

It could be just another boxing gym, dingy and functional as such places usually are – no windows, concrete floors painted dreadnought gray. The weight benches and iron plates have dents and duct tape swathes the misshapen heavy bags. The voices tell you that you're somewhere in the city: drawling Caribbean English and lightning Spanish, the gruff tones of the white working-class, even a glottal growl from somewhere in the broken Soviet Union. The sultry day makes the gym a sweatbox but nobody complains although they're all wearing heavy cotton trousers – all the same institutional shade of olive-green. Everyone is quiet; all faces are turned to the ring.

In one corner Kevin Rooney – one-time trainer of Mike Tyson – preps his fighter, a tall, pale welterweight with chiseled arms. The fighter, Jay Crumb (12 wins, 3 losses as an amateur), has the distracted look of a man anticipating contact. Crumb nods at Rooney's instructions but you can tell he's barely listening. Across the ring Dell, Tizz and Ruler gird their fighter, Frost (2nd degree murder, 25-to-life), a chocolate-dark, thickly muscled man. Frost looks younger than his 38 years but none of Dell's fighters look their age. The bell rings and the boxers move forward to touch gloves. Then the first concussive thuds, the hooting and shouts as the crowd presses around the ring

Green Haven Correctional Facility, maximum security, hulks amidst the forest and fields of southeastern Dutchess County, eighty miles from New York City. Round a bend on Route 24 and it's over you, the Death Star, weathered concrete walls thirty feet high, running for over a mile and sunk fifteen feet below the soil to discourage great escapes. Twelve observation towers crown the walls and the guards on high wield automatic rifles. Pass through the metal detector, through the 'bubble' guard room where you wave a marked hand beneath the UV light, and you can't help but feel uneasy whether it's your first visit or fifth. The electronic metal gates open and close behind you with solid clanks, a guard hands you a visitor pass and warns you not to lose it. 'Otherwise we might have to keep you,' she says and laughs. You can't help but feel uneasy, especially if you've come to fight.

That's why I bring my boxers here, Rooney tells me as we head down a six hundred foot-long corridor painted pine-green and creamy lime.

Boxers are all con artists, Rooney says as we walk. With his red face and reddish-brown hair, Rooney looks like a B-movie drunken Irishman. Rooney is fifty-plus pounds overweight and only his broad back tells you that he was once a fighter.

You ask them if they're nervous coming to prison, Rooney says, And they tell you, 'Oh no.' But they are. That's why I like to bring them here. The whole boxing game is about pressure. Coming down here, knowing that you're going in a prison, it makes things a little more intense.

So far, the prison looks a lot like high school. Smaller windows though, and more bars. Prisoners in groups stand to one side of the line painted down the middle of the corridor. I look down as we pass them, not wanting contact, not wanting to offend. They look at us, strangers in our civilian clothes. I notice that there are many more inmates than guards. That strikes me. I don't know the exact ratio but nothing visible holds the bad guys back.

Rooney is right about boxers and what they say. His fighters – pale Jay Crumb, dark Pierre and all 6'8, 250 lbs. of Andrey – all assure me that, no, they're not nervous, not one little bit.

To detect tension in boxers, you have to watch their bodies in the ring. Through the first round, Crumb moves like a robot. His jab falls short and rushes his punches or waits too long. He doesn't punch in combinations and he falls for Frost's feints and traps. Crumb's father brought him to Rooney from New Orleans two years ago when he was sixteen. 'I got him doing some things okay,' Rooney says of the work-in-progress. 'He's moving his head and counterpunching. A little while ago he beat the state Golden Gloves champ.'

Frost glides, loose-limbed, his lead hand low. The bulge of black mouthpiece and a black triangle of scar high on one cheek makes his expression bleakly serious (After the sparring I asked him why he started boxing. 'In prison, a lot of guys are booty bangers,' he said. 'You either fight or you're a punk. And I don't see myself as no punk.'). When the first round ends, the gym rattles with applause and shouts. You'd think we'd just watched 'The Rumble in the Jungle', not a slow round of sparring, but this is the first time that Team Dell has entertained visitors in over two years.

