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December Fly

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Danny Cook

December Fly

Before Colin Conley's first fight, his mother had bought him a brown leather jacket, the kind movie boxers are always wearing. Of course, she had bought it large. She bought all his clothes large in the fervent hope he would grow into them. So Colin went around dragging his jean-cuffs, his hands hidden in his shirtsleeves, his shoes flapping like sandals. But this jacket: She had bought it larger than large, as if to call God's bluff and finally force some action. He never grew into any of it. Six years later, he was still five-nine, 164 lbs., a middleweight.

Colin thought about this at the old gym, slumped up under a poster advertising an upcoming Larry Holmes' fight. He was wrapping his hands. Since no one would be there for another ten minutes, he was in no hurry. He touched his nose with his fingertips. Even touching as lightly as possible, he could still feel it. The same way with his cheekbones, where the individual fault lines glowed — tense, clean and hot like electrical wires. After a hard bout, his face always felt broken up like this.

But he had won. He said it out loud, "I won, — it." And it did make things better. He was done wrapping both hands, and so leaned deeper against the wall and watched his breath cook up around his eyebrows. Water was dripping from the ceiling into buckets that had been placed around the gym. Everything was so damp. The gym was humid and cold, like a swamp at night.

It smelled of fossilizing leather. That was from the gloves, lined neatly along their shelves, shiny in Vaseline. And it was from the heavy bags. These were unevenly stuffed, embittered, punished-looking things, things without memories that when hit, shuffled and teetered away like churlish old drunks. The gym was a ruin; but there is something noble about a ruin. At Miami University, where he fought the past three years, he'd trained in a new gym. It always smelled like a shoe store: He hadn't liked it. But now he was back in his old gym: The Lima Boxing Club.

Colin stretched out and did some shadowboxing. When he did upper cuts and hooks, he felt the wind in his nose, that's how sore it was. About 7:30, Roger came in laughing. He was enormous and black, his inertia carried him inside. Something about him looked denser than an ordinary man, like he were filled from top to bottom with lead. He had half-closed eyes. He was the best heavyweight ever to come out of central Ohio.

"I hear' you kicked —," he said.

Colin nodded.

"About time, about time," Roger said. At ringside, Roger leaned on the hopelessly tenuous ropes. They were floss in his fists. They helped him balance while he stretched. "You strong," he said, "But I hear he'as tougher'an we thought, I hear some — about you hitting canvas in the third, huh? Is'at true?" Roger laughed again.

"He had good movement," Colin said.

"It ain't footwork that land you' — on the floor."

"He was tough all over."

"But you was tougher, you was tighter," Roger said.

"On Sunday I was."

"That all it takes, be'in good on Sunday. — boy, be a — bird Monday through Sat'day, but be clean on Sun'ay. Be clean on Sun'ay. You know what make' a good fighter? He knows when to be on... He ain't all-powerful, he's real flesh an' blood, but he' good 'cause he know' when he gotta do something, and he do it. He's on fire when he has to be, huh?"

Colin shrugged: "It was my fourth try," he said, "I tried enough times I pretty much had to win ... statistically, I mean."

"— the statistic, man. It don't matter how many times you try, long as you do it, huh?"

"It matters," Colin said.

"Bull—. It don't matter," Roger said.

More fighters came in. Roger turned on some heat, and while the radiators cracked and creaked to life, everyone stretched out. Rubin Striker came up and said congratulations. Some other guys came up and hit Colin on the shoulder: good fight, nice fight. A little flyweight Colin had never seen came up to him. He had a tattoo of a bracelet around one of his tiny hairless arms. It made him look like an ancient Egyptian maiden. He said he thought Colin was going to give up after the third. He said Colin was a phenom. He said Colin was a beast, that he had good, good rhythm, he said that last punch was the hardest overhand right he'd ever seen. Then the flyweight went over to the mirrors and rolled his shoulders in circles, watching himself. For a fighter, he was effeminate.

Colin started going into some things with a new kid named Gerard. The guy was a quick learner. Colin strung up a cord and showed him how to duck back and forth underneath it. He told him to watch for the counterpunch, but not to watch too long. Then Colin went over and toyed around with a speedbag. He thought over the fight.

Things had started well. His punches were hitting before he thought about throwing them. It was like watching a tape of himself; it was like directing something, his gloves matched perfectly to the gaps, a metronome was going deep

in his head. He would swing wide and smooth, like happiness, and then narrow and brisk and involuntary, like hate, and then wide again. He had a fully conscious moment when he could feel his muscles working under his skin like chains, and he knew that he was too much for the boy. In the final seconds of the round, he stepped inside and hooked him to death. It was so bad that the boy couldn't get to his stool. He finally had to be led there on the hairy arm of his Romanian coach. There was some disagreement as to whether things should go on. The Romanian coach threw a tantrum; a doctor looked into the kid's eyes, "you doing all right, son?" The boy nodded.

