



Manhood, Lorain-Style

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Manhood, Lorain-Style

Nick Kowalczyk

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Sometimes I still travel back home to Lorain, Ohio looking for solace. Gone for ten years, first to college and then to Kansas City and then graduate school in Iowa and now in New York as a college professor, I go back home physically as well as in my memories, far more often than I should. I'm still unsettled about never fitting in. So lately I have been visiting an old family friend, the former mayor who governed throughout my childhood, who tells me stories about local history so that I might feel rooted belatedly.

The mayor's name is Alex Olejko but everyone calls him "Kiki" (pronounced *kye-kye*). Now in his mid 80s, Mayor Kiki is stubborn, friendly, and gregarious, a Polish-American man with a walker and a prosthetic leg and an uncanny historical memory and a fast mouth. With shameless pride, he recounts his glory days to anyone who will listen. To me, he embodies the city itself: Mr. Mayor, Father Town. Born in a Polish neighborhood near the steel mill, Mayor Kiki received his nickname because he played baseball. "The nickname was a hand-me-down," he once told a newspaper reporter. "My older brother John, a bowler, was a natty dresser like Kiki Cuyler, the professional ballplayer. It was an era [the Great Depression] when most other ballplayers looked like they were working on some gashouse gang. Not Cuyler." And because Alex's older brother bowled and Alex played baseball, and Alex was good, he was given his brother's nickname as a compliment. He showed enough promise to play minor league ball in Alabama in 1948, but he returned to Lorain that same year to marry a local girl and work in the steel mill. He joined fast-pitch softball teams like those sponsored by Hahn Manufacturing, the Russo-Slav Club, Koscho Tavern, United Polish Club, and Old Dutch Brewers, and he played sandlot baseball for Lawson Lumber and the National Tube Company. His athletic prowess earned him respect, and after quitting baseball in 1957 he capitalized on his reputation and started a political career: first as a councilman, then council president, and ultimately mayor for eleven years.

When he talks about himself now he makes me laugh. When he talks about Lorain he makes me sad. He tells me that Lorain, Ohio—my decrepit and dying Rust Belt hometown—once was (and maybe still is?) the greatest place on Earth, second to heaven. Often he tells me how bad things were during my childhood, and how he

fought for us. The American Shipbuilding yards on Lake Erie had closed, the U.S. Steel plant on 28th Street had drastically cut production, the Ford Motor Company was laying off workers at the Lorain plant by the hundreds and sometimes thousands, and the city had nearly defaulted. Lorain needed a fighter, the mayor says, even if that fighter was just an ex-jock without what he calls a “high brow” education.

He knows but does not admit that he was outmatched and outwitted against federal politicians, corporate lawyers, chief executive officers, and the media, including the local media, which mocked his boorish ways. In “fighting” for Lorain, the mayor, at a congressional dinner, told congressman Tip O’Neil he was “full of shit” when the Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives contended that cities didn’t need a cut of federal revenue. He physically threatened a four-foot, ten-inch tall secretary of labor in the Clinton presidency, Robert Reich, who much to the mayor’s displeasure favored the North American Free Trade Agreement: “If you were two feet taller I’d kick your ass,” the then-seventy-year-old mayor told Reich. He got the attention of then-President Bill Clinton by insulting him: “What the hell does a hillbilly from Hope, Arkansas know about speaking good Polish,” the mayor asked Clinton after Clinton had praised Mayor Kiki’s ability to speak in multiple Eastern European languages. And the mayor called Ted Koppel, the *Nightline* newscaster, a “candy ass.”

This latter incident deserves some explanation: the story goes that the mayor was invited to the taping of a town hall-style *Nightline* episode being filmed in Cleveland about U.S.-Japanese relations since World War II. Though in the studio audience, the mayor was never asked to speak—which might have been a good thing. He had planned to complain that Japanese steelmakers had built the Alaska pipeline, received part of a contract to rebuild Kuwaiti oil fields after the Persian Gulf War, and “dumped” steel to drive America—and particularly Lorain, Ohio, home of the world’s biggest seamless pipe mill—out of the industry. He was angry at what was happening to our town, and angry with Koppel for being “snubbed.” He called Koppel a “candy ass” and sent him a certified letter: “I dare you to prove to me you’re not a candy ass.”