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Two years! A boxing lifetime. Two years since the world came to Team Dell (as Team Dell cannot go out to the world). Two years with nobody to fight. Two years is a long time to wait, to keep your game face on, to keep training in spite of the disappointments. Easier for fighters to give up, for teams to blow away or be shut down as has happened with every other boxing team in every other prison in New York State, from Attica to Greene, Chateaugay to Clinton, and on to Elmira, Sullivan and Sing Sing. Understandably, prison administrations are ambivalent about the idea of inmates polishing their combat skills.

Boxing shows were scheduled during those two years but cancelled, one after another, due to facility-wide lockdowns: once because a homemade bomb was found in a gym stanchion (they still haven't figured out how that happened), another because of a rumored Y2K strike by inmates (forty 'troublemakers' were transferred to other prisons). The last cancellation followed the near murder of the deputy superintendent in one of the four prison yards by a kamikaze inmate with knives taped to his wrists. 'This is a prison, after all,' Randy Berstell, the director of the recreation department tells me. 'Sometimes you forget that. Sometimes I forget that. The administration tells us, 'Be aware that anything can happen here, at any time.'

A tall, big-boned man with brilliant blue eyes and a florid moustache, Randy went to high school with Kevin Rooney when Rooney was a local celebrity on his way to a Golden Gloves title, both men part of a Staten Island diaspora which seeded upstate New York.

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What's wrong with you in there? Rooney shouts after the second round as he sprays water over Jay Crumb's head.

I'm a little tired, Crumb says.

I don't want to hear that bullshit! Rooney barks.

Well, you know I've been sick, Crumb says.

I said you were going four rounds when we came in! You knew you were going four rounds! You're going four rounds!

Rooney's tone softens.

Listen, he says, These guys are more tired than you. They don't train like we do. Remember that.

For the third round, Team Dell replaces Frost with Machete (Criminal possession of a weapon, second degree murder – thirty to life). A squat, honey-colored Latino, Machete has muscles like an action-figure but then, inmates often do. Weight-lifter bulk runs counter to boxing logic, which posits that weight work limits flexibility. The logic of the prison arms race is different. Inside, bigger is always better.

In the ring, Machete lacks refinement. He punches wide rather than straight and his footwork is rudimentary. A miss with one haymaker sends him plunging through the ropes. What Machete lacks in skill however, he makes up for in brio. Sensing that Crumb's jab is soft, Machete hooks over it, catching the boy full force on the side of the head. Crumb pauses for a moment like he's considering the long drive home and goes back to the lazy jab. Machete blasts him again. Crumb stands under the impact though and then counters with a straight right that clips Machete's chin. Knees buckling, Machete takes a bunny hop backwards.

That's it! Rooney shouts, Now go to the body!

Shadell quickly steps between the fighters and looks into Machete's eyes.

Are you okay? He says.

Machete nods and Dell waves for them to continue. For the rest of the round, Machete tries to overpower the game but tiring Jay Crumb. Machete's lack of experience limits him however, and most of his wide punches deflect from Crumb's arms. The round ends to more applause and the two men embrace.

‘Boxing Commissioner’ of the eponymous Team Dell, Shadell deserves much of the credit for sustaining the boxing team through the lean years. As he referees the sparring, reflections from the ceiling lights glint off his smooth brown scalp. Shadell’s pencil-thin moustache gives him a dandyish air but his short body is as powerful as Machete’s and he radiates energy – pushing between fighters and shouting instructions: ‘Break when I tell you to break!’ ‘Step all the way out!’ ‘What did I tell you about that? Don’t let me see it again!’ The voice of a man accustomed to command. Between rounds, Dell morphs from referee to trainer, speaking urgently to Machete: ‘Jab your way inside. I want you to stick and move, don’t stand and slug with these guys.’

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Later that day, I interview Shadell in the gym office, which looks exactly like the gym office in my middle school.

I’ll tell you right off, Dell says, I was guilty, okay? I did something stupid and I regret it. My moms did for me when I was growing up. She’s always done for me. So I can’t say that I was completely destitute or lacking hope. But being that I was young, I was telling myself, ‘I want, I want, I want.’ You know, the nice things that other people had. Not even that so much as I needed to make money to buy time, for my boxing career and my family.