Colin knew he would win, but nothing in him skipped a beat. He did not gloat. He had a great sense of nothing. He felt nothing in particular. He knew he was the bad guy; he was the shoe-in, the man who had narrowly missed the title four times, the veteran. He was the brooding god playing opposite to a pathos-ridden Prometheus — a boy Mafia-handsome, wearing golden cross, wet black hair and righteous, catty, Irish eyes. The boy was a boy, after all, and between rounds he waved back at the crowd like going off to war. Everyone liked him. Even Colin.

Just before the third round, Colin got off his stool, and in that moment, he felt the eyes of the crowd on him: He had none of the heady, knotty muscles of youth; he had an intelligent, grave face; he had the disinterested patience and too-good manners of a fascist dictator, and for all these reasons, crowds disliked him. Not that it bothered him. But when he got off that stool for round three, something was bothering him. Something was wrong, and round three became a disaster, nothing but red leather across his nose. He was being hit badly, and his cornerman saying, "That' okay, that' okay Colin," and this is how he knew it was not okay. A minute and a half into that round, he'd gone to his knees.

When the round was over, he had found his way back to the corner. But sitting down, he missed the stool and collapsed awkwardly—a clumsy suitbag thrown at the foot of a motel bed. And people were laughing. They were high-fiving over him. Colin had not given up. There was never a question of giving up. But by then it wasn't art any more. When the bell began round four, he walked straight ahead—right cross, left hook, right cross—straight through the boy. If the emotion did not come naturally, he would have to conjure it, and so he worked like an alchemist, synthesizing rage from each punch. He was reckless and graceless and frank. He shoved, he played dirty. Through his mouthpiece, he issued foamy curses. And, of course, he won. This is how he knew he won — his arms were raised over his head, his opponent was squatting on the canvas with his head between his knees. It was a narrow win on points. But it hadn't felt like a win.

It was like the Greeks marching into Troy, after nine long years, and wiping rose-red blood from their blades, black smoke curling up off the temples, booty jingling off in crude-wheeled carts, and Helen — beautiful even in sackcloth

— but these Greeks, some of them, were thinking, “So this is Troy, huh...so that’s Helen.” It is the sad paradox: Whatever we use to buy our triumph, this is just what we will later need to enjoy it. Only it is gone.

When he started fighting in 1986, boxing was a rarity. It was dying. When people heard you boxed, they were impressed — You’re a fighter? Wow, I never really met anybody who boxed — At first that had been enough, just being a fighter. But that wore off in a year. And then he wanted to be good. Really good.

That first day he had gone to the gym with Eric Smith. When everyone else was done sparring, Eric had asked if the two of them could hit around for a while. A pudgy man in holey sweatpants laced up their gloves and jammed the headgear down to their eyebrows. It had been like a sacrament; the gloves were damp with the sweat of the Korean boys who just fought, and the old pocked-up heavyweights who had fought even before that.

While they suited up, the regulars lounged around the ring winking at each other. A Mexican named Chendo waved at Colin. Kick —, he said. Colin stayed aloof, gave Chendo a professional nod, but right then something had swelled up in his throat and almost choked him; and he knew he was made to box. He looked over again, and there was Chendo smiling, turning his mouthpiece over and over in his lips.

Right away, Colin had been hit hard. His eyes teared up, and he saw Eric slouching sideways, and hissing through his mouthguard like Darth Vader. And Colin was hit again. This time he’d swung back, but his glove went wide, it carried his body around, and it dragged more anger into him—the futility of the punch, its foolishness, so earnest and prayed over, and missing horribly, watching its target escape behind. Another came at him, and this time Colin ducked low, the jab grazed his hair, and then he was hitting Eric, drilling him over and over. He knocked his mouthpiece out. The man in holey sweatpants stopped the fight. He was laughing. Chendo was laughing too.

When 1986 turned to 1987, at that very moment, on the brink of another January 1st, Colin had been in the basement hitting the bag and listening to Mötley Crüe. He hit as fast as he could for two minutes, and then hugged the bag, rocking with it, wheezing so bad he couldn’t hear the radio, watching the whole room go in and out of focus — grass-green Schwinn three-speed, dart boards, and his father’s pyramid of self-help books — *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, and *Imagineering*, and *Tough Leadership*, and *Eating Problems for Breakfast* — all moved in sea-sickness before him. After a minute’s rest, he hit for another two minutes. He did two minute rounds until 12:43, when he threw up. Then he ate a banana, and began again.

... If you can hold on when there is nothing left to hold onto but the will that says hold on ... Some men might believe what you say, all men will believe

what you do... You have to wan-it to win-it and we wan-it more ...

