

## The Pugilists

by Sharman Ober-Reynolds

My husband and I attend a boxing class in Mill Creek, Utah, three times a week. My husband has Parkinson's Disease, and the class is designed to make us “rock steady” to fight against it. Our coaches are mostly young and enthusiastic. To keep us motivated and help us get acquainted, they ask silly questions at the beginning of each class. Some of our answers have included: “What would you be if you lived in the ocean?” Dory and Marlon. “What historical figure would you be?” Fred and Wilma. My husband, a retired philosophy professor, loves questions and comics. He has large compilations of *Pogo* and *Krazy Kat*, which he reads almost daily alongside philosophers Quine and Putnam.

The boxing class is more practical than philosophical. It reminds me of kindergarten for seniors in slow motion. There are lockers and mats, and the gym is festively decorated for the holidays. Strings of colored lights hang between punching bags in the winter, brightening up the gym, which is tucked away in an ice-encrusted strip mall. On Valentine's Day, we saran-wrapped pictures and words of things we want to fight against onto our punching bags; political tyrants, various exes, insomnia are popular targets. Ours is Parkinson's.

Our warm-up consists of Frankenstein walks, butt-kicker walks, and pretending we're stepping over a bucket walks. Moving in the same circular direction, flapping our arms, each of us high-stepping to our internal rhythm, we look like we're from Monty Python's Ministry of Silly Walks. We box to the Beatles and Elvis and do core strengthening exercises to Louis Armstrong. It is an arduous hour, and we all work up a sweat.

Boxing comes naturally to me since my dad, the son of vaudeville performers, was also a pugilist. His was a short and not an illustrious career. Still, we have the muscle-man pictures of him flexing in boxing trunks to prove he put in the work to look the part and his report of having once been a sparring partner for Jack Dempsey. When it comes

right down to it, though, for both my dad and us, boxing was and is therapy. My husband and I signed up online. There was a more torturous journey for my father to the boxing ring. But I am getting ahead of myself. I have to go back to my dad's childhood, which I have puzzled together from overheard conversations.

Working with trained animals, magicians, ventriloquists, pantomimists, and jugglers may sound alluring. However, this was a difficult life, especially for families who sometimes traveled forty-two weeks a year. In 1913, my grandmother had had enough, or not nearly enough, of what she needed. So, Rosalia took her six-year-old daughter and left for a more permanent home with her sisters in Seattle, leaving my dad and uncle with their father in Salt Lake City. Unable to perform his soft shoe act in the local vaudeville circuit and care for his ten and eight-year-old sons, my grandfather boarded his boys at St. Ann's Orphanage. This was an act of love with a good deal of desperation thrown in. St. Ann's, built to care for the destitute children of the city, was a sturdy, three-story red brick building with wings on each side enfolding a grassy courtyard on fifteen acres in South Salt Lake. Overlooking the courtyard was a cupola with a white statue of Our Lady Beauraing of Belgium, her arms outstretched, and a plaque admonishing children to "kneel and pray."

At the orphanage's cornerstone ceremony in 1899, the Salt Lake Tribune quoted Thomas Kearns as saying, "the accidents and deaths inseparable from the hazardous occupation of men engaged in mining throw upon the hands of the charitably disposed many helpless orphans." Mr. Kearns, a mining magnate, understood the risks of digging for copper, and as owner of the newspaper, he made sure everyone knew he was one of the "charitably disposed." And, of course, the disposed of were in need of charity. His wife made the initial \$55,000 contribution, though he spoke for her at the commemoration. "Her daily dream and thoughts were ever devoted to the welfare and comfort of those little orphans, who have forever been deprived of a single moment of a parent's love."

St. Ann's was both a blessing and a curse for my father and his brother, providing sustenance though "not a moment of a parent's love." There were about ninety-two young children at St. Ann's under the supervision of five Sisters of the Holy Cross. Given all the work the nuns had to do, I'm surprised they found the time to convert my father into a right-handed boy despite God having made him a leftie. At the orphanage, my father's

clothes were too large and then too small, but never comfortable. He was often cold and worried about his sickly little brother. When Duffy wasn't sick, he was angry and started lots of fights. My dad had to end them, so he developed his boxing skills early.

When my father had enough of the nuns at St. Ann's, he ran away to the leafy green eighty acres of Liberty Park, a few blocks away, to work out on the playground equipment. After a few trips, he improvised a gymnastic routine and became an eleven-year-old ambidextrous fugitive orphan with a plan. He waited until a crowd gathered, then showed off a variety of circles, holds, and beats on the uneven bars. Sometimes, this earned him a nickel. Escaping from St. Ann's gave my dad a moment of control over his life.

Three letters my dad wrote his mother while at the orphanage survived and found their way back to our family. These neatly written pages were business-like and uncomplaining, itemizing the number of eggs he collected each morning and describing how he'd fertilized the vegetable garden by mixing in chicken poop and compost after weeding the cucumbers, onions, and carrots. Grandma Rosalia kept these letters for over forty years. The envelopes were worn enough to make me think they had been read and reread many times; the corners crumbled if you pinched them too hard, like old crackers. I'm sure my grandmother wrote back with encouragement. One of her notes probably conveyed the sad news that his little sister had died of appendicitis, and my grandmother was now alone. But my father never kept any of his mother's letters; he must have let them go just as she had let him go.

