

The Winnipeg Kid

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JOHNNY GOLDEN'S BLOND ringlets are slick with sweat and blood. His blue eyes—beautiful, almost feminine—swell with tears. The sclera of the left is beet red from a burst vessel.

Those eyes are among the few parts of him that can move, and they dart around in fear.

I have him in a death grip. He knows it. I know it. 60-odd thousand paying, stomping, ululating fans know it.

Our projected images tower over the crowd, our flexing muscles and soiled weapons and sweat and blood rendered in oversized three-dimensional detail.

And while well-padded men still slash at each other with crooked sticks down the highway, hockey is a ghost of its former glory. Sports night in the Americas now demands its champions to arm themselves with steel, and Olympic Stadium is Montreal's coliseum. The nosebleed seats offer just as good a view of the outsized spectacle as the front row, and they're just as pricey too. Technology has been kind indeed to the blood sports.

Johnny Golden is on his back. My knee presses into his solar plexus and I hold his straitjacketed arms in an iron grip. Even bent on one knee, my projection towers above the top row of seats.

Johnny's eyes are wide. He expects he's a dead man. He's been thrown into combat with me, and I'm the meatgrinder, the widowmaker, the last-person-you-ever-look-at. I'm the Winnipeg Kid, and they only let me fight the expendable ones anymore.

I lean toward Johnny and an expectant hush falls over the crowd. The sound of thousands of lips licking. The crowd knows what's coming. I lean in. Lightly, very lightly, I place my lips on Johnny's forehead.

And in that moment I see. I know.

Johnny Golden: Jon Haxon. Father was a neighbour from two floors above, fact unknown to both men. Mother failed two attempts at self-induced abortion. Jon aged 2: Mother incarcerated for violent drug crimes, now dead. Jon aged 10: First stint in juvenile detention. Most fight training behind bars. Jon aged 11: Pimped out by foster parents. Murders both—suspected but never arrested. Jon aged 15: Legally emancipated. Jon aged 18: Refused entry into United States Army based on psychological screening and criminal record. Jon aged 19: Adopts "Johnny Golden" and joins the league. Jon today: Aged 20. Record of 3-1. Resuscitated from one defeat and one victory. Unemployable outside the profession.

Loved by: None.

Will be missed by: None.

My gift.

I am, when needed, the sword of justice. And I am, when needed, the Angel of Death.

For Johnny I'm the latter. Death will be a mercy. I grant it.

I pull his arms even tighter behind his spine and Johnny arches his back in agony, exposing the sweet pink of his neck. I release one hand, but before Johnny can respond it is at his neck. I tear at his exposed artery with fingers like iron. I dig, pulling the life from his neck by the handful.

Virtual blood sprays out of the dome of the once-again-open stadium, to the very extremes of the massive projectors, and the illusion crackles off into the damp Montreal night. The crowd convulses in a spasm of murderous rapture.

Actual blood sprays on me. Hot and tangy—details the crowd will never appreciate.

Johnny is a limp side of beef. I let him fall to the mat. This is a death that the league doctors can't reverse. My signature moves all mean the same thing: Resuscitation is impossible. I rise to the ovation.

...

They whisk me off to the locker room while cheerleaders fornicate during the first intermission.

I'm not done for the night. The winner of the first bout fights the last one, but it won't take much to prep me for the finale. I'm the Winnipeg Kid, and I'm always ready for a fight.

Doctor Steve, reeking of bleach, ambles in with not a bit of urgency. There's no rush: I'm not dead, and Johnny Golden is. Permanently.

He attends to the dead man first, and I jibe: "I think his blood pressure's a little low, doc."

Still inspecting, he says with a mirthless chuckle, "Low but stable, Kid."

Doctor Steve fills his lab coat impressively, the starched white now stained with Johnny's blood, and he looks like he could be one of us.

"If you ask me, I say Johnny Golden is better off."

"Mmm hmm," he says without looking up from the gaping neck and mangled jugular, possibly entertaining some wishful notion that he could put the poor bastard back together. Sorry, doc, this one is drained out and used up.

I wonder what he's hiding behind that carefully lowered brow. Revulsion? Fear, maybe?

I could find out, but I don't dare.

I nearly bestowed my gift on him years ago. It was after one of my early fights—a rare loss. I was in bad shape, but I hadn't died.

I remember: As I lay on my back, the world spinning around me, that singular smell of doctor's bleach snapped me into momentary sharpness. Doctor Steve was above me, a needle in one hand.

I didn't even mean to—it was an instinct. I grabbed him with my iron grip and I pulled him close. He fumbled the syringe. A nurse tried uselessly to pull me away.

And I laid a kiss between Doctor Steve's eyes. Then I saw inside him. Outside him. *Stephen Lavery, M.D.: Born in Ottawa to Louise Silber and Richard Lavery. Stephen aged 5: Enters private kindergarten. Stephen aged 7: First taste of Scotch at his grandparents' winter retreat...*

But no more than that.

Instead, suddenly, darkness. A needle—maybe Doctor Steve's, maybe a nurse's—must have found my flesh, and a soporific flooded my veins. I never learned the rest of Doctor Steve's testimony. Whatever fitting end he deserved, that interruption had saved him.