Dell ended up at Green Haven after an ill-considered attempt to rob a department store in Queens.

At that time, I had a job. I was working at the airport; the woman who I married got me the job there. But I told myself, ‘You can’t train right without money. You need to have a little something put aside.’ When it happened well, I had a bad feeling about the whole thing but I told myself I had already gone too far to stop. As soon as we went inside, I knew I was doomed. I just knew it. When we went in, there were three people in the office. The doors locked automatically behind us, so we couldn’t get out. There was a security guard down in the basement. He put in the call to the police. So, soon enough we had a hostage situation. Negotiations went back and forth for a while. I thought about it

and I told my associates, 'I don't want to have to kill you, but I'm not getting involved in a shootout here.' So we kicked our guns to the door and that was it.

At the time, Dell was twenty-five years old and two fights into a pro career. In the office, he speaks with the same energy that he manifested in the ring, beaming at me with the serenity of a minister or a self-help guru. I discover that Dell's interests extend well beyond boxing. In his years of confinement, Dell has produced three books: *Measured Moments*, *A Treasure Within* (both collections of Dell's aphorisms and advice) and *A Soldier's Caution*, a training manual for boxers. Selected aphorisms from *Measured Moments* read:

Existence: Being is easy and anybody can be. But, being successful is what makes you worthy of meaning.

Intoxication: Never accept a pledge when it has been conceived on the premise of intoxication.

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Next up for Rooney is Leonard Pierre, twenty-three.

He's been with me since he was a baby, Rooney says then adds with pride, He's like a little Mike Tyson.

The first thing Leonard Pierre's father did when he came to the United States from Haiti was to take his eleven-year old son to Rooney's Catskill gym. When Pierre says prison doesn't fluster him, I believe him; he's been to Green Haven a half-dozen times, enough visits to get over the jitters. Kevin is preparing Pierre for his first pro fight, sometime in October. The prisoners remember Pierre and sing his praises.

So what you saying? One man says, Rock, he in trouble?

He could be, another answers, If he come in half-stepping, Pierre'll knock his ass out.

In the opening round, Rock (2nd degree weapons poss., 4th degree poss. stolen property, murder two – twenty to life) comes in at full speed and drives Pierre back. Rock deserves his name: he looks like a mahogany Mr. Universe and stands several inches taller than the Haitian. Rock keeps Pierre at the end of his punches and nimbly sidesteps Pierre's rushes or ties up when Pierre tries to bull inside.

Before the second round, Pierre and Rooney make a few revisions. Pierre is small for a middleweight but Tyson was a small heavyweight and that didn't stop him from disassembling larger opponents. Pierre presses forward in the style of a young Tyson – bobbing from side to side to dodge punches and pounding Rock's body until his arms drop. Pierre then targets the taller man's head. Increasingly, Rock finds himself on the ropes, arms tucked against his side while Pierre bludgeons him with combinations. Rock barely survives the round.

I know I got tired in that second round, Rock tells me later, still high on adrenaline and feeling no pain.

I just started training two weeks ago, he says, When Dell told me Rooney was coming in. Trust me: I'll be ready for these guys next time.

Since Rock looks like he could eat thunder and crap tornados it's hard to see how he could be more ready – but as every fighter knows, there's being in shape and then there's being in boxing shape. I've watched more than one beach bully make the mistake of confusing the two.

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I've been boxing since I was a little boy, Edrick tells me between rounds. One of Dell's youngest recruits he looks like a teenager, smooth face dewy with youth. Edrick he tells me he's twenty-three.

I'm from Puerto Rico, he says, Levittown, Joabaja. I learned my English here, in prison. That's why my English is a little twisted. But I try. I read all the time. There's a great boxing gym in Joabaja. Juan Osario is from there and Simon Brown trains guys there

now. When I heard they had boxing here at Greehaven, I applied for a transfer and after a while, it came through. At first, you know, Dell said I would have to wait, because a lot of guys want to get on the team, but after he saw me on the bag and stuff, he let me join more quicker. When I was growing up, people told me I was going to be champion. All the time. 'Oh, Edrick, You going to be in the Olympics. You going to be world champion.' And then this happened. I was just visiting New York when...I don't really want to talk about it...

