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Rain Dogs

Written by Adrian McKinty

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ADRIAN
McKINTY
RAIN DOGS



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Oh how we danced with the Rose of Tralee,
Her long hair black as a raven,
Oh how we danced and she whispered to me,
You'll never be going back home.

Tom Waits, 'Rain Dogs', 1988

Humiliation, unhappiness, discord are the ancient foods
of heroes.

Jorge Luis Borges, *On Blindness*, 1983

1: THE MOST FAMOUS MAN IN THE WORLD

Even the fulminating racists on the far side of the police barriers were temporarily awed into silence by their first sight of the Champ as he stepped nimbly – lepidopterously – from the bus on to the pavement in front of Belfast City Hall. He was bigger than ordinary men, physically, of course, but there was an aura about him too. Ten years past his prime, heavier, greyer and with what was rumoured to be early onset Parkinson's, this was still the most famous man on the face of the Earth. He was wearing Adidas trainers, a red tracksuit and sunglasses. He was flanked by two Nation of Islam handlers in dark jackets and bow ties, and a pace behind them was the Reverend Jesse Jackson, a celebrity in America, but a largely unknown figure here.

The Champ ascended the dais and the crowds surged forward to get a better look. And in cop think: the better for some nutter to get a bead on him – *to throw a bottle or a brick, or to line up a concealed pistol*. He was loved, yes, but he was hated too and he had sown equal parts enmity and adoration since his first title fight against the hapless Sonny Liston. Over the years the enmity had diminished, but it still lingered here and there in the hearts of those made vulnerable by the diseases of racism, patriotism and religious fervour.

The Champ took off his sunglasses, tapped the microphone, took a step back and shadow-boxed. Cheers rippled through the crowd. This was what they had come to see. 'Look at his feet!'

someone said in front of me – a sage and pugilistically astute observation. The Champ danced like a kid, like the skinny kid who had outfoxed Zbigniew Pietrzykowski at the Rome Olympics.

He had the crowd in the palm of his hand and he hadn't even spoken yet.

It was a cold, clear day and it couldn't have been shot better by Nestor Almendros: sunlight illuminating the Baroque revival columns behind the Champ's head and the clouds parting to reveal an indigo sky, the likes of which were frequently to be found loitering over the Champ's hometown in a meander of the Ohio River, but which seldom troubled the heavens over this muddy estuary of the Lagan.

He stopped boxing, grinned, and an aide gave him a towel to wipe his forehead. He attempted to unzip his tracksuit an inch or two, but his hand was unsteady on the zipper and the aide had to help him. But then the Champ smiled again, strode confidently forward, grabbed the microphone stand and said: 'Hello Ireland! I'm so happy to be here in beautiful Belfast at last!'

The audience was momentarily baffled by the statement. None of them had ever previously considered the notion that Belfast could be beautiful or that anyone would have come here voluntarily, and upon arrival, would have been happy with this as their choice of final destination. Yet here was the most famous man on Earth saying exactly that. Belfast's default demotic was sarcasm and everyone liked a good joke so perhaps the Champ was only kidding?

'Yes, sir, it's a lovely winter day and it's wonderful to be here in beautiful Belfast, Northern Ireland!' the Champ reiterated, and this time there was no doubt about his sincerity. The crowd, oddly moved, found itself roaring its approval.

He had shadow-boxed, he had waved, he had lied and told them their city was aesthetically pleasing. He could have run for

mayor on a Nation of Islam ticket and won on a first-round voice vote of the council.

The other policemen began to relax a little but I wasn't so easily taken in. I was up on a raised platform with half a dozen other cops, the better for us to keep an eye on the small group of National Front skinheads yelling abuse from the protest-pen that had been rigged up for them next to Marks and Spencer. No more than twenty of them in total but with a wig or a hat they could easily have infiltrated the crowd – although that level of ingenuity was probably beyond their mental capacity.

