

Michael Taylor
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The Combination

The future as envisioned by Johnny Smith tends to be an inhospitable place, full of looming disasters, deadly fires and storms, fatal accidents, murder. The dictionary defines the latter as the unlawful and premeditated killing of one human being by another. But as Johnny will learn, there are circumstances where killing is a tragic but hardly illegal outcome of a certain type of culturally sanctioned recreational violence, one in which “premeditation” can be construed as “motivation” and the natural instinct of a man to avoid injury or even death can similarly be viewed as cowardice. In this arena – a square of canvas, twenty feet by twenty feet – killer and victim willingly clinch, shadowed by fate and destiny, and woe to the poor psychic who tries to play referee.

Logan Airport. Flashbulbs pop, reporters and photographers jostle for a better view... and somewhere back in the line of ticket holders approaching the metal detectors Johnny Smith cranes his neck to see what all the ruckus is about. Johnny and Bruce are returning from a quickie “research trip” to D.C. (we won’t learn much about it here), checking in again for a commuter hop to Bangor International, and for once he’s not the center of media attention. Instead, the crowd surrounds a powerfully built man with a gleaming shaved head stands who’s standing framed in the rectangle of the metal detector, his arms outstretched like a pumped-up Christ as a smiling security guard runs a hand wand over his torso.

“Holy shit,” Bruce says, clearly awed. “That’s Danny Dominguez.” Johnny gives him a blank look. “Danny ‘The Punisher’ Dominguez,” Bruce repeats. An avid boxing fan, Bruce quickly fills Johnny in on Dominguez’ back story: his Mike Tyson-like rise and fall was, ending in a jail stint, was one of the bigger sports stories of Johnny’s coma years. Now Dominguez, a thuggish power-punching middleweight, is

trying to resurrect his career and image of invincibility with a series of pay-per-view fights against mostly lesser-skilled opponents.

Johnny's profoundly unimpressed. As far as he's concerned, the so-called "sport" is legally sanctioned violence, pure and simple. But he's grateful that today at least the media spotlight is on someone else as he steps through another metal detector – undetected by the crowd of airport paparazzi mobbing Dominguez. We see one of them, a short guy, being elbowed aside, then desperately hoisting his digital camera above his head to shoot blindly.

Meanwhile, Johnny's reaching for his computer bag when he's brushed by Dominguez, who's moving away with his entourage. As a camera flash strobes, Dominguez shoots Johnny a quick, annoyed look... and Johnny goes into a vision...

Dozens of camera flashes are exploding now as Dominguez bulls a slighter, older fighter across a ring with a lacerating series of blow. The sound of his heavy gloves thudding against flesh and bone is all but overwhelmed by the roar of a huge arena crowd brought to its feet by the instinct that a knock out is imminent. It is. Dominguez lands two thunderous lefts that set up the coup-de-grace: a haymaker right hook that starts at Dominguez' hip, accelerates upwards like a missile, and explodes into his hapless opponent's face. All the crowd noise drops out as, in agonizing slow motion, the other boxer lands heavily on the canvas. A referee looms over him, counting ten over the body that twitches then grows still. Dominguez lifts his arms in victory, but still he man doesn't move, and now amidst the bedlam a ring doctor crouches to peer under the fighter's eyelids, then check his pulse. As he reacts in horror and shock...

Johnny snaps out of the vision to find a security guard hustling him along. Bruce gives him that “what just happened?” look. Cut away to the photographer, studying the LCD screen of his camera, reacting to what he’s shot. He looks down the corridor, but both Dominguez and Johnny are gone. MAIN TITLES.

We pick up Johnny and Bruce at a newsstand in Cleaves Mills the next day. Bruce is thumbing through boxing magazines as Johnny insists that he’s sure about what he saw. “He killed a man, Bruce. With one punch.”

“One punch?” Bruce says.