Edrick pauses and his face twists like he's near tears.

When I first started with the team here, he says, I thought that we would be fighting every month or two. Then when four, five months went by, I started working on my legal, because that's what's really important. My family is in Puerto Rico so I don't get to see them too often. I'm trying to arrange a family reunion in one of the trailers, so I can see them. They've been here a few times, but I don't get too many visitors. That's why I get down sometimes. I've been inside for six years already. I started smoking a while ago, but now I'm trying to cut down. Boxing doesn't go with smoking.

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The more I walk around Green Haven, the more it looks like every school I ever attended, a particular brand of WWII-era institutional ugly that still blights an impressive number of American cities. Green Haven reminds me of school in other ways, too: in the regimentation and the arbitrary authority, in the threat of violence from peers, and in the overwhelming boredom. Most inmates are men who failed in school and ran to the lure of easy money and good times on the street. They ran early and they ran fast. About two-thirds of adult inmates are functionally illiterate while over seventy percent didn't finish high school and sixteen percent have no high school at all (the United States educating its poorer children about as well as it rehabilitates its prisoners). Prison is school for men who thought school was hell and ran, who ran for freedom only to find themselves in twenty-four/seven, three-hundred sixty-five day-a-year detention. For students at Green Haven, hell is a school with corridors six hundred feet long, walls painted pine and a hideous creamy lime.

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As I watch the sparring, an inmate sitting behind me leans over.

This isn't life, he says, I haven't seen the trees outside of these walls in twelve years.

I look back at him. He's middle-aged with limp, gray hair, a puffy face and narrow shoulders. No boxer this. He's smiling, almost.

I did something wrong, he says, Drugs, you know. But I didn't hurt anybody. I've been here for fifteen years. When I came in, my daughter was three. My son is getting married next week and I can't go to the wedding. I've paid my penalty. They keep saying they're going to change these drug laws but nothing happens. Look at him.

He points to an even older man limping as he shoves a trash barrel across the gym floor.

He's been here for twenty-three years, the man says, This isn't life.

He shrugs an articulate Latin shrug.

Let's watch the fights, he says, Maybe we'll see something good.

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People in here need something, Dell says in the gym office, When your appeal gets knocked around, or you stop getting visits, guys give up. They give up, you know, it's like committing suicide. They start medicating themselves, they stop taking care of themselves, they don't wash their hair, don't shower, they stop going to activities, don't leave their cells. Some of them really do commit suicide. If you don't have something, forget it, you're gone. You're gone. When I got hit on my last parole bid, I had to ask myself why. I realized that my work here wasn't finished. I had did my two books, *Measured Moments* and *A Treasure Within* but there was something missing. So I wrote my instruction manual, my boxing book. I have another hearing coming up and I'm really looking forward to getting out this time. I have two grandkids now; I had my daughter

when I was just 14. I hope when I get out maybe to do something in boxing. But that can wait.

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For his third round, Pierre faces Ali (1st degree robbery, four counts: 33 to life). Ali stands at about the same height as Pierre but he's massive, golden brown arms twice as thick as Pierre's darker ones. Ali starts quickly, hitting Pierre with combinations and then slipping the counters. He's the first southpaw of the day and his style seems to confuse the tiring Pierre, who doggedly follows.

I've been sick, really sick, Pierre says after the bell to the inmates around his corner.

Rooney cuts him off.

You don't talk about being sick in the ring.

Yet he seems more willing to excuse Pierre than he did Crumb.

How much does that guy weigh? He says, gesturing toward Ali.

155-160, says an inmate named Red.

Is that all? Rooney says and shakes his head.

He's a southpaw too. You know I hate southpaws.

The next round goes more slowly and Pierre has his moments but he's wearing down. Rock staggers him with a good right cross and Shadell jumps between.

I'm okay, I'm okay, Pierre says and Shadell lets them continue. The round ends with the two men standing in front of each other, launching rockets at close range. Pierre wobbles again but the bell saves him and the two men bang chests in salute. Vigorous, sustained applause rises from the crowd.