Now he remembered all of this, and remembered climbing into bed with a will, and already thinking about the next week's bout with Peter Sateriano (be patient, counterpunch, you have to counterpunch, hit him hard right away so there's no mistake about who has control, make him afraid, and so on ...)

On fight days, Colin would sit in the pink-walled Spanish class, and while the tape played — Escuchen y repitan ... pelo ... abuela ... telefono — he watched the bus pull up, frosty-yellow in the cold, engulfed in its own blue exhaust. Looking out the classroom window, he could already smell the seats, the veined naugahyde, and the damp wool of stocking caps. And its transmission winnying and buckling. The bus door screeching open at railroad crossings. The bus always took them closer and closer to the event. Back then, it was the event that was so important.

Without any embarrassment, he remembered crying after his loss to Peter Sateriano in Columbus. He remembered walking around outside with Olivia. They held hands and walked in the shadow of the sporting complex where the snow was still hard. Their feet crashed through like it were china.

He tried to explain to her what it was like to lose like that. "See, its like your will failing, you know. You tell yourself you're a certain thing, and then you're not. You don't meet what you said you were, you see what I mean?" he asked. But she did not. She said he'd tried hard the whole time, that he'd never given up. And even supposing he had, she said, supposing he was no good and wasn't tough: she wouldn't give a care. Because she loved him, she loved him for who he was. And when she said this, that's when he was sure she didn't understand. Because who was he? He was a coward. Right then that's exactly what he was. He promised himself he would never be a coward again. They were standing back at the back entrance, under a naked orange bulb. It made a fiery ellipsis in the snow. And though it was cold and dead outside, there was a fat, black fly hobnobbing around in the orange light. Slowly it lumbered along, skipping off the snow, trying to gain altitude. Flies aren't supposed to survive that long. Flies in snowtime — it was some kind of cruelty, and Colin was going to kill it, but she was talking to him, she was turning his head to hers.

She wanted to kiss him. He said wait; he hugged her. She was warm, and the snow came down on them in big, wet flakes. Far away, the city showed, a black, jagged sculpture of arches, spires, and gables — as if chiseled from a single onyx. She wanted him to kiss her. Please, she said, please. He said he couldn't. He said he couldn't think about that now. It was true, he couldn't think about her. He promised himself he would think about her after he won at Knoxville.

That had been five years ago. Since then he'd had thirty or so amateur fights, and now ten as a professional. Olivia ended up marrying a carpetlayer. It

always struck him as some kind of betrayal. A carpetlayer ...

Colin caught the speedbag by the throat and looked behind him. Everyone was going back to the old ring. It was a real regulation ring. Keeley had bought it at an auction for \$200. It had Budweiser pads and red and blue ropes. Inside, Keeley, who always refereed the fights, was messing with a new stopwatch. Chendo leaned over the old man's shoulder: "Hit the red button! No, no, no, rojo, the red button at top. There you is, there you is," Chendo said. He looked over the milling group of fighters, "Okay, who going first?" he asked, "Who going —— first?" Roger raised a half-taped paw. "Tha's good," said Chendo. He walked over and put his arm around Roger, "We sparring, okay, sparring, not kicking ——, okay?" Chendo said. Roger nodded — his seriousness was unqualified. It was resolute and noble and Moorish. He kept his passion subterranean.

Colin helped Roger on with his headgear. It fit small around his bony cheeks. Roger did not want any help with the handwraps. Using his teeth, he pulled the strings to where they pressed deep into his forearms.

Chendo was already in the ring. "You slow, Roger, hurry up, hurry up," he was yelling. Chendo had a slouched-up way of moving about the ring, his arms and legs curled to him like a drowning bug; and hanging off him, the tatters of a bellyshirt, like broken wings. He taunted Roger—he was always taunting.

To get Roger's right glove on, Colin had to push with his whole body. Finally it sank home over the knuckles. "Too tight?" Colin asked.

"Tha's good," Roger said, and looked up to survey the crowd, which had lined up on both sides of the ring, some kneeling in front, others standing. It was like they were getting a team picture. The radio was blaring.

"Hey, som'body turn tha' —— off," Roger said.

Chendo complained, "That' good music, tha's Van Halen...tha's good."

Despite his protests, the radio went off. Colin spread the ropes for Roger to get inside. "I can' believe I'm fight'in this squirrel," Roger said, "He won' even let me hit him withou' crying. Colin, boy, if you didn' jus' fight, I'd be kick'in you' ——, boy."

"I'm not that hurt," Colin said.

"Ain't you sore?"

"Not bad."

Roger yelled to Chendo, "Hey, boy, get out'a there, Colin here want' a piece of me."

Chendo protested, "You ain't no heavyweight, Colin..." But it was no good. Some of the boys showed him the way out. It had been a good year since Colin had fought Roger, and this was something they wanted to see. Not that he had a chance, Roger was heavier. And he was tighter, he could feint with uncanny precision, putting a fighter anywhere he wanted without touching him.

