab, Travis gunned the engine and drove off, leaving David dry heaving in front of Big Dick's cabin.

Big Dick appeared in the doorway yelling, "Mother fucker! Mother fucker! I'll fucking get you!" His hand was wrapped in a towel.

David could hear sirens in the distance, but his body was weak from the dry heaves and he couldn't run anywhere. He was looking at the pile of vomit at his feet and all he wanted was his Nanna to hold his forehead and rub the spot between his shoulders, like she used to, when he was a kid and sick with the flu. He wanted to be home.