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There the boys are, Rooney says, his small, sharp eyes on the window as we pass down the corridor. We stop to look out onto the yard, a city of men. On a day of record heat the prisoners stand in the shade of the walls, a few diehards under a vicious sun playing basketball or lifting weights on the benches scattered across the meager grass. A small group has gathered beneath a television in a wooden hutch set about six feet high.

That's their place, Randy says, as we start to walk again.

The guards don't like to go out there. I go out there and it's fine but I'm not a guard. The inmates are out there whenever they can be.

Even in the winter? I say.

Yes. On the coldest day of the year.

How can they go out in the middle of winter? I say.

They put on their coats and their hats and their gloves and their sweaters and they go. No matter how cold it is they're out there, lifting. They might not go during a blizzard, but as soon as the snow tapers off, you see them shoveling paths to the equipment and clearing off the weight benches.

Randy laughs.

It's not like they have a whole hell of lot else to do.

Later in the day, I leave the gym with Machete in the inmate throng. We come to a checkpoint and have to wait for a guard to take us through. Sweat makes a greasy sheen on Machete's olive skin. Boxing, he says, is the most important thing in his life. He tell me he boxed as a kid but hadn't for years until he ended up at Green Haven. Dell recruited him out of the yard where Machete had already begun to do boxing workouts on his own. I ask Machete how he ended up at Green Haven. He shrugs.

I was at a club, he says, And this guy got killed. A month later, the police arrested me.

He shrugs again. Matter-of-fact, almost a challenge, that's what happened and here I am and who the fuck are you? It's the street attitude and I don't ask any more questions.

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That's the biggest obstacle we have, Dell says, When I'm trying to recruit fighters. That 'street' thing.

Most inmates walk into Green Haven with a street attitude, tough guys who plan to keep it together inside: 'fuck it, I'll do my time,' 'fuck it, I'll get respect.' In comparison to the gangster front, Dell and his 'think positive' fighters come across like a choral group (But a choral group that can kick ass). Yet every inmate I talk to – even Dell's guys – stands across a gulf from whatever it was that sent them to Green Haven. It's a break in time, a permanent separation between cause and effect. 'Something happened to somebody and somehow I ended up here.' Even those who admit, 'I did something stupid' become extremely vague when it comes to what that stupid something was (A defensive reaction perhaps, on the part of men who might have once said too much).

If street culture led to the downfall of these men, it's no surprise that the street has found its way into the prison, since most inmates carry street codes inside of them, a fractal reproduced through eight cell blocks 2309 times. Nowhere is the street more present than the yard, street pressures intensified by proximity, street-in-a-box. Yet the yard is precisely where Dell aims to recruit.

A lot of the guys on the team, he says, Were guys who were getting into trouble in the yard. I look for that kind of person. You know, guys who are starting fights, or guys who are involved with gangs, or guys who are easily led. I go up to them and say, 'Hey, why don't you come and try boxing? This is what we're about.' Or say the guys like to play ball, so I tell them, 'Let's have a game of 21 or Horse or something, and if I win, you come and check out the team' (Randy tells me that the 5'6 Dell is an excellent basketball player).

The wait-list for the boxing team is backed up for as long as four months although, Dell says, 'If a guy is in trouble, I'll make an exception.' Once an inmates joins Team Dell, he has to fulfill a number of requirements to stay on it.

We ask them, 'Do you have your diploma? Your GED? No? Are you taking classes?' 'Well, I'm thinking about it.' So we tell them, 'If you want to stay on the team, you have to be working toward your GED. And you also have to enroll in the Alternatives to Violence Program. A lot of guys don't have discipline for it, and so they drop out. Boxing takes a lot of discipline.'

The educational requirements are Dell's innovation. Boxing also serves as an outlet for the aggression that builds up in prison life.

Sure guys get a little hot sometimes when they're sparring, Dell says, But nothing goes back to population from in here. Beefs stay in the ring. All a guard has to do is pull the cord in the gym for an emergency and that's the end of us. The disciplinary records of my fighters are excellent.