Another quite separate protest group was the Reverend Ian Paisley's elderly band of evangelical parishioners far down on Royal Avenue, who were not happy about the appearance of a famous Muslim spokesman in the capital city of Ulster, God's true Promised Land. They could be heard singing their discontent in dour Presbyterian hymnals and determinedly joyless psalmody. Wherever Paisley went there was always an element of unselfconscious surrealism, and today he had brought with him a gospel choir, a gaggle of schoolgirl accordionists and a moon-faced kid on a donkey shaking a tambourine.

The Champ ducked from a phantom left hook and then took the microphone stand again.

'Abe Grady, my great-grandfather walked from Ennis, County Clare, to Belfast in 1860. In Belfast, he took ship to America. He crossed the Atlantic Ocean and found a country in the midst of Civil War. A land where my other great-grandparents were slaves. We've all come a long way since then and it's great to be back home!'

More roaring from the crowd.

'But I heard, I heard that some folks here aren't happy that I came here to Belfast to see you today? Is that true?'

Cries of 'No!'

'No, I see 'em. I see 'em over there!'

Defiant cheers from the National Front contingent below us.

‘I see ’em. Look at them! Oh man, they so ugly, when they look in a mirror the reflection ducks.’

Laughter.

‘They so ugly that when they go into a haunted house they come out with an application!’

Roars of laughter.

‘They so ugly that when they go into the bank, the bank turns off the security cameras!’

A great howl of laughter and cheers.

The Champ let it die away until there was only silence.

‘Now they’re quiet, huh? I don’t hear them. Oh boy, they think they can outwit me? I’m so pretty. I’m so fast! I’m so fast that last night I turned off the light switch in my hotel room and I was in bed before the room was dark!’

More laughter.

‘He’s doing all the old classics,’ a sergeant grumbled next to me.

‘If you even dream of beating me you’d better wake up and apologise!’ the Champ said, and took a step back to do some more shadow-boxing. The crowd was deliriously pleased.

The Champ wiped his forehead again and waved. Jesse Jackson waved. The Lord Mayor waved and, pushing his way to the front like an eager schoolboy in Cuban heels, Bono waved.

The Champ talked some more about his Irish roots and his grandmother and great-grandmother. He talked about growing up in Kentucky in the era of Jim Crow. He got serious.

‘Service to others is the rent you pay for your room here on Earth. The fight is won or lost far away from witnesses – behind the lines, in the gym and out there on the road, long before I dance under those lights. Only a man who knows what it is like to be defeated can reach down to the bottom of his soul and come up with the extra ounce of power it takes to win when the match is even . . . Now I know you got problems here in Belfast. I know it. But believe me, there’s no problem that can’t

be solved by the human spirit. You got to work together. You gotta work hard! We're all brothers and sisters, no matter our creed or colour. Someday this will be a peaceful island! And that day is going to come because of people like you! Thank you, Belfast and God bless you all!

'Ali! Ali! Ali! Ali!' the crowd chanted and cheered. The Champ acknowledged them and waved goodbye. He turned and an aide put the towel around his shoulders and began guiding him towards the bus.

'Is that it?' the copper next to me was saying.

'I think so,' I said.

I was glad. The riot gear was making me sweat and already my boxer shorts were drenched. I'd be happy to get it all off, put in my overtime claim and go home to Carrick.

But then, as he was making his way between the crash barriers towards the bus, the Champ suddenly stopped in his tracks, shook his head, turned and walked back on to the stage. He peered out over the audience and then walked down the steps at the front of the stage into the adoring crowd.

'Jesus! He's gone walkabout!' I barked into the radio.

'We know!' a dozen voices yelled back into my earpiece.

The crowd surged towards the Champ. Thousands of them. Young, old, Catholic, Protestant . . . His two handlers were swamped immediately. Swept away.

'I've lost him! I can't see him!' desperate voices yelled into radio mikes.

For an uneasy thirty seconds we wondered if he had been trampled, if maybe we should fire in a couple of tear-gas canisters or baton rounds . . . but then we all spotted him again, just across the street from us.

He was slowly shaking hands and making his way towards my position.

'He's coming to Donegall Place,' I said into the radio.

'Who is this?' a voice asked in the earpiece.