But Colin was good. Everyone knew that. It would be a fight, something to really watch.

When Keeley helped him into the gloves, their acrid smell made him tremble.

“Didn’t you just fight two days ago?” Keeley asked, lacing up his headgear, “Why are you fighting now, you ain’t sore? Don’t tell me you ain’t sore,” he said.

Colin breathed deeply, he sniffed up the air, and this calmed him some. But his legs were sore. All his muscles were sore; he could feel each striation. He scrunched up his nose until it throbbed. He scrunched it again and again; he hit himself in the face with a glove, and then again, just to get used to it.

Keeley was rough, smearing the Vaseline on. But he talked to him calmly, monotonously. “You take it easy, man, all right? You look real tense. This ain’t no regulation fight, understand? Be loose, man.” He slapped Colin in the stomach. “Be loose old boy, this ain’t for real,” he said.

But it was for real, because now Colin was the one fighting against all odds. He crossed himself, and was hoping for that something, whatever it is an underdog always hopes for — that something inside you, spontaneous, gratuitous, lucky, gutsy — to come out.

Outside the ring, the flyweight brandished a ball peen hammer, then hit the bell with it, and then Roger was coming out, easily, dragging his left leg, then switching stances he dragged his right. The two fighters touched gloves in the middle. They circled each other, Roger gave up some half-hearted swings, he rolled his neck. There was an egalitarian exchange of jabs.

Chendo was leaning on the ropes, “Do supthin, ——— do supthin’,” he was saying, and then Roger was doing, he was dipping his shoulders left, almost imperceptibly, his eyes rolling the same way — just the hint of movement, a false clue — and Colin fell for it, wheeling right, straight into a strong right.

He woke up at the end of a glove, all the yelling around him, Mexican, Korean, English. Cursing, and lots of yelling. And then his legs were back underneath him, and he was ducking away neatly, taking with him all his scars, shaking off the hit like he’d gotten something in his eye, blinking, fat capsules of water coming down his cheeks and onto his lean chest.

From the sidelines Chendo was still screaming: “Didn’t see that one, no señor? Didn’t see that, ha ha! No way he saw that ——— one, yeah man, ha!” Keeley told Chendo to shut up. He asked Colin if he was okay.

Colin brushed him away, “I’m all right,” he was saying. And then he was dancing again, and flicking forward, quickly, no warning, as if without even his own permission, swiveling, ducking underneath — and then he was inside and uncoiling, his fist kicking off of Roger’s headgear, his left following through, catching Roger in his cheekbones — cheekbones thick as PVC piping under his

black skin. And the cheers were deafening, everyone was standing, their hands waved about and trailed handwraps like graveclothes, like a ragged group of lepers, and Colin was still inside pounding, eluding punches. But then Roger's bovine arms knocked him back. They were goading him into a corner, muscling him against the Budweiser pads, making him squirm, striking hard left, hard right.

Somehow the corner spit Colin into the clear. He was ruffled, he had splotchy glove burns across his chest, his hair hung off him like wet chains. While he retreated, Roger was busy hitting at his own headgear, trying to straighten it out. It had shifted to cover one of his slitted eyes. Once he knocked it back into place, he closed again, he drove the middleweight before him. They circled the worn canvas. Colin hit him with a straight right, and then a left hook — hard punches, punches that would have staggered another middleweight, but not Roger, who just shrugged and chewed his mouth piece into place.

And then Roger hit him hard, very hard, a long overhand right, and suddenly there was blood everywhere, spreading in rivulets over Colin's chest, soaking into his green shorts, where it took on the stale, purple color of liver. A broken nose.

Keeley was kneeling by him and cleaning things up with paper towels. Most of the boys had gone home. Roger stood in his corner still loved up: “— you Colin, what'as you try'in 'a do, boy? —, I'm sorry, huh?”

“I started it,” said Colin.

Keeley looked up at Roger: “Don't go on a guilt trip, man. —, Roger, if someone starts walloping like that, what you gonna do, eh? You gotta do something,” Keeley looked back down at Colin, “Man, what in God's name was you think'in.” Colin was laughing: “—, don't make me laugh, it hurts to laugh,” he said. Keeley shook his head, “I don't know why in — you're laughing, man...look at you. Hey, you want an aspirin? Roger, get in my bag and get me two aspirin,” Keeley said. Colin said he was fine, he said he didn't need aspirin. He thought he would quit. He was a good fighter. It was quiescent knowledge, a shade above melancholy, and not at all how he'd pictured it would be. And lying there, his back on a canvas cold as snow, his shorts pasted against him like wet papier-mâché, he thought it was worth it. But just barely worth it. And maybe, by the time he showered that night, alone, it might not be.