Fifteen years later, the mayor regrets none of this. “When I had to I kicked ass and didn’t take any bullshit,” he has told me. “Lorain is a tough town. If you want to be respected you gotta talk tough, you gotta act tough, and you gotta let people know you have *balls!*” Very true, I agreed, but I had to ask: How could Koppel have *proven* that he wasn’t a candy ass? Not surprisingly the political patriarch of my hometown, an otherwise beautifully nice and grandfatherly man, considered this question irrelevant.

This story begins with me sitting alone in the auditorium of Lorain Catholic High School for a back-to-school event when a cheerleader named Julie sat beside me. Very much heterosexual and full of longing, I lacked confidence with girls to the point of being sixteen and never kissed. I also had what in Lorain was a curse: a friendly and emotionally expressive personality, which made me a near-eunuch to girls. So without other options, I befriended the girls I liked and prayed that somehow I might woo them into romantic and sexual rapture. It was undoubtedly an impossible dream, as Julie and her friends planned to put me in their wedding parties as a bridesmaid. But I had a fool's heart full of hope and an untapped libido unaffected by reason and reality.

That day I liked the shorts Julie was wearing—khaki, and revealing. And her top, too—orange, tight, and low enough to notice. We spent the welcome-back event making jokes, scooting close, and smiling. A couple of times her breasts touched my forearm and stayed there. When she whispered I could smell her stale Winterfresh gum. But behind us sat her boyfriend, Louis Rivera.

From what I knew of their relationship, Julie enjoyed making Louis jealous. They had dated for a year and bickered constantly, and from what Julie had told me she never had let him win an argument. But she was attractive, I was shallow, and beyond the girl I desired something else: a fistfight with Louis.

Some background information is warranted here: Ever since puberty most of my friends had called me “gay” because I didn’t fit into Lorain’s cast-iron molding for manhood. In certain socio-economic settings, *gay=homosexual* as well as *bookish, artistic, liberal, creative, different, feminine, sensitive, inept, and stupid*. (I actually cannot think of another word except “fuck” with so many connotations and usages). I was “gay” because I didn’t care for cars or sports, wasn’t athletic, and enjoyed reading, writing, and watching critically acclaimed movies. It didn’t matter that I watched the same porn movies Timmy Magyar stole from his dad’s garage cabinet and lent out, joined the football team and track team, and lusted over the cheerleading squad. Being “gay” had little to do with sexual orientation and more about my life lacking brawn—and for this I got ball-busted. I enjoyed classic movies (“Nick has *gay* taste in movies”); I have small, naturally smooth hands (“Nick has *gay* hands”); I lean politically left (“Shut up about your *gay* political views”); I volunteered for an AIDS Walk organized by my mother to benefit local patients (“Go for a *gay* walk”); and I participated in leadership activities as a teenager (“Go learn how to be a *gay* leader”).

In Lorain it is nearly impossible to stray from the tribe without inadvertently insulting the tribe, so perhaps my friends—yes, these insults were coming from *my friends*—simply reacted badly to my white-collar sensibilities. And to anyone who saw their adult lives as extensions of their teenage years, or desired future geographies no further than Cleveland, or even closer, still Lorain, or believed it was immodest for any young man to push against the collective identity of home, I could not have behaved more pretentiously. Or been less worthy of respect. In Lorain, my witticisms and my sensitivities failed me because masculinity was hyped in factories and sports fields and fistfights—and so I believed I needed a fight, or at least the specter of a fight, a performance of machismo suggesting that I *could* fight, to win the respect of my peers.

In Julie and Louis' relationship, I saw an opportunity. What fight between teenage boys isn't at least tangentially over a girl? She made the fight look worthwhile. And Louis, for his part, seemed somewhat beatable. He saw himself as a thug but he wasn't. He had thick but flabby arms and a demeanor suggesting he would rather "talk shit" than "throw down." Like most of the other Lorain boys, he listened avidly to Tupac Shakur and went so far as to install rims on his mother's Ford station wagon, which he claimed had "kickin' bass." He also hated my friendship with Julie and never looked at me without scowling. But he also was 6'1" and 180 pounds; I was 5'9", 155 pounds—a detail my scheming had overlooked. Our size differential became noticeable the following night, however, at a party, when I crossed paths with Louis in an entry hallway so I could stand on my tiptoes and bump his shoulder as I walked out.

He yelled at me, "Bitch, check yourself!" But I kept walking.

Late the next night he phoned me: "Whatup bitch?"

I inquired who was calling.

"You know who the fuck this is, bitch."

"Louis? Hi. How did you get my number?"

I heard the other end of the line go silent, as if Louis had approached a man with a knife and the man had asked about the make and model. He ignored my question.