The fighters, especially the younger African-Americans, have embraced Dell's precepts and reflect his upbeat attitude. From different fighters, I hear the same praise, hear the same mantra of 'You can make it if you try.' In general, the Latin fighters don't speak in the same tone of converts, Latin/Black the obvious divide on the team, as it is in boxing as whole. I'm told there have been white fighters at Green Haven but I don't see any. The greatest crisis in team history occurred when a group of Latin fighters tried to break away from Team Dell. A competition was planned to determine who would run the team but the leadership of the breakaway movement was weak and the rebellion faded. I think the lesser loyalty of Latin fighters is because Dell doesn't speak their language – even when they speak English. The language Dell speaks is one to which his black fighters are accustomed, borrowing as he does a vocabulary and cadence from an African-American church that is locked in a perpetual battle with the street.

Dell's message has made him a Green Haven celebrity. At the end of each of the weekly, inmate-produced news programs (on WGHF News), Dell delivers a short motivational speech. There is also a Team Dell promotional boxing video.

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After the sparring, Rooney and I wait outside the shower room for his fighters. A group of security guards walks past us in the long corridor and a guard calls out.

You're here to beat these guys up? I hope you kick their asses for them. I wonder why it's okay for you guys do it, but if *we* try something...

The other guards all laugh.

Maybe I should start boxing, the wag says.

I think they'd like that, Rooney says.

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In the drab gym office, a guard and I listen to the gurgling percolation of a coffee maker. I tell him his job must be pretty tough and he gives me a look.

How many films have you seen about prison? He says, And in any of those films, have you ever seen a guard who wasn't a bastard? Didn't think so. Let me tell you, it's a great job, that's why guards have the highest rates of any profession for suicide, alcoholism and divorce.

I can't even imagine, I say, Still, some of the prisoners seem like decent guys.

No, there aren't any good inmates, he says, You can't think of it like that. Each one of them will fuck with you. It's funny, the guys who are worst on the inside aren't even the worst in here. We had the Amityville Horror murderer, killed his whole family, but he was always nice and quiet. Never gave anybody a problem. When I started this job, I thought I'd be having long, philosophical conversations with the inmates.

You did? I said. The guard pours out two cups of coffee. It tastes like diesel-engine degreaser.

These guys have a lot of time on their hands, right? I figure they'd do a lot of reading. Well not once have I had that conversation. You know what happens here, how it really is? A new guy will come in, and the first thing he does is go up and punch a guard in the face. And what's the worst thing that can happen to him? The worst thing is that we'll give him a beat down and he gets a month of solitary. That's the worst thing. And then when he gets out of solitary, he's got an instant reputation. Now if he goes and hits another inmate, what's going to happen to him is that he's going to get killed. So who do you think he's going to hit? Don't tell me that there are good prisoners. Not until you've seen what I've seen. I saw a prisoner kill another prisoner with a soup ladle; you know, the spoon part was cut off and handle sharpened. We got the call and we went to pull the guy off, he was stabbing him so hard that sparks came up off the floor every time he missed. Afterwards he said, 'Oh, I didn't mean to kill him.' Well, then why did you stab him ten times in the stomach? Tell me there are good prisoners see when you see seventy guys fighting in the yard, hitting each other over the head with weights, in a fight that started over a t-shirt. I saw Dep Schneider when he got attacked. If you saw how he looked...He was so hacked up and bloody, I didn't even recognize him as the same person. And he's a big guy, he wanted to get a night stick and go back out and take care of it, but he collapsed from blood loss. And what's going to happen to that guy who did it? A year in solitary. Maybe. Then when he gets out, he's gonna have this tough reputation wherever he goes. He was already serving a life sentence so what does he care what else happens to him?

We stand in silence after that, drinking our coffee.

I have about six of these a day, I say, When I'm really working hard.

The guard says he averages twelve.

Besides having New York's only boxing team, Greenhaven also holds the state's only 'death house.' Located in a penthouse on the fourth floor of Building 2, the death house

received the world-renowned electric chair ‘Old Sparky’ – aka ‘Big Juicy’ – from Sing Sing in 1969. As New York's current death penalty law specifies lethal injection as the preferred method of execution, Sparky has since retired to a museum in Alexandria, Virginia. The death house consists of two cells with outdoor recreation pens, a visiting room, a viewing room for witnesses and the execution room with the gurney.