“Okay, a combination,” Johnny amends, and somewhat clumsily mimes the series of punches he witnessed. Bruce reminds him that while a death in a boxing ring is hardly routine, it’s nothing new. They’re not talking about high school hockey players with bad hearts, but seasoned pros who know the dangers they’re facing. In other words, maybe this is another case Johnny should leave alone. But Johnny’s adamant: if he can prevent a man’s needless death, he’s got to do it. Why else would his visions have shown him this tragedy?

Bruce sighs, then finds what he’s looking for in the magazine: a picture of Dominguez’ next opponent, a boxer named Richie Avila. Johnny recognizes him immediately as the man he saw die in the ring. Bruce has barely heard of the 37-year-old fighter. The magazine pegs him as a second-tier contender who never got his title shot and now is on the downside of his career. While hardly a washed up “tomato,” the odds makers give him little chance of going twelve rounds with Dominguez, never mind beating him.

In the first act, Johnny will use every behind-the-scenes approach he can think of to stop the fight. This means confronting an array of commercial interests that together dwarf even Culp & Belling, the pharmaceutical company Johnny went up against in “The Outsider.” So Johnny looks for a potential weak link.

Using Purdy’s connections, he gets a meeting with an HBO/Showtime honcho. Or perhaps this time he uses his own guile, getting his foot in the door by letting the cable network execs think he’s going to pitch a show based on his own celebrity persona, then hitting them instead with his fight vision. An uncomfortable scene for the suits, who now have to backpedal: they weren’t expecting quite this much “reality.” But Johnny doesn’t let them off the hook, asking how it will sound later if the public learns he warned them and they let the fight proceed anyway? Although the network still doesn’t cave, he may leave the suits unsettled, at least one of them remembering the Culp & Belling affair, and the fact that Revivatin has yet to come back on the market.

Johnny also approaches Avila directly, traveling with Bruce to the boxer’s gritty gym in L.A. Bruce’s better understanding of the environment may smooth the initially awkward meeting, but it doesn’t help when Johnny lays his vision on Avila. The fighter’s startled; his father, who’s also his trainer, is irate. He doesn’t need a phony psychic screwing with his son’s head before one of the most important fights of his career. He kicks Johnny out.

So far, Johnny isn’t having much luck. And things don’t improve when the latest edition of the Enquirer hits the news stands. It shows Johnny and Dominguez at the airport with the querying headline, “The Slugger and the Psychic: What Does Johnny Know about Punisher’s Comeback?” Enquiring minds would like to know; some would

even insist on it. Like Cathan Donnegal, Maine's answer to Tony Soprano, who slides into Johnny's booth at the local diner and suggests that if Johnny does indeed know how Dominguez' next fight is going to go, or any of the ones after that, he would be wise to share it. He gives Johnny a little time to think about it, just enough time for Johnny to realize that if he's going to be forced to share his knowledge with a mobster, he may as well share it with everyone. He calls Dana – and soon all hell breaks loose, much as it did in the Culp & Belling affair, only this time the “Smith Factor” works a bit differently, to Johnny's surprise and alarm. While his warning is met with typical derision or amusement in the mainstream news, with perhaps the occasional story warning of the very real dangers of boxing, it also vastly increases public interest in this otherwise run-of-the-mill bout. The colorful and chaotic boxing community, which on the promotional side is only a step away from professional wrestling, actually *embraces* Johnny's warning. After all, a “death match” is an even better draw than a “grudge match.” Of course, no one is professing to actually believe Johnny, and as a sop to those who might – and, of course, as yet another promotional stunt – the fight's promoter and the cable network insist on full medical exams for both fighters, including CAT scans. They show nothing wrong with either man.

Much as Mike Tyson did in real life, Dominguez boasts about *how* he'll kill Avila – driving fragments of his nose up into his brain. Avila, for his part, coolly dismisses Johnny as sick publicity hound, and says Dominguez would be better off worrying about his own health. He fully intends to win this fight.