‘Duffy.’

‘He’s coming towards you?’

‘Yes.’

‘Get him back on the bloody bus, Duffy!’

‘How?’

The reply was lost in a blizzard of static.

The Champ moved through the crowd, ‘like a cinder through the snow,’ the peeler next to me said. Fame was his protection. He wasn’t a politician or an actor, but he was sporting royalty and people gave way before him. Arms reached out to touch him, others were holding out notebooks and scraps of paper which he signed with pharaonic detachment.

‘This is DI Duffy, we’ll need more uniforms at the east side of Donegall Place. Could be trouble. He’s heading straight for the National Front demonstrators behind the crash barriers.’

‘Roger that, Duffy, I can send you half a dozen men.’

‘We’ll need more than that!’

Confused radio traffic now. Panic. Fear.

‘He’s going to get into it with the bloody National Front!’

‘They’re going to lynch him!’

‘We need reinforcements!’

Normally, the Champ had handlers with him at all times, to prevent lunatics throwing sucker punches in the hope that they could acquire infamy by coldcocking the great Muhammad Ali.

And now, without handlers or aides or policemen, he was walking right up to the racist NF protestors outside Marks and Spencer.

‘There is no black in the Union Jack!’ the National Front were chanting – nervously – as the crowd followed the Champ towards them.

What on Earth was he doing? Did he think he could reason with them? Ali’s spiel wasn’t going to play with this lot. Ali’s spiel worked on the postmodern ear. Ulster had barely entered the twentieth century.

Yet still he advanced.

Finally, I could see a couple of RUC Land Rovers heading towards us, bringing the much-needed reinforcements, but they were going to be too late – the Champ was going to get to the National Front protestors before they did.

‘Come on,’ I said to the Sergeant. ‘We’ve got to go down there.’

‘Into that lot?’

‘Yeah.’

‘No way.’

‘That’s an order.’

‘Says who?’

I pointed to the Inspector’s pips on my shoulder. ‘Says me.’

‘You’re going to get us both killed . . . sir.’

We climbed down off the platform just as the Champ reached the crash barriers.

A dozen seething skinheads in parkas, skinny jeans and DM boots were yelling at Ali-like caged laboratory animals. Ireland – the land of Charles Stewart Parnell and Daniel O’Connell – had been brought to this happy state whereby Ian Paisley and a skitter of foul-mouthed skinheads were the spokespeople for the disaffected.

The Champ found the skinhead leader, fixed him with his eye and waved his hand for silence.

The crowd hushed and held its breath.

‘Listen to me! Listen to me,’ the Champ began. ‘I took an easy shot. I called you ugly and I made everyone laugh. You riled me up. I heard the war music. But then I remembered to be humble in the face of mine enemies and to trust in the mercy of Allah. I’m here in the spirit of peace and brotherhood.’

The skinhead stared at him, amazed.

The Champ leaned over the crash barrier and put out his hand.

That big right hand.

That big right hand that had floored Foreman in the eighth.

That big hand right that was shaking with Parkinson's.

The skinhead froze. His mouth opened and closed. And then his arm began to raise. He couldn't help himself. It was magnetism. It was kinetic. His eyes were wild. He turned desperately to his friends. *I can't stop myself . . . I mean, don't you see who this is? Sure you can talk about Gene Tunney or Joe Louis or Jack Dempsey but this is The Greatest!*

His arm lifted. His fist unclenched. He shook hands with the Champ.

I'm shaking hands with Muhammad Ali.

'What is it you don't like about black folks?' the Champ asked.

The skinhead was tongue-tied.

'Come on, answer me like a man!'

'I, I . . . I . . . You shouldn't be in our . . . this is our . . .'

'Son,' the Champ said, 'if all you have is a hammer everything looks like a nail . . .'

And you could see it in the skinhead's eyes.

This was it. Saul to Paul. Right now. Instantly. This wasn't Donegall Place, this was the royal road to Damascus.

The Champ destroyed the National Front contingent with a handshake and a grin. We'd never seen anything like it.

