



Slumpbuster

A short story by Craig Lancaster

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t's the damnedest thing.

I'm crossing Montana Avenue, same as I do every other Tuesday for sure and a lot of the days in between. I've got my collar up against the cold because November's come on fierce, and I look back over my shoulder and see it. The Conoco refinery blazes up against the night sky, this blue-black color that I've never seen before, and I just stop. I stand there and look at it, and damned if it's not just about the most beautiful thing I've seen. I know that sounds stupid, a refinery belching whoknowswhat into the sky—and making that mysterious shade of blue in the lower reaches, for all I know—but that's what I see. True beauty, right there on the edge of the hardscrabble.

It startles me. All I want to do is stand there and take it in, think about it some, marvel at this perfect little moment I've been permitted to see, for whatever reason.

That's when the meathead in the Neon pulls up to me and leans on his horn. I jump back, staggering into a fighting stance, and he blows past me. "Get outta the road, dumbass." A middle finger presses against the frosted window. I scramble up the curb and give him the double six-shooter fingers, but he's out of there, and soon I'm looking across the street again. My perfect little moment, it's gone. It's all weeds in the sidewalk cracks and windblown newspapers and the bleary light that hangs over downtown, threatening, like an unpaid hospital bill.

I head for the front door at Feeney's and try to get my head back on my business.

"I TOLD YOU IF IT HAPPENED AGAIN, THAT'S IT," Frank says, poking at me with a finger that looks like a chunk of polish sausage, and that reminds me that I'm about half starving, only I don't think about that too much because I don't know where Frank's finger has been.

"Yeah, but Frank—"

"But nothing, Hugo. That's it. I told you three years ago that you're too damn old for this, but

you know, you did all right there for a while. But this—Hugo, this ain't all right. I'm telling you, for your health, you gotta stop."

He's looking at my right eye, which is no doubt mangled pretty good, but the eye isn't the half of it. I got laid out again, dropped by a left hook from a kid who, by rights, should have to ask permission to wash my jockstrap. Frank thinks I can't see the shots coming anymore, that the ones I used to duck or block are finding their way to my melon, and he seems to be right. Two fights in a row, I've been sent down. I don't think I lost consciousness this time; Trevor says I did, but that's the sort of thing Trevor would lie about. Whatever. I was down long enough that there wasn't any point in getting up. Frank's no dummy. He sees what's what.

"Frank, you don't know what you're talking about. A couple of bad rounds, man. It happens."

Frank's eyes narrow in on me, gaps in the slats. "Trevor says you was out."

"No, I wasn't."

"He says you was."

I have to be careful here. Trevor's a liar, a cheat. Trevor has a beef with me clear back to when we were kids, when we were both coming up, young, same age, same weight class, same path. It worked for me, and it didn't for him, and he's never forgotten or forgiven. Trevor's also the guy, now, who puts three hundred bucks in my hand every couple of weeks, fills the Babcock for his smokers on the basis of my name, and would never acknowledge the truth of the situation. Trevor's got a lot of reasons to see me done.

Trevor is also Frank's only boy.

"Frank, I was there. I wasn't out. I didn't get up—no use in denying that. But my eyes, they were open."

Frank reaches across the bar with those sausage fingers and paws at the flesh around my eye, the one Trevor patched not thirty minutes ago, talking too much the way he always does. "Gettin' old, Hugo. How's that feel? That kid tonight, he's, what, nineteen, twenty? Shame to see you busted up that way. Real shame." I had to sit there and take it.

Soon after, apparently, Trevor called his old man, because Frank knew before I hit the door. "Stitchin' ain't that kid's strong suit," Frank now says. He brushes his thumb across the knitting, and I bite the inside of my lip. It may be days before I have the guts to look at Trevor's handiwork.

"Hugo, here's the deal: No more fights for you unless a doctor says it's OK—"

"Aw, Frank—"

Feeney brings his left hand down, a hammer on the bar. "Shut up. Just shut up. This is how it's going to be. You're gonna go down to the clinic, you're gonna see one of those nice doctors, and you're gonna ask for some of them head tests. I been reading about this. They do 'em for guys who play football, this whole round of tests where they ask you stuff like your name—"

"Hugo Hunter." I snap my heels together and salute.

