

Punch for Punch
By Alexander Saxton

READER: Even before the food arrived, something bad was in the air around the dinner table. I've never felt at home with my wife's family, and for that matter, neither has Alison, but this time, I had this, special sick feeling, and when I looked at Alison's face, she looked pale and greenish, and I could tell that she was feeling the same way.

Maybe it was just the lighting. Alison's parents say the chandelier is an antique, but just because something's old, doesn't mean it has value. The fixtures were flower-shaped, but made by someone who obviously didn't know what flowers were supposed to look like, and the light that spilled out of their thick, greasy glass was green and cheeselike. It felt like the kind of light you would get in a morgue.

There was something, bad, rotten, in the smell of whatever it was my mother-in-law was cooking, and the rest of the family was smoking too much, just, cigarette after cigarette, soaking the tobacco with their saliva, and sucking the smoke through the plaque-clogged gaps in their yellow teeth.

The hair on the back of my neck and arms had been standing on end from the moment my wife and I had been seated at the end of the table, and I was already counting the seconds in my head until we reached the safety of our car.

I'd had the bad luck of being put next to Donna, my wife's aunt. Donna always wears a Jesus fish brooch, but if you ask me, of the two, she's more like the fish. And that's only if it's one of those deep-sea fish with the sharp teeth that we're talking about.

She was holding her cigarette between two fingers with her palm faced up and her elbows on the table. On someone else, those drawn-on eyebrows of hers would have been sort of funny, but there isn't anything funny at all about the flat, black stare she gives people. We were talking about my job.

DONNA: I guess you make a lot of money doing that, do you?"

READER: I'm comfortable.

DONNA: I'm *sure* you are.

READER: Donna always looked at me with the same expression on her face: dry nostrils flared, one side of her mouth dragged down, never blinking. As we talked, I could see her gaze drift so that she was looking over my shoulder at my wife. She lifted one of her eyebrows.

The muscles in my jaw were starting to tighten, and so I reached across the table for a distraction.

R: So, Carson, what do you do?

Carson twisted his neck to look at me, which did strange things to his neck tattoos. He was sitting with his chair pulled out parallel to the table, and my sister-in-law, Marcie, was sitting in his lap. Donna turned to look at them as well, and noticed for the first time what kind of a scene they were making. She froze in her seat, and I had to keep myself from smiling. Donna had never looked at me with anything but dislike, but I'd never been on the receiving end of anything like the kind of cold hatred that spilled out of her eyes at that moment..

DONNA: What are you doing, Marcie. We're at the dinner table.

Marcie pulled herself away from Carson's neck and flipped her hair.

MARCIE: Yeah, So?

I watched a tendon slowly stand out from Donna's neck.

DONNA: So, we're sitting at the dinner table, not in the gutter behind a whorehouse. In this family, when we're sitting at the dinner table, there's an expectation that you behave like a lady, and not like a slut.

CARSON: Hey, you can't talk to her like-

MARCIE: (quietly) shut up, Carson.

CARSON: But she can't-

MARCIE: I said shut up.

Silence gathered over the table. Alison says Donna and Marcie have been at war since Marcie was a kid, but the way Marcie reeled when Donna called her a slut, like she'd been slapped, made me think the word was a new weapon in their arms race. A gas attack. Without saying anything, Marcie climbed into her own chair.

At the other end of the table, Alison's grandpa lit another cigarette. Grandpa Buck almost never talked. I'd asked Alison if this was because he had hidden depths, but she'd always told me it was because he had nothing to say. Buck's face was a shitshow to look at. Ugly from birth, a past career as a failed boxer had left him with a squashed mess of a nose and a face asymmetrical with scar tissue. In a shitty town like this one, a resource-extraction town with the last of the resources extracted back in the late 70's, boxing was a rigged game, and the old man

had made ends meet by throwing fights and letting people beat him in the face until they knocked him out.

But maybe that's too generous to him. From everything I've heard, as a boxer, grandpa Buck didn't have a lot of strengths other than getting hit in the face, and he lost a plenty of fights without anyone paying him to do it.

Alison was the first one to try and break the silence.

ALISON: Aunt Donna, that word you used-

MARCIE: Shut up, Alison. I don't need you to protect me, I can take care of myself.

ALISON: But,

MARCIE: Shut up!

CARSON: Marcie, come on, Marcie.

(SFX: door slams)

DONNA: Well. Well.

ALISON: I'm going to check in on her.

DONNA: She'll be *fine*.

ALISON: *You* should be ashamed of yourself.

DONNA: Me? I don't know *what* you're talking about. *Me?*

(door slams again.)

DONNA: *Well.*

That left me alone with Buck, Carson, and Donna.

Another long, deep silence lagged over the table. Nobody moved, except to bring cigarettes to their lips, drag out the poison, exhale, and lower the cigarettes again.

