

Two Fist Fights

(4 minute read)

I engaged in three fistfights during high school, all of them in my junior year. I described one of them in the first chapter of [Pilgrim River: A Spiritual Memoir](#), so will recount only the other two here. I was not a brawler or even an experienced fighter, but I fancied myself a tough guy, nonetheless. I had the wrong idea about *how* to fight: I thought the proper form was to box like professional boxers on television, dancing nimbly on one's feet and jabbing opponents at the right moment, and that all fighters would follow this form.

The first fight was with Billy Thompson, two years older than me and already out of high school. I don't recall the details of how it began, but here's what I do remember. Two of my friends and I were dragging Main Street in our car (in small rural towns in Nevada, that's what teenagers do on weekends—they drive up and down the town's main street). We were drunk. At a stop light (the only one in my hometown at the time), we pulled up next to a pickup truck in the adjoining lane. Windows were down, curses hurled, middle fingers raised, and ire aroused.

"We're calling you out!" said Billy Thompson, the driver of the pickup. "We'll meet you at the motorcycle race track." (Motorcyclists used the dirt track to compete in speed races). We drove two miles out of town and turned onto a dirt road. Everyone piled out of the vehicles and chose sparring partners. Billy Thompson chose me. I was ready, sure I would take him down quickly. After all, I lifted weights, could do a hundred push-ups *and* pull-ups, and had hill-shaped biceps. A year earlier I had bought a boxing bag and hung it from the floor joists in our unfinished basement. I practiced for hours and had the rhythm down good. I watched the deft moves of Cassius Clay on television, before he became Muhammed Ali. I admired him and thought I was ready to be a good boxer.

Billy Thompson did not box, though. He walked right up to me, lowered his head, and began swinging arms and fists wildly. *Whoa*, I thought, *that's not how it's supposed to be done! This isn't proper boxing!* I had to back up, then try to get jabs in between his wild swings. We both landed punches, but neither of us got hurt. Two minutes after the fight began, Billy rushed me, grabbed me around the midriff, and pinned my arms to my side. "Okay, that's enough," he said. "Let's stop now. Good fight! You're a cool Junior! Let's have a beer."

We spent the next fifteen minutes sharing beer and shooting the breeze, including just what, exactly, had generated the cursing and middle finger raising in the first place. We had no beef with Billy Thompson and his friend, nor they with us. No one could pinpoint a specific motive that made sense. The best response to the question, "so why'd you guys flip us off, anyway?" was, "Dunno, because you were there?"

The next fight was with Freddy Gray, a punk who lived on the south side of the railroad tracks (the bad part of town where a number of hoodlums lived). Here's how it happened. A group of classmates and I were sitting at a table in the school library, studying and talking. I got up to get a book from the shelves, but when I returned, my chair was gone.

"Where's my chair," I asked.

"Freddy Gray took it," someone said, and pointed over to a nearby table. Freddy had his back to me, seated in *my* chair. *That punk!* I walked to his table, stood directly behind him, gripped both sides of the chair where the legs meet the seat and, with a deft move, yanked it out from under him. He tumbled to the floor, then scrambled back up, red-faced and angry. "I'm calling you out, Garcia. Meet me in the front parking lot after school!"

"I'll be there," I said.

A crowd of a dozen or so had gathered to watch the fight. We removed our jackets and faced off. I got in the first punch, a hard right to his upper left jaw. Freddy's head snapped back and the force made him back up a couple of steps just to keep his balance. "Whoa!" said one of the onlookers, "*he's* gonna have a black eye." I should have rushed forward quickly when he was off balance, and pummeled him, but I wasn't thinking about tactics. Instead, I was suddenly and acutely aware of an excruciating pain in my upper right arm and shoulder. It felt as if the ball joint of my upper arm had slipped out of the shoulder socket. I could barely move the arm. But I had to try. I couldn't cede the fight! I rotated my arm, slowly, as Freddy gathered himself. I tried to hide a grimace—the pain was fierce—then finally the ball joint popped back into place. What relief!

Freddy and I continued to jab at one another (he boxed, too—no wild swinging). About thirty students were now watching the bout. Five minutes into the fight, I threw my upper left arm out of its socket, and got it back in place with the same rotational motion I'd used for the right arm. The fight continued for maybe ten minutes. Many punches back and forth, without much consequence, except that my shoulders became increasingly inflamed. The agony! But I was too proud to let on about it.

Freddy Gray called the end of the fight. "OK, let's call it quits. It's getting close to dinner time." I agreed. After the fight, I could not even get my jacket on: the simple act of placing my arms into the sleeves caused such pain. I asked someone to drape it over my shoulders, without telling anyone about the racking pain! That night, I could not turn in my bed or sleep because my shoulders burned like fire. It lasted for days. I told no one.

My shoulders have never been the same. Sometimes, say, when I threw a baseball, my arm would pop out of the socket. I had to quit the high school baseball team. If I reached into a fridge with my arm at an angle just so, it would pop. Sometimes it happened during sleep, when turning on my side. When I got older, I had an orthopedist look at it. He said the ball joint wasn't popping out, but that an axillary nerve was getting pinched by bone and cartilage when my arms

made circular motions. No matter, my dreams of being both a tough guy and a professional baseball player were at an end. And if that didn't suck enough, there was an even more humbling outcome to that fight: despite my best right punch, Freddy Gray didn't even get a black eye.