"—and other stuff, too, smartass, and they brain-scan you or some crap. It's all scientific. Cutting-edge stuff. After the doctor does that and if he writes a note saying you can fight, you can fight."

I roll my shoulders inside my coat and look for some crack in Frank's delivery, some little opening I can move through and make him give up this idea of his, but Frank isn't showing any give here. I know this look. This is the deal.

"How am I gonna pay for that, Frank?"

I've seen this look, too. Disappointment. Annoyance. The look that tells me I have my hand out too much. I know this, and he knows it. The sigh leaves Frank like air squeezed from a tiny hole in a balloon. He sweeps the rag over the bar.

"Bring me the bill."

"Thanks. You'll see. It's nothing."

Frank runs the hose from the tap to the glass bottle without me having to ask. "You know, it wouldn't kill you to bring these back so I didn't have to give you a new one every time."

"I forget, Frank."

He sets the growler in front of me.

"Kitchen still open?" I ask. "Man, I'm hungry."

"I got some cold sandwiches. Turkey."

"Great."

He dips into the cooler and pulls up a cellophane-wrapped sammy. Wheat bread, moving hard from stale to ancient. I hate wheat bread.

"That'll do," I say.

"With the beer, seven-fifty," Frank says.

I look at him. No opening. It's Frank the Rock, a man with a face for poker but a leaning toward bloodsport. That face would drop in on me in the late rounds, there on the stool, when victory and defeat were an equal stretch. "Bear down now," he'd say. "It's yours for the taking."

"Put it on my tab?"

The face breaks. "Damn kids," he says, and he turns away from me. That's my signal to go.

I'm halfway through the door when the words hit the back of my head.

"You ever plan to pay this tab?"

I toss a backward wave. I want to come back with something quick, but nothing really occurs to me. My smart-assing has about kept pace with my fighting. I know what I want to do, but my body and my mouth don't seem to be cooperating anymore. Anyway, I'll be hard-pressed to pay for anything if I'm not getting in the ring, and even if I do, well, there isn't much to suggest that I'll be squaring that account any time soon.

I TAKE THE LONG WAY AROUND TO THE SOUTH SIDE, along Montana Avenue parallel to the railroad tracks, to the underpass and on to the other side. It's a good half-mile out of my way, and I'm far past the turn-back point when the wind kicks up and the hooked glass handle of the growler starts grinding into my finger.

It's just as well. Cutting through downtown, even the little corner of it that stands between me and the house, means perhaps running into someone who just saw me get dumped on my ass,

and I don't really want to face that. Or maybe it's just someone hanging outside the Rainbow or the Rex who wants to talk about the old days. I mean, don't get me wrong: It's nice to be remembered, especially after all these years, but some nights—and tonight is one of them—a guy just wants to take off his shoes, settle into the recliner and float away in a glass of beer.

The other benefit of going this way, and this one's a harder sell with the beer and the sandwich in my coat pocket, is that I'll get a little exercise in. When I retired, the running stopped cold. My knees couldn't take it anymore, and once you've reached the point where the good money's gone and never coming back, the motivation to get up and pound out the miles pretty much leaves, too. Life is no "Rocky" movie. I'll tell you that right now. Sure, I was like any other kid, screaming for ol' Rock to knock those bums out, but that scene where the kids run through the streets with him and up the steps at City Hall? Straight-up lies. I know. There isn't an intersection here in Billings that I haven't crossed on the run, and not a single time did even one kid, let alone a whole neighborhood of them, fall in with me. I would've let them if they'd wanted to. Running is a damn lonely business.

GRAMMY'S HOUSE SITS DARK ON THE CORNER, a view to the browned-over emptiness of South Park. It is, all at once, a welcome sight and a reminder of the things I haven't done. Time stands still around here. If I forget where I've been and what I'm carrying, forget about the piled-up years and the ache in my head, and if I pretend the porch light is on instead of busted out because I can't afford to replace it, then I can also pretend that I'm coming up on the house after an afternoon of chasing my friends around the park. I can pretend that Grammy waits on the other side of the door with a hot bowl of soup and a grilled cheese, that she'll make me bear down and do my homework, even the long division that's giving me fits. I can pretend that loneliness isn't welcome here.