What does it take to leave your children behind? For me, it would take everything, which suggests how miserable I believe Grandma Rosalia was. I think my father and his mother came to some understanding. Or maybe not. It is said that to understand is to forgive, but it may be the other way around. Until you forgive, you guard against the possibility of understanding. And even if you forgive, you still may not understand. My dad, who was as silent as a tree, rarely talked about his mother, so I can only guess what went on in her mind, how she recorded, reordered, and reconciled those events, or what they came to mean to her.

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My father and husband have more in common than boxing; they are both tender-hearted and wouldn't kill as much as time. Of course, there are differences as well. Despite the nun's best efforts, my dad never got more than an eighth-grade education, while my husband went to school for twenty-four years. Fighting could have injured my dad's young brain, while our boxing class claims to provide neuroprotection to our old ones. We hoped to improve our balance while my dad aimed to knock his opponent on his keister for a count of ten.

In Rock-Steady Boxing, we maintain a particular stance. Our left legs are advanced, our left arms are tucked next to our bodies, and our right arms are drawn back, ready to strike. This is our pose as we move around the room, hoping to improve our stability. During the fight, it's crucial to remain standing, whether your opponent is in the boxing ring or Parkinson's. If you're knocked down, you can take Our Lady Beauraing's admonition to kneel and pray. Then, you must get up and jab, block, parry, bob and weave, duck, clinch, counter, peek-a-boo, slip, cross, roll, hook, and land a solid uppercut. Our instructor yells, "Guard your face. Protect your money maker," and we remember when we were pretty like Ali.

After several years at St. Ann's, my dad and his brother joined his father, uncle, and grandfather on a dry farm in Ryrie, Idaho. My dad was no longer a child and his adolescent body was awkward and restless with the onset of adulthood. Fate crept through his veins, and hormones surged, making him an image of his parents and a stranger to himself. Remembering his youth, my dad used to say that he never had enough of it and that it was over before he was done with it.

How big is the world when you're thirteen-years-old? Both infinite and infinitesimal. It's all your wildest dreams but also a cramped bunk in a frontier cabin. Sometimes, the family traveled with the carnival during the long Idaho winters, and my dad's performances at Liberty Park proved to be good training for the gut-clenching stunts he executed as a catcher on the trapeze. Hanging upside down by his knees, his chalked hands would grab the wrists of the flier unwinding from a double somersault, one second before the aerial artist seized my father's wrists. My dad was reliable, 100 percent. Once so vulnerable, my father and uncle now demonstrated feats of strength, tearing telephone

books in half and lifting Model T cars. He did not live a contemplative life. Instead, my dad cultivated a belief that if he was strong enough, he would be able to find and hold onto all the good things he didn't know he was looking for. And I think he did.

How big is the world when you're past middle age and have Parkinson's? If you are a philosopher, the world moves from infinite, passionately argued questions like, "What are we?" "What are we doing?" and "What ought we to do?" to infinitesimal daily changes you use all your diminishing strength to fight against: small steps, small handwriting, small appetite, small energy, and small concentration. One of my jobs is to stand close by and say, "Big steps, sweetie!" so my husband can navigate doorways.

My husband cultivated the belief that if he knew enough, he would find answers to questions even he didn't think to ask, and the world would make sense. We both assumed and were educated to believe that we lived in a world of expanding comprehension. And we do, but our expanding understanding is about things we're not so keen to learn about, like deep brain stimulation, fistfuls of pills, and unending physical therapy. These are my philosophical questions. "Is heartache in your heart or in your mind?" and "Is accepting the fact that I cannot accept what is happening to my husband a form of acceptance?"

With both illness and poverty, there is a feeling of being left out and left behind, as if the afflicted and indigent are stragglers, and people can't quite remember to stay back and help. We have family, friends, and coaches rooting us on, but really, it's up to us. So, we go to Rock Steady Boxing because our lives have been reorganized, and we need to learn new skills. My husband is throwing punches to build up his strength, and I'm concentrating on spine windmills, shoulder pass-throughs, neck-half-circles, stretching exercises to improve my flexibility. My husband is hoping for superhuman powers, including not falling down, and I'm aiming for resilience. The next time our coaches ask us who our heroes are, we'll say, Mr. Incredible and Elasti-Woman." I'm my father's daughter; I've learned that sometimes we have no choice but to fight back.



**Sharman Ober-Reynolds** was born in Los Angeles and completed a master's in fine arts at Arizona State University. For over thirty years, she worked in health care as a family nurse practitioner, primarily in autism research. She is primary author of *The FRIEND Program for Creating Supportive Peer Networks for Students with Social Challenges, including Autism*. In 2023, Sharman was the first-place recipient of the Olive Woolley Bert Awards and has published creative non-fiction in *bioStories* and *Adelaide Literary Magazine*. Sharman now lives and writes in an old house in Salt Lake City with her family and Cadoodle.