"Bitch, I hear you been talking shit about me to my girl! You gonna get jumped!"

"What are you talking about Louis? I'll say everything to your face, too."

Privately, though, I began to doubt my plan. I had asthma, I wore contact lenses, and Louis was talking like he was hard. Usually his voice sounded tinny but here it sounded fierce, a street-talking bass. It was Lorain's "ghetto" elocution, a lazy mumble that

mimicked countless West Coast gangsta rappers who grew up hard or, like Louis, pretended such. In actuality Louis lived in a pretty decent neighborhood in a small yellow house the color of an Easter egg, his father worked at the Ford plant, and his mother was attentive and sweet. But to explain what I mean by hardness and its function in Lorain, I have to leave this story for a bit:

The tough times of the 1980s and 1990s unraveled an old Lorain sensibility: you were ‘a man’ if you knew how to build things and repair cars and earned money by working with your hands. Many of those men now were laid-off or tenuously employed, made vulnerable, and economically and psychologically castrated. (If a man can’t provide for his family, than what kind of man is he?) For the first time in a century, a man could no longer be tough, minimally educated, factory-employed, and middle-class. The days of collecting a high school diploma and immediately getting a hardhat and union card were ending. So the male identity shifted in the low-income local economy. Manliness became a distinction belonging to those willing to act hard, not necessarily those willing to work hard, because, after all, what local work was there to be had anyway? And hardness became a trend among the young people.

It’s interesting that the decline of industrial America in the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s coincided with the popular rise of gangsta rap, which was its own form of curse-laden, class-specific social protest, often mixed with violence and misogyny and homophobia, as well as movies about impoverished youths struggling to escape south central Los Angeles. And in Lorain, which some called L.A. for the “Lorain Area,” we gobbled up that gangsta shit. Personally I think I could create the soundtrack of a typical Lorain childhood in the 1990s with a mixture of songs by Dr. Dre, Eazy E, Tupac Shakur, Ice Cube, and Bone Thugs~N~Harmony (who actually got started in Cleveland) — as opposed to the Bob Seger, Bruce Springsteen, John Mellencamp, and Tom Petty mix-tape one might make for an earlier generation.

Naturally, the consumption of our entertainment led us to model the gangsta image. In the worst cases, this amounted to acting like one of the hard sociopath characters, not one of the well-intentioned and forward-thinking characters from *Menace II Society* or *Boyz N the Hood*. Identifying along lines of class, not race, we became the latest generation to embody an antiquated masculine ideal in a factory town long known for take-no-shit toughness.

But here was the problem: A mentality of hardness intrinsically contains a sense of fatalism toward the future and an inability to look beyond the present circumstances of disempowerment. Hardness, in other words, threatened to make a young person a

bum adult in Lorain. It denoted an absence of traditional ambition, for it often delivered you to the top of a lowly heap. And my curse, which later became my mixed blessing, was the fact that both manliness and hardness eluded me. Based on the old standards of Lorain, I am still the sort of guy Mr. Fix-It types assume doesn't know which end of a hammer hits; and in reference to me being hard, let me just say that my attempts earned me the nickname, "The Compton Panda Bear."

Back to the story: Louis told me, "Me and my boyz are gonna kick your ass! I've been talking to Kevin Matos about you, and he thinks you're a little bitch. You know he's my cousin! So if you're so tough, bitch, why don't you bring it?"

At the time, Kevin Matos was a legendary juvenile delinquent. Allegedly he had ties to Lorain's street gangs, served in juvenile detention, and had the ability to score you some "chronic." But I'd never met nor seen Matos. He was as mythic as the "Dread Pirate Roberts" from *The Princess Bride*: you could fear him without proof he existed.

"You wanna fight me Louis?" I heard myself say with newfound bravado. "Let's do it tomorrow afternoon. You, me, nobody else."

Suddenly I was overcome by the high-minded idea I'd been challenged to a duel not by being glove-slapped across the face but by being endlessly called "bitch" and threatened with a street-jumping.

Then Louis said, "3:30; Central Park; you bring your boys and I'll bring mine" and with that my high-mindedness ended. I fell asleep wondering how to throw a decent punch.