Carson didn't need to say anything: the psycho look he was giving Donna summed it up. Donna didn't need to say anything. The scaly smile that had slithered over her face spoke for her

Buck didn't need say anything, because he never said anything.

And that left me.

My view on things is, conversation is something that facilitates an important illusion. Most of the time, when people talk, they don't actually exchange of a lot of information. Because facts are small, and you use them up too quickly to support the weight of a conversation. But that's okay, because the point of conversation isn't to say anything, it's to let us fool ourselves into thinking that we're human beings engaged in some kind of mutual social enterprise, when the reality of it is, we're all just apes trapped together in a series of confined spaces.

And if you just give your imagination a moment to run through that brutal scenario, you'll see why I try not to spend a lot of time with my wife's family.

So I gave it a minute, and I took a couple mouthfuls of warm, stale beer, and just when I was about to open my mouth, Donna cracked first. Maybe something to do with the fact that Carson hadn't stopped staring at her with his blue, crazy eyes since Marcie had left the room.

DONNA: What *is* taking the food so long?

(Silence)

DONNA: I mean, honestly, I love Ruthie, but she takes forever in the kitchen.

(Silence.)

DONNA: I'm going to see if my sister needs any help.

(SFX: Door closes)

When she was gone, Carson seemed to relax a little bit. He leaned back in his chair and lit up another cigarette. He'd been pulling his from a ziplock bag in his pocket. I don't know where you get a ziplock bag full of cigarettes.

READER: So Carson, What do you do?

He looked me in the eyes for a long moment before he replied. It was something he seemed to do a lot, but I wasn't sure if it was calculated to put people on edge, or if it was just that he was too stupid to say anything without giving himself a minute to piece together the words.

CARSON: I'm a fighter.

READER: What, like boxing?

I'll admit, I kind of just said it to piss him off. Carson was too heavy for boxing, and he was wearing two separate pieces of UFC branded clothing to Sunday dinner.

He stared at me for another long minute, eyes burning with dumb aggression. I wondered if his eyes ever didn't look like that, or if that's what he looked like when he was talking to his mother, or watching a funny movie, or having sex.

CARSON: You serious? No, nobody does *boxing* anymore.

Down at the other end of the table, Buck shifted in his chair.

R: What, so you do MMA or whatever?

I don't know how it was possible, but Carson's eyes bulged even more. I couldn't have cared less that I'd pissed him off, but it started to occur to me that maybe Carson was even more disturbed than most of Marcie's shitty boyfriends.

SFX: (Wheezing laughter)

We both turned to look for the source of the noise. To my shock, Buck was laughing.

CARSON: What. What's so funny.

(SFX: wheezing laughter continues in background)

But Buck wasn't done laughing yet. He kept shaking in his chair for a good fifteen seconds, making noises like a leaky faucet. I couldn't imagine when the last time he laughed had been. Carson and I just sat in silence, watching him until he subsided. I think he would have wiped away a tear, if somebody hadn't punched his tear ducts shut thirty years earlier.

At last, he spoke,

BUCK: MMA? MMA fighters are all pussies.

Well, so far as jokes go, it's not one that I would have laughed at for fifteen seconds, but I'll admit that I took a certain pleasure in watching Carson react to it. He changed hue like a cuttlefish, first plaster white, and then crimson purple.

CARSON: You don't know what you're talking about, old man.

BUCK: Course I do, I've seen it. None of those guys could ever make it in boxing. None of 'em got the fitness, 'none of 'em knows how to throw a goddamn punch.

I could practically feel the heat coming off Carson's face and the cold coming off his white clenched knuckles.

CARSON: I'm telling you, That you don't know what you're talking about.

And then I saw something I didn't like creep across Buck's face. A shifting, cunning look that slid over his ruined features like the shadow of a bird. Usually, Buck had the bored, vacant eyes of a man just waiting to punch the clock on life. But at that moment, something flared to life in those sockets, something cruel and knowing and for a moment, I saw where Donna got her snakelike glance. Buck was wearing that look Donna got when she knew something the other person didn't, and was going to use that knowledge to get something that she wanted.

BUCK: Alright, If you feel so sure, then what do you say we make a bet on it. You want to make a bet?

CARSON: What kind of bet.

BUCK: What, are you scared of a little bet?

CARSON: I'm not scared of anything, I just want to know what the bet is.

That mean smile of Buck's spread out wide. And Carson might have been dumb, but he wasn't blind, and he saw the evil look on the old man's face just the same as I did.

BUCK: I'll bet you that a seventy-five-year-old boxer can still throw a better punch than an MMA fighter in his twenties."

R: (laughs) Buck, that's ridiculous.

But neither of them seemed to hear me. Carson narrowed his eyes for a moment, but then he spread his lips in a mean smile of his own.