And we both know it.

That needle saved me too. I'm allowed to kill *certain* employees of the league. Allowed and encouraged. That's my job. But league doctors are not among them. Society would have judged any sentence I passed on Doctor Steve that night long ago as murder. Far better that I didn't have the chance.

A roar from the stadium shakes the locker room, breaking my reverie. Doctor Steve is done with Johnny Golden and he has readied a suture for me. I haven't even realized until now that among Johnny's final acts were a pair of gashes on my cheek and left biceps. Doctor Steve turns my head to the side, and his gloved hands probe my wound. Suddenly his face is close to mine.

Some day, doctor.

Some day.

Four referees fly in with a stretcher, and now Doctor Steve has real work to do. I recognize the hapless gladiator. This gargantuan beast—carpeted in his own natural shag—is Bear Brock. He lies on the gurney with eyes wide open but rolled back out of sight. "Cardiac arrest," barks one of the refs.

“Shit,” says Doctor Steve, examining Bear Brock’s torso. “What the hell happened to him...?”

“He just got a dozen heavy punches to the chest from Call Him Joe,” says the ref.

Doctor Steve shakes his head and reaches for the defibrillator.

When it’s over and Doctor Steve has cleaned up, he returns to finish the stitching job on me.

“Is he going to fight again?”

“He was only dead for fifteen minutes—he’ll live,” he says off to the side of me. “I doubt he’ll fight again, though, unless the league springs for a new heart. In which case he won’t be fighting *you* anytime soon. Can’t throw away an investment like that too quickly.”

Doctor Steve yanks off his gloves with a pop, scribbles something onto a screen, and leaves for the break room without saying a word. He looks as cheerless as ever. It can’t be easy keeping up with the Winnipeg Kid.

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The evening’s finale.

His name is Dead Eye Dorado. I know the book on this character. He wears a quaint Lucha Libre mask, painted like a skull, black and fluorescent yellow. But the eyes are filmed over with reflective lenses.

The first bell rings and the projectors turn on. Two virtual juggernauts towering over the crowd. They see us in every detail. We don’t see them at all.

The second bell rings and our dance begins. The sound of the crowd fades into a faraway whine, drowned out by the hammering heartbeat in my ears.

Weapons flash.

Dead Eye draws first blood at three minutes into the fight, slicing down the fleshy part of my right forearm. The pain is an annoyance. I return the favour with a jab under his ribs just seconds later.

And so on.

We're contractually obligated to let this go ten minutes. After that the real fight starts.

I am surprised, at a few ticks past 600 seconds, to learn what a good fighter Dead Eye is. Faster, suddenly. Stronger. Smarter.

Flash. My left thumb is gone, flying into the night sky. I hear the crowd's lusty enthusiasm. It's nothing the doctors can't fix—it's not even the thumb of my death-grip hand—but still.

He's outmanoeuvring me.

Overpowering me.

Flash. My left ear—gone.

I think: *This is not the book on this guy.*

And then I think: He's been sandbagging it in his previous fights, feigning ineptness. It makes no sense.

A blow to my face, too fast to defend. I cough and swallow something in a gulp of blood.

I stumble.

And at last I'm pinned to the blood-slick mat. Dead Eye is lighter than me, but he has me pinned with his knees and just one hand. His blade is in the other, but he tosses it away. It flies out of the ring. The crowd approves.

With his free hand, Dead Eye reaches for my mouth. I bite at him and notice only now that my incisors have gone missing. That's what I'd swallowed just minutes ago.

He pinches the loose flesh of my mouth and my lips pucker despite my protest.

He lowers his own forehead to my lips.

I strain to move away, but he holds my head in place.

Against all will, I place a bloody kiss on the forehead of the fighting mask, right above those impenetrable reflective lenses.

The Winnipeg Kid: Carroll Klingman, Jr. Born in Winkler, Manitoba. Son of Carroll senior and mother Anne.

No, this isn't how it works. I twist and struggle, uselessly. Dead Eye holds my face in an iron grip of his own.

Carroll aged 7: Learns his "gift" at the deathbed of maternal grandmother, dying of cancer. Euthanizes her.

No.

Carroll aged 11: Passes sentence on his wrestling coach.

No, this is all wrong.

Carroll aged 17: Euthanizes father. Euthanizes mother.

Carroll aged 18: Joins the league.

Carroll aged 19: Dies in battle for the first time. Fights again four days later.

Carroll today, aged 33. 216 mercy killings to date. 80 executions. A handful that were both.

Carroll tonight, now. Surrounded now by a crowd of thousands. They scream for him, with a passion fuelled by revulsion and fascination. The Winnipeg Kid, willing to act out the murderous fantasies of the timid masses.

Not a sword of justice.

Not an angel.

A monster.

The crowd does not love him.

They will miss the killing. But they will not miss him.

Dead Eye's gift.

He pulls his own forehead away from my lips and releases my jaw. His hand now freed, he reaches for my throat.

In the fleeting moment, I wonder if this death will be one that Doctor Steve can reverse.

And I pray not.

THE END