But I draw closer and reality can't be dodged. The seasonals that used to bloom along the footpath are long gone, the dead husks of them whittled away by the four winters since Grammy last drew breath. Paint flecks away from the eaves, reminding me of the last promise to her that I didn't fulfill. I was laid up in the bedroom upstairs, blankets on the windows to keep out the sun. For three weeks solid I was in there after McGinley knocked me out—Jesus, McGinley. That lumbering ape. I could see everything coming, and it wasn't any use to me at all. He was so big, so much stronger than I was. I just couldn't keep him off. I'd hit him, move away, and he'd be on top of me again, crowding, leaning, that left hand crashing down on me, again and again.

Anyway, this isn't about that. I'm lying up there for three weeks, Grammy's bringing me my meals, because any kind of light hits my eyes and my head just feels like it's going to go off like a bomb. And she asks me, all gentle like, which was her way, if I'd mind painting the siding on the house. And I tell her, "Grammy, of course I will. As soon as this passes, I'll take care of it. I promise."

A week later, she's slumped over in the front yard, and a month after that I'm in Reno, fighting Olson just to pay off her funeral bill. And four years after that, I still haven't climbed up to those eaves with a bucket of paint.

I'll get to it one of these days. I told her I would. I will.

THE CHILD BOWS HIS HEAD, and the ample man in the white T-shirt grabs the chinstrap and gives it one last tug. The man's free hand cups the back of the child's head and draws it near for a few final whispered words. The child nods. He turns.

A single bell slices through the low din of the half-filled auditorium. Winter has draped the windows from the outside, and shadows crease the light inside. The boy moves forward, the sixteen-ounce gloves blotting his face as he holds them aloft, as instructed. Frayed, flopping tube socks with orange stripes cling to his legs below his knees. Terror—some adrenaline, too, but mostly terror—holds him in its thrall, and he sizes up the other boy, the one moving toward him, the one with a confident manner and the new boxing boots and the stenciled satin shorts.

Anticipation hums in the throats of those who have gathered. They've come to see the up-card fights, the ones between accomplished amateurs, but blood is blood, even if it comes from a couple of nine-year-olds. Everybody has to start somewhere.

At once, the boy realizes it—that he doesn't want to be here, doesn't want to fight, can't hold himself together for this. His opponent is on him now and swinging leather, and the boy drops his hands and begins to cry. The right hand screams for his eye as a towel flies in from the corner and the man scrambles toward the ropes.

WINDSHIELD WIPERS CUT THE LADEN SNOW and the passed streetlamps paint the inside of the car in alternating dark and light.

"You showed up, kid. That's the second-hardest part." The man steals a glance into the backseat, peddling a forced smile.

"Yeah," the boy next to him says. "Everybody's scared the first time. I was. I didn't cry, though—"

"The hardest part is showing up again," the man says.

The boy in the backseat clenches both fists.

"Do you understand, son?"

The man glances back again, and the boy raises his eyes.

"You understand?"

The boy doesn't know what to make of this man. Grammy reveres him. "This man," she had said after she brought the boy to the junkyard gym, at a loss to stop the beatings he was taking daily after school. "This man is the boss now. You listen to him. You do as he says." That was four weeks ago. In between that day and this night, the man has been an unbending taskmaster, making the boys run, jump rope, hit the speed bag, the heavy bag. Two hours a day, every day, no exceptions. In the ring tonight, he stepped in as his own son let go with punches to the head and stomach, acting as a shield. "Not tonight," he'd whispered into the boy's ear. "You don't have to do this tonight."

The man looks at him again, sterner now.

"You answer me, Hugo."

The boy releases his fists, and blood surges back to the palms and fingers. "I understand, Mr. Feeney."

The other boy turns to him. "Sorry if I hurt you. Defend yourself next time."

"Trevor." A single word, growled, silences the other boy and turns him around in the seat.

Mr. Feeney eases the car through the slush along the curb. A light burns in the front room of the house. For the past few days as the fight approached, it's been pacing and worry. She'll want to know what happened. She'll fret over the eye that's gone puffy from that first shot.

"You come back tomorrow, Hugo," Mr. Feeney says. "You'll get in there, and next time you'll fight."

"Yes, sir."