CARSON: (low mean giggle) Are you saying what I think you're saying?

BUCK: Yeah. That's what I'm saying.

Somehow, without me noticing, Buck had shifted in his chair, so that his back was straight and his shoulders were square.

BUCK: You and me, right here, right now, punch for punch.

R: This isn't funny, Buck.

CARSON: You're going to get yourself hurt, old man.

R: He's right, Buck, this is dangerous.

But neither of them were listening to me. Buck just stared at Carson with that cagy smile.

BUCK: We'll just have to see about that, won't we?

(SFX) two chairs being pushed out)

R: Guys, Please stop this.

CARSON: What are the stakes?

BUCK: The only stakes that matter, fatboy. Knowing who's right, and who's wrong.

R: Please, that doesn't matter. Please stop this.

They'd both moved into the open space on the other side of the table, and Buck was cracking his neck and rolling his shoulders. He still had that gleam in his eye like Carson was a puppet he was making do a lewd dance. For his part, Carson seemed to be taking the whole thing as a kind of joke, and because it was a brutal joke, probably as the only kind of joke he found funny.

R: Donna, Allison, can you get in here?"

(SFX: door opening) After a second, Donna strode in, wiping her hands on a dishtowel.

DONNA: What is- Dad, sit down, what are you doing.

Without even looking at her, Buck put up one finger.

DONNA: Dad-

BUCK: - Stay out of this, Donna. You're a dumb bitch, just like your mother. I know what I'm doing.

Allison entered through the other door, and froze.

ALISON: What's going on, here?

BUCK: Alison, honey, (SFX: Cracking knuckles) Tell your husband that if he tries to get in the way of this, both me and fatboy here are gonna make him wish he didn't. This is between us.

Alison said nothing, but she wrapped herself around my arm.

R: (whispering) It's okay. They're not going to go through with this. It's crazy.

But deep down, I knew they *were* going to go through with it. Because *they* were both crazy, too.

CARSON: Who's going to go first?

Carson still had this meaty smile plastered over his face. Buck was still looking like fox among chickens.

BUCK: I am.-

CARSON: (sniggers) Seems fair to-

But before Carson could finish his sentence, Buck crossed the distance between them, and struck him in the face so hard he crashed sideways into a shelf and almost fell to the ground.

All sound seemed to slow in the room. Carson put both hands on the sideboard and steadied himself. He took several deep breaths, and shook his head. I was impressed he was still standing. It had been one hell of a punch. He turned white, and then green, and then he screwed his eyes shut for a long moment again, and re-opened them. He turned red again, and his eyes blazed blue, and his nostrils flared. He took off his sweatshirt, revealing huge, hammy, pale, tattooed forearms. I suddenly realized he must weigh close to three hundred pounds, and thought what an enormous weight that was to come hurtling at the old man's face.

ALISON: Please, Stop this now. Grandpa, you're going to get hurt.

BUCK: (laughs) Too late to go back now. Besides, *I know what I'm doing.*

Buck was smiling wider than I've ever seen anybody smile. He *knew* something, and whatever it was, it was bad news for Carson.

CARSON: (Breathing hard) That was a pretty good punch, old man.

BUCK: Just a warm-up, fat boy.

CARSON: But get ready, because I'm about to show you how it's really done.

BUCK: (laughing) Come on, fat boy. Show me how to punch, *I want to see it.*"

Carson roared like an animal and threw himself at the old man. Buck was laughing that rusty laugh of his right up until the moment that Carson hit him.

The sound it had made when Buck hit Carson was a meaty crack, but when Carson hit back, the sound came out wrong, more of a wet thud. His fist hit Buck's cheekbone, but instead of knocking him back, it kept going forward as the face sagged and caved in before it. Even before he had completed the motion, Carson's eyes were widening in horror and revulsion, and he began to recoil. But the damage was done. Buck tumbled back through the air, left side of his face collapsed like a rotten gourd, and a tendril of clear gel from one ruptured eyeball followed him to the dining-room floor.

A crystal moment of silence hung in the air, then shattered on the floor when the screaming began.

Donna and Alison shrieked and rushed to the body. A moment later, Alison's mother had entered the room and joined them, and Marcie was there a split second after that.

Amid all the screaming, all I could do was stand there, looking at Carson. He came around the table, wide eyed and barely able to put one foot in front of the other, dabbing in openmouthed revulsion at the vitreous humour still smeared on his knuckles.

CARSON: Why did he do that? Why did he make me do that to him?

He dropped himself into in a chair, and stared at the wall, and said nothing more.

There was nothing more to say. The women were all crying. Carson was catatonic, and I was dumbstruck. As for Buck . . .

The crafty smile that was still fastened to his lips, and the knowing glint that still seemed to flicker in the depths of his dead remaining eye, seemed to sum it all up.