This same summer my friends began mocking my intellectual interests and having whole conversations in a nasal parody of my voice. As teenage torment goes, this was frustrating stuff. I remain friends with some of these men today, and some of them still answer my phone calls with a fey shriek of self-importance: *Ewwwww!!!* It's a difficult voice to describe, but imagine a cartoon character the opposite of hard: a blueblood, a buffoonish fop who considers himself brilliant but frazzles easily, speaks quickly, and accentuates his words as if constipated. He is unaware of his own haughtiness and says things like, *Oh-de-oh, my name is Dexter Butterfield III and I am a world-renowned film critic! I have been known to give lessons in the New York City film circles and I have grandly impacted the world of arts and letters! I'll have you know that I am...Ewwww! Don't interrupt me, I am a world-renowned...*

My friends probably saw this teasing as good-natured, humorous, an easy way to knock me back into my place. But I've

never been able to believe it was pure, innocent kidding. The mocking of my voice—my developing white-collar voice—made a joke of the man I was trying to become. It was as if the only way to respond to my early efforts to extend beyond the confines of home was to imply, “What makes you think you’re so special?” It’s a pervasive and provincial mentality, in Lorain and in struggling places like Lorain: I’ll always be there for him when he needs it, and I hope he succeeds, but not too much. Because if he does succeed, what will that say about me?

At six in the morning the following day I had football practice, one of those hellish two-a-day stretches of training. I’d gone out for Lorain Catholic’s team the year prior even though I’d never played football, rarely watched it, and barely could catch a fast pass. I joined the team for two reasons: 1) I wanted to lift weights to make myself more attractive to certain Lorain girls who, as life would have it, never liked me back anyway; and 2) I knew the coaches would accept any willing body.

Thanks to the city’s dying economy, Lorain Catholic, a once-crowded private school and the educational beacon of the city’s western expansion that began after the Ford plant arrived in the 1950s, had an enrollment during my childhood of 350 students—including a junior high and a pre-school—and the football team had only 20 guys. The school was so desolate and the football team was so historically inept, that I, un-muscular and clumsy, became a starting middle linebacker—which was exactly what I didn’t want. I joined the team to secure an image, not to play.

After six months of exercising I had bench-pressed my weight five times and marveled at my new muscles. I believed myself tough, maybe even tough enough for a fight. But I was still a joke. Once I tried doing bicep curls with friends much stronger than me when Coach Portis, a man roughly the size of Jaws, on steroids, saw me and began cheering, “Schnooky, eat that weight!”

Schnooky: my nickname, a derivative of schnook, which describes a stupid or easily victimized person. Its etymology began with Nicky in the sixth grade, Snicky in the eighth grade, and finally Schnooky in high school when a loud kid with a learning disability and a speech impediment yelled “Hey Snicky!” at me in a crowded hallway. His mispronunciation, which occurred in the first month of my freshman year, brought about this emasculating and dorky nickname which did not leave me until I left Lorain for college.

“Schnooky, man, look at those pipes!” Coach Portis’ yelled. Twenty sets of eyes, cheerleaders’ included, watched my small pipes curl a barbell into a seventh (nearly impossible) repetition. Under

pressure, I decided to grunt during the eighth repetition to enhance the spectacle of my pipes 'eating weight.' Except my voice cracked in mid-grunt. I sighed a loud, falsetto Arrrrgh...eeeeeeehhhhhh!!! and the weight fell to the floor. Laughing, Coach Portis said what everyone already was thinking, "What the hell kind of *homo* noise was that!"

At practice I discovered my teammates already talking about my upcoming fistfight. Apparently Louis had phoned several people and asked them to back him, not me. Hardly popular on the team, I knew that my general indifference to sports offended my teammates, as did my lack of skill, which itself was the reason behind my indifference. I also had discredited myself during a recent scrimmage when I accidentally blocked the wrong player and caused my friend Timmy Magyar to nearly break a rib and quit the team. So I disliked my teammates just as much as they disliked me, especially the ones who never left home and still call me Schnooky and talk gleefully about my athletic failures. Despite my feelings toward my teammates, though, I was a pragmatic guy. I spent the morning groveling and trying to befriend the worst bullies. Almost all of them ignored me, which was okay; I had neutralized myself and made no more enemies. A success! What bothered me, though, was an assistant coach who laughed at me and wished me well.

During our lunch break in the gymnasium my friends tried transforming me into a fighter. My good pal Scott, a quarterback with big forearms who had punched everything from upperclassmen to hand-dryers in restaurants when girls rejected him, walked me to a mattress underneath a basketball hoop and told me to practice my swing. "Hit it!" Scott said as four other guys looked on alternately clapping, shrieking, or yelling Ewwwwwww!