Johnny's attempt to save a life has again proved hopeless. Or so it would seem, until Avila shows up on his doorstep, looking far less confident than he did on TV. “Did

you really see me dead?” he asks. Johnny nods. Then Avila asks him if what he sees always comes true? And Johnny says no – sometimes he can help change the future. Avila nods, relieved. He’s not about to back out of this fight. He can’t. But maybe Johnny can help him change the future. Maybe he doesn’t have to die. Maybe he can even win. For that reason, he wants Johnny in his corner, and Johnny, seeing no other chance to save this man’s life, agrees.

And from this point on, we take Johnny out of Cleaves Mills and plunge him into a totally alien environment: the world of the struggling journeyman fighter. He works with Avila in his gym, and at the boxer’s insistence may even live with his family – including his pregnant wife and young son, who’s already training to become a boxer himself. Johnny gets to know these people. Despite Avila’s father’s continuing suspicion and hostility, he slowly becomes part of this boxing family, though he still struggles to understand what drives Avila to continue in this brutal sport.

His abilities help him see into the boxer’s past, reliving old victories and punishing defeats. But he focuses on trying to find ways to change Avila’s future. Maybe by putting on Avila’s gloves he’s able to put himself in the fighter’s shoes in the upcoming fight – and we see close-ups of Johnny in the ring, reeling from the blows he absorbs. He may even make a “scouting” trip to Dominguez’ camp, stealing an item that can give him more visions. Working with Avila’s father, he may even succeed in recreating the exact combination that he saw bring Avila down. But now it’s almost as if Avila has a blind spot that makes him vulnerable to this series of moves, because try as he might, he can’t seem to learn to counter it. In an alarming training exercise, a sparring partner knocks him on his ass with the same moves. As the night of the fight draws

nearer, Johnny's visions still show the lethal punch getting through. It's as though try as he might, fate won't be budged.

The scene shifts to Atlantic City, where the fight is being staged. The night before, Johnny can't sleep. He goes to the empty arena, approaches the ring – and realizes he's not alone. Avila is here too, standing in the dark. At this point, he no longer wants to know what Johnny knows; whatever he has seen, or still sees, is immaterial. Johnny wants to know how he can just ignore the danger; what about his family, who depend on him? Is this fight worth the risk?

And now Avila tries to make Johnny understand. He indicates the ring, says this is his world. Within those 20 by 20 space, it doesn't matter what Johnny Smith or anyone – including God – has to say about his chances; here, he's the master of his own fate. (And guys, I'm scrabbling toward some sort of meaning here, though I haven't quite got it in mind yet. Something that Johnny can learn from. He's got the fate of the whole wide world on his shoulders, but this guy's boiled fate down to what happens in the space of a boxing ring. Maybe it's that however big your world, or the task you've appointed for yourself, is, what matters is that you believe in yourself, and you meet your fate squarely... or some such shit.)

Act Four is mostly devoted to the fight – a big-ass sequence, like the fight at end of Rocky, or Ali, or The Set-up. It's brutal, but maybe Johnny sees the tragic beauty in it as well. The fateful round approaches and Johnny touches the ropes and still sees that terrible combination coming. And then he and Avila, who's on his last legs, trade a look... and Johnny understands finally what it's all about, fighting against the odds no matter what they are... and suddenly he's cheering Avila on, *believing* in him, trusting

his heart instead of his visions, and this small thing – not an action even, just a feeling – that somehow changes fate, because Avila reacts to it, takes heart from it, and not only survives the punishing combo when it comes, but lashes back at Dominguez, punishing the Punisher with a flurry of his own that keeps the crowd on its feet. The final round is his... though not the fight. Dominguez still wins, but in a way Avila has won as well.

There's an irony at the end – Avila's survival has dealt a blow to Johnny's reputation. Maybe it's the first step in Johnny's "fall" after his year or so of celebrity. But of course this is one case where Johnny couldn't care less about appearing to be wrong.

Maybe we play a tag with Bruce and Johnny. They're trying out a new fitness regimen. As they put on their gloves...