Hugo gathers his things. The duffel bag carrying the unused towel and the uneaten bologna sandwich. He clambers out into the falling snow and turns, facing the car. Mr. Feeney gives a wave. Hugo leans forward and taps the passenger-side glass. Trevor rolls down the window.

"Yeah?" the boy asks.

Hugo points at his eye, his finger nestling into the soft flesh below it. "Didn't hurt."

Trevor's face knots up something fierce. He rolls up the window, but not before his father's basso laugh escapes into the night air.

The car pulls away, and Hugo turns to the house. The door opens and she stands there, waiting for him, fretful fingers already in overdrive as she grinds them together.

I SHOULDN'T HAVE DRANK THE WHOLE GROWLER.

Maybe it's the indigestion, or maybe it's the dream. Whatever, I'm standing at the toilet at 1:17 a.m. and I'm making a mess of it, aiming with one bleary eye under a single dusty light from the fixture overhead.

A lot of people might debate me on this, but I think there are four things in this world that deliver a cocaine high (four things besides cocaine itself, I mean): sex, sneezing, knocking a man out and peeing. Still, I'm starting to think there could be too much of that fourth thing, as I stand here draining out what I put in just a few hours ago.

I give it a shake and head back into the pitch darkness of the attic bedroom. The blankets hung by Grammy over the windows remain in place, useful far beyond her intention. I can't take sunlight on its terms. The headaches come on too fast. Frank's been asking me about them for a while now, and it's been deny, deny, deny. I don't want to go to the clinic—a doctor's interests rarely match up with my own. But this is the path available to me, so I'll do what I have to do.

I fasten my hands together and reach for the ceiling beams. My shoulders groan happily in the tingle. I feel better. I consider a return to bed, but there's nothing there for me now. I head for the stairs.

EVERYTHING IN THIS HOUSE HAS A PLACE. Mine is upstairs, out of the light of day. Grammy's is down here, in the bedroom she occupied from 1952, a bride who never saw her man come home from Korea, until she left us—left me—four years ago. I don't like to talk about her being dead. I mean, yeah, she is, but she lives here still. I can feel her moving through me in the silent moments, so much that I got rid of the TV so I'd never be distracted and never miss her. She finds me in my dreams sometimes, as she did tonight, and I'm frustrated that I lost her when I woke up. I can't bring her back. I can only wait until she returns.

I run my finger along the pictures and plaques on the west wall, her monument to me. It's a mashup of school portraits and boxing ribbons and stories from the *Billings Herald-Gleaner* clipped out and preserved in shadowboxes. And there, big as all life in the middle, is a picture of the two of us from March 13, 1997, when I rented out a ballroom for her seventieth birthday. She's silver-haired and beautiful, and she's kissing me on the cheek as I hold up a fist. Everything was looking up then. Everybody was happy.

I sit on the edge of her bed, and I breathe in deep through my nose, and she's there. She lingers still.

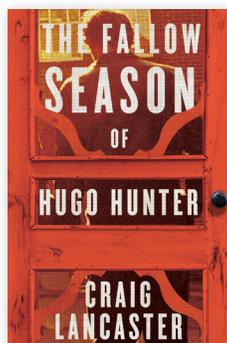
AN EARLY MORNING LIKE THIS, I might be up for a drive to the West End and a corner booth at IHOP. But I sold the car, and I'm not sure where the next check is coming from, so I'd best hold tight to the money. I scrounge around in the kitchen and scare up some saltines and peanut butter, and I sit at the blue kitchen table and build me a few cracker sandwiches.

I eat them one at a time, peanut butter sticking to the roof of my mouth and ground-up crackers sinking into the fissures of my teeth. I sweep a finger through my mouth and loosen the residue. The back porch light casts a faint glow on the grown-over yard. Add that to my list.

I guess I'm going to have to start where I left off and talk it over with Frank. Yeah, he's done for me. But I've done for him, too, many times over. I need to remind him of what he owes. He won't open the place till the drink-at-lunch crowd starts milling around Montana Avenue, and that's a good number of hours away. No matter. It's sit static in here or be moving out there. No choice at all.

I grab my sunglasses and charge the door. The light's coming up. The roasting of sugar beets, the smell of a sick child, fills my nose. The refinery belches into the morning sky.

Nothing changes on its own. You gotta change it, right?



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