"Hit it! Hit it! Hit it!" "C'mon Schnooky!!!!" "Kick his ass!" Their yelling ricocheted off the wooden floorboards to resemble the sound of actual cheers. As we headed back to the locker room for our afternoon practice, this one focusing on offense, I pulled aside Scott and told him I didn't think I could win.

"Louis is a pussy," Scott scoffed. "Just hit him and keep hitting him and you'll be fine."

"But what if he brings Matos and a gang of guys to jump me?"

"There will be enough of us to stop that," he said. "Your friends aren't going to let that happen."

He walked away before I could confess the truth: I wanted to call off the fight because it seemed inevitable I would embarrass myself yet again.

Unfamiliar with fight etiquette, I learned from Scott that nobody drives himself to his own fight. After practice we met at his house and drove my car to the grocery store where I worked, and we waited. A couple of Scott's friends drove us to the fight after first surveying Central Park for any cops or large groups of boyz. While the scouts were gone Scott saw my legs trembling and told me to calm down.

Apparently some cops were at Central Park, which wasn't surprising. When I was little my mom took me to the swing sets there but by high school the park had fallen victim to drugs, gangs, and vandals who at one point burned the playground equipment. The scouts said Louis had switched our venue to a neighborhood park in one of Lorain's nicer western developments with trees and a creek where we wouldn't be so out in the open.

At the park I saw at least thirty people gathered, some from the football team and some whom I hadn't seen since school had let out. Louis scowled at me from afar. Julie was noticeably absent. "Is Matos here?" I asked, and Scott pointed to a fat kid wearing oversized jean shorts, a sideways Cleveland Indians hat, and a white t-shirt that ended at his knees. To my amazement Matos looked more like a marshmallow than the ripped, veiny-armed thug I had envisioned. Taking my hand out of the pocket of my khaki shorts, I walked toward Matos with my arm outstretched. I told him I didn't have any problems with him and hoped he didn't have any problems with me...a gesture so necessary and yet so melodramatic I must have been acting under the influence of *The Godfather* movies. Matos pawed my hand: "That's aiiiight, dude. I don't even know why I'm here. Rivera just called me fifteen minutes ago and woke my ass up from a nap. He said he was gonna fight some dude. I ain't got nuthin' wit'choo."

That sneaky Louis had invoked Matos' name to dupe me into backing down: At the time I believed this made Louis a coward and a liar, but using Matos' name actually was brilliant. It might have worked if I had not been so unwilling to back down.

The crowd quickly formed a half-circle with Louis and me in the center. How the fight began I cannot remember, but in my memory I can see Louis yelling at me in a gangsta rhythm, his right hand pointing at me like a gun, and me replying, in my nasal teenage voice, "Fuck you, motherfucker!" I can only assume this affectation came from movie actors whom I admired: Bruce Willis in *Die Hard*, Stallone in *Rambo*, Mel Gibson, De Niro, Pacino, and Harvey Keitel—men whose onscreen identities seem hatched from a mix of working-class testosterone and vulgarity. And if what I read in graduate school is true about gender being something performed, not inherited but self-created and pieced together, than I can see

how men of all ages in our rusted town, including me, enacted a gendered archetype of some kind. There was the sleazy judge who chomped unlit cigars, the barbers in shiny shoes who complained nonstop about their ex-wives and doubled as bookies, the men of all generations with Jarhead haircuts like Marines, the mayor who saw himself as our foul-mouthed paternal protector, the football coaches and their beer-gut bravado, Louis who tried to be hard, and me who saw myself as a brooding, hypersensitive rebel like James Dean or Holden Caulfield—all of us influenced by what we watched or read, trying to imagine ourselves into being. We adopted attitudes, language, and behaviors and laid them atop our unsteady senses of self for the purpose of temporal freedom, to make us bigger in our minds than we ever could be in the reality permitted by our landscape. It was like we were caged by corroding smokestacks, protected inside our own haze.

Someone yelled eventually, “We came here to see a fight! Are you two pussies gonna fight or just yell at each other?!?” I don’t remember what happened next, but I think I asked Louis, stupidly, “So you wanna fight?” as if the matter remained negotiable. Both of us moved toward the other, and what happened next surprised us all: As Louis moved toward me, I swung my right hand around as fast as I could, not looking at him but hoping for a target. My punch connected with his left temple—and Louis fell to the ground! I’m told my friends yelled in chorus, “Hit him! Hit him! Hit him!” and I was advised to follow fight etiquette and jump on, kick, punch, bite, and savage poor Louis while he was helpless. Instead I waited for him to get up. Immediately he punched me in the nose. Feeling blood drip into my mouth, I lunged toward Louis and we tussled on the ground, neither of us landing another punch or inflicting another injury. This lasted maybe 30 seconds until the same voice that yelled, “We came here to see a fight!” asked, “Are you fags just going to wrestle or are you done?”