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Last of Rooney’s fighters to step through the ropes is the Brobdingnagian Andrey (8 wins, two losses), a symptom of what the heavyweight division has become, the realm of the Slavic titans. Andrey came to Rooney from Byelorussia by way of Cuba, where he had been training for the 2000 Olympics when his manager convinced to turn pro. Next to Andrey, Robert Lockley (2-5, 3rd degree possession stolen property) seems sylphlike, although he’s over six foot and two hundred pounds himself. The mismatch seems complete when Andrey begins with a series of swift jabs; the big man is fast as well. Yet as the round develops, Lockley frustrates Andrey the giant, sliding under his punches and tangling his arms. Lockley's long braided dreads swing behind him like a basket of snakes. As heavyweight matches so often do, the rounds degenerate into a plodding dance. The two men shove and grunt, Andrey pushing down on Lockley’s neck with a forearm although Dell keeps warning him to stop. The elephant ballet has the red-faced Rooney turning purple.

He’s hitting you with uppercuts? How can that be? Stop holding him. Stop fucking holding him! What’s wrong with you, you came all the way to prison to meet a woman?

Today, Andrey can’t seem to summon the requisite ferocity to crush, kill, destroy. Andrey has the genial demeanor of so many super-sized men, defensive adaptation to a frangible world. Only when Lockley lands the occasional hard shot does Andrey become upset enough to punch with bad intent, as if to say, ‘How dare you!’

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There has been a lasting relationship between prison and boxing, both domains of desperate men. For many poor urban teenagers – in gangs, with juvenile records and

broken families – boxing is the last possible handhold they can grip before falling into crime. The strictures of boxing often gave them a sense of control that they can apply to the rest of their lives. Boxing brought fame and wealth to a few who came to the sport in the Greybar Hotel. The heavyweight champion Sonny Liston learned to box in prison, as did contender Ron Lyle, and the former middleweight titleholder, Bernard Hopkins. Kevin Rooney directed the now defunct boxing program at Greene Correctional Facility, and he points out that many of the inmate fighters face their greatest challenges only after they get out.

Guys do good things in there, Rooney says, But 90% of them, once they're out, once they're on the street again, they try to go straight for a while. But they need money. So they go back to doing what they were doing before. And hope they don't get caught.

The street is more difficult to escape than many imagine: in the last decade alone, the list of champion-level boxers who have found themselves in jail or prison includes Mike Tyson (rape), Riddick Bowe (kidnapping, assault), Fernando Vargas (assault) and Aaron Pryor (drugs), among others. It must be horrifying for these men, successful, wealthy, to find themselves back in places they thought they'd escaped forever, like waking up to find a dead man knocking on your door. At Green Haven some of the old-timers remember an inmate named Johnny 'Devil' Green, waving around a copy of Ring Magazine. Green's face was on the cover.

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At the end of the third and last round of Andrey's tussle, the applause, steady after every round, grows heavier, and not just for the dancing bears. It makes sense to me now: for a few hours, the inmates have been able to relate to the world as something other than inmates, and in a way men like to define themselves, in struggle against men. Although violence brought most of the inmates to Green Haven, on Dell's boxing team violence, the giving and taking of blows, ritualized and supervised, helps to forestall future violence.

The prisoners cross over to our side of the ring and cluster around Rooney's fighters. They offer Crumb unsolicited advice, marvel at the immensity of Andrey, renew their acquaintance with Pierre, talking about rounds he fought at Green Haven four years earlier. 'I'm gonna see you on TV, man' they tell Pierre. 'You're gonna be a champion.'

Time presses however: the inmates have to hurry back to their cell-blocks for the afternoon count. They file out, amped and voluble from one of the great events of their year. As Rooney gathers his equipment, a young man sidles up to him. I'd noticed him nerving himself up to approach the trainer at the edge of Rooney's admiring claque. The boy tells Rooney how much he admires his fighters, how he boxes himself, had a few amateur fights outside, trains hard, dreams of nothing else but becoming a pro. The boy has a baby face belied by swollen biceps and bull neck.

How old are you? Rooney says.

23, the kid says.

What's your bid?

18 to life.

For a body?

Yeah. Plus time.

Did you do it?

No, the kid assures him, It was a frame.

Rooney nods and hoists his duffel bag, and together they walk out of the gym.