'Never seen anything like it,' the Sergeant said. This was the opposite of what happened when the Kennedys came. The Kennedys brought bad voodoo, Ali brought good.

'Duffy, are you still there?' the radio voice asked.

'Yeah.'

'We've got the bus around to Royal Avenue, get him down to Castle Street.'

'OK.'

The Sergeant and I escorted the Champ to his bus which had moved to the junction of Royal Avenue and Castle Street. He was exhausted now. But he took the time to thank me and the Sergeant.

He shook *our* hands. And his grip was strong. The Sergeant

got an autograph but I was too star-struck to think of that.

I walked back to Queen Street police barracks where I'd parked my Beemer and said hey to some grizzled old cops who looked like rejects from Jim Henson's Creature Shop.

I got in my car and drove along the A2 to Carrick Police Station.

Everyone was more or less gone except for Lawson up in the CID room and the Chief Inspector lurking in his office. I decided that I would avoid both of them. I put in my overtime claim and quickly looked at the duty logs. It had been a busy day. Muhammad Ali had come to Belfast, robbing the station of half its staff, and back in Carrickfergus the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland had been showing visiting dignitaries around the old ICI factory in Kilroot. The big-wigs were from Sweden, the rumours being that either Volvo or Saab were going to set up a car plant. It was pro forma stuff. Every new Secretary of State pretended he was going to 'save Northern Ireland' by encouraging investment, but in fact the new investment always went to marginal electoral constituencies in England.

Outside to my Beemer. Home to Coronation Road in Victoria Estate.

I parked the BMW in front of my house: #113, a three-bedroom former council house that sat in the middle of the terrace.

'Hello, Mr Duffy.'

It was Janette Campbell, the jailbait daughter of the thirty-something, chain-smoking, dangerously good-looking redhead next door. Janette was wearing Daisy Dukes and a T-shirt that said Duran Duran on it. She was smoking Benson and Hedges in a way that would have cheered the heart of the head of marketing at Philip Morris.

'Hello, Janette.'

'Did you see Muhammad Ali right enough?'

'Yes, I did,' I said, wondering how *she* knew where I'd been today.

‘Me boyfriend Jackie says Tyson could take him easy.’

‘Your boyfriend is an idiot, Janette.’

She nodded sadly and offered me a ciggie. I declined and went inside my house.

There was the smell of cooking from the kitchen and there were three suitcases in the hall.

Beth was in the living room, coiled on the sofa like some exotic cat, an ocelot, perhaps, reading Fanny Burney’s *Letters*.

‘How’s the Fanny Burney?’

‘The burny fanny’s much better, thanks. You know, since I started taking the antibiotics,’ she said, with a grin.

‘That gag must be fifty years old,’ I said and sat beside her on the sofa.

‘Here’s a brand new one, Janette next door told it to me: why do French chefs make omelettes with only one egg?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Because one egg is *un oeuf*.’

I put my face in my hands and let the riot helmet drop to the carpet. Beth poked me between the folds of my body armour.

‘Well?’ she said.

‘Well what?’

‘*Well*, did you meet him?’

‘Who?’

‘The Champ – as you’ve been annoyingly calling him all week.’

‘It wasn’t really about meeting *him*. I was just there to do a job is all.’

‘Ha!’ she said, with obvious disdain. ‘As if you didn’t pull every string you could. You said “Ali” in your sleep last night.’

‘Did not,’ I said, blushing.

‘How was his speech?’ Beth asked, handing me a still-cold can of Bass.

‘Speech was fine. What’s with the suitcases?’

‘Moving out.’

‘*You’re* moving out?’

‘Yes.’

‘What? When?’

‘Tomorrow morning. Rhonda’s brother’s coming for me.’

‘Tomorrow?’

‘We’ve discussed this, Sean.’

‘We have?’

‘You’ve known all along that this was only temporary. I have to be near the university, my classes. And this, frankly, is probably the least interesting street in the least interesting town in the world.’

‘It’s had its moments in the last few years. Trust me.’

‘Yeah, well, it’s not for me.’

I drank the rest of the beer and took the book gently out of her hands. Beth and I had been going out for nearly seven months and she’d been living here for the last few weeks. Sure, there was an age gap but I wasn’t dead yet and I made her laugh and we got on well. We’d met at the Stone Roses concert at the Ulster Hall, but apart from an affinity for Manchester bands we had little in common. She was a Prod from a wealthy family, who, after working for her da for a few years, was now doing a master’s degree in English at Queen’s. Short red hair, slender, pretty, with a boyish androgynous body, which, if you know me at all, shouldn’t surprise you. Her legs were long and strong and there was something about her deep green eyes.

‘I thought we had a good thing going here, Beth?’

‘Do you ever listen to me? I mean, ever? I told you this was just until Rhonda got the wee house on Cairo Street.’

‘I thought that fell through.’

‘No. It didn’t.’

‘So that’s it? We’re . . . what? Breaking up?’

‘Come on, Sean. Has the weed destroyed what’s left of your noggin? We talked this over two weeks ago.’

‘Yeah, but I thought things had changed, you know? I thought you might want to stay. We’ve been getting on so well.’

‘There’s no future for us, Sean. In a couple of years you’ll be forty.’

‘You’ll be thirty!’

‘It’s not the same. Look, we’ll still be friends. We’ll always be friends, won’t we?’

‘*Friends*. Christ.’

She put her arms round me and kissed me on the cheek. ‘Come on, Sean. You didn’t think I was staying here permanently?’

‘Actually, I sorta did.’

‘Oh Sean, sweetie . . . Look, you must be starving, let me give you your dinner. I made it special, so I did. A last supper.’

Cooking was not one of Beth’s talents, but it didn’t matter. It was hot and it would have taken a culinary genius to screw up an Ulster fry.

‘How do you like it?’ she asked, watching me eat.

‘It’s good.’

‘You don’t think the potato bread is burnt?’

‘That’s the way I like it.’

She leaned over and kissed me again. ‘You say all the right things.’

I put down the fork. ‘Stay. Stay here with me. You won’t regret it.’

She shook her head and got a beer from the fridge. ‘Come on, let’s watch the news and see if we can spot you in the crowd.’

Ali’s Northern Ireland peace initiative was the lead story. He was 46 years old, but he was made for the telly, standing out like a black Achilles among the pasty, blue-white Micks.

‘Oh my God! There’s you!’ Beth screamed delightedly, and it *was* me, coming down from the platform with the Sergeant.

‘You *were* on the TV! I don’t believe it! You’re famous.’

‘Yup. I’m famous.’

‘Now get in there famous man and do the washing-up while I finish off me packing.’

I did the dishes and went out to the garden shed. I rolled a fat

joint with a leaf of sweet Virginia tobacco and a healthy flake of Turkish black cannabis resin.

I'd smoked half of it when I saw that it was snowing. Sunshine in Belfast in the afternoon, snow in Carrickfergus in the evening. That was Northern Ireland for you. I finished the weed and when I went back in Beth had added two toiletry bags to the three suitcases in the hall.

'That's it?' I asked.

'That's all of it.'

'Let me lend you some records. Rhonda probably doesn't have much and I've seen your collection.'

'Nah, it's OK, Sean, I'm not into that stuff.'

'What stuff?'

'Old stuff. Elvis and crap like that.'

'Bloody hell, have I taught you nothing? Lemme play something for you.'

She groaned as I put on my rare bootleg of the *From Elvis in Memphis* sessions, where hit followed hit in the King's last great flowering. You know the stuff I mean: 'In the Ghetto', 'Suspicious Minds', 'Kentucky Rain' . . .

'And to think that this was recorded in the same month as *Let it Be*, the last Beatles album – it's crazy, we've got the end of the fifties and the end of the sixties recording at exactly the same time,' I said.

She sighed, shook her head and smiled that lovely Beth smile. 'I'm going to miss you, Sean Duffy.'

Later that night I lay there in the double bed, looking at her pale cheeks in the blue light of the paraffin heater.

'Honey, I'm going to miss you, too,' I said.