“We’re done,” I replied, breathless. I had been a Lorain man for approximately three minutes, and it was exhausting.

In the ride back to my car, Scott was so mad he didn’t offer me shotgun: “Goddamnit, Nick, why didn’t you keep hitting him! When...you...get...somebody...on the ground...you-fuckin-hit-him!”

With my nose bleeding and my front teeth hurting, I wasn’t in the mood for lectures. “I thought it’d be nice to let him get up.”

“Ewwwww! Nice? You were in a fight!”

“Can’t we talk about this later? But tell me this — did I win?”

Scott shook his head at my question of legacy. “I’m not sure — but what a hit!” Then almost exactly at that moment a police officer pulled us over because my escort driver was speeding. Apropos of

Lorain, the cop didn't reprimand me for fighting even though I had a bloody face but he did cite Scott for riding shotgun without wearing a seatbelt. "Goddamnit, Nick!" Scott repeated when I was dropped off.

I went into the grocery store to wash my face in the bathroom. Unfortunately I ran into my boss, who also was Louis' boss—Louis was a bagger, too, and we were scheduled to work together the following day, when Louis would show up with a welt on his head. Telling my boss not to worry and apologizing for coming into the store all bloody, I cleaned up quickly and left. From the grocery store I drove to visit another girl who, like Julie, was a friend and a cheerleader and tremendously attractive but didn't like me the way I liked her. Her name was Kaci and she had not attended the fight even though she lived a short distance from the park. I suppose I was looking for someone to commend me for what I had done: acted like a man, got into a fight like guys were supposed to get into fights, et cetera. Opening her front door, Kaci ignored me and kept talking into her telephone. I assumed she was talking to Julie, one of her best friends. Perhaps I had upset Julie—or maybe I had impressed her!—and Kaci was being the good friend trying to calm her down—or stoke her flames of passion!

Kaci said, "Nick just got here. Let me put him on the phone and you can explain everything to him. It'll be fine." Handing over the telephone, she looked at me as if to say, I thought you were too smart to act so stupid. A blast of sobs hit my ear; it was Louis, crying. He apologized and told me he hadn't wanted to fight me but did so because he had an image to protect. He said he couldn't let me flirt like I had with his girlfriend, who amounted to nothing less than his everything. Louis made me promise not to tell anyone his big secret: his parents were fighting and his father was acting erratic because his managers at Ford had told him that come autumn he probably wouldn't have a job. Usually Ford sent the lucky Lorain workers to plants in Kentucky, but that seemed unlikely for Louis' dad. Fifty years old, about to be laid off, with one son about to graduate high school, a son in junior high and two daughters not even in middle school, Louis' father had taken out his feelings of helplessness on his family. Verbal abuse, maybe physical, Louis didn't specify. He said his mom was talking divorce. "Now look, man, I feel so fucking embarrassed right now you don't even know, you don't even know man, everything is fucked and everyone is gonna think I'm a pussy but I don't even care," he cried. "And I'm sorry man, you know, Julie is everything to me and if I have to move than I'm gonna lose her. What you did disrespected me but I don't have any problems with you, and I'm sorry. After this I want everything to be cool between you and me, you know?"

And what happened next? The next day the football coaches said I should make tackles as strong as I punch. Throughout the school year my friends told and re-told the story about me hitting Louis. One of my aunts learned about the fight from a co-worker whose son had been there and told him, “Schnooky laid out Louis Rivera on his ass” — and relatives even praised me. But of course the responsibility for my actions belongs to me—not Lorain, not my friends, not family, only me. I kept my promise to Louis not to tell anyone about his domestic problems, and even here, in this retelling, I’ve done my best to mask his identity and give him a measure of privacy. But I also gloated about knocking him down. I claimed to everyone who would listen that I “sort-of won.”

Today, Lorain has a new, well-intentioned, young politician poised to someday become mayor or a state official or a political kingmaker, and I knew this man when I was young. During a meal we shared during one of my visits home, this man, who left Lorain for college and returned home to enter local politics, told me he still liked me and trusted me “because you’re not a pussy—because, if you need to, you can and you will fuck somebody up.” Of course, I thought of Louis when he said this, and I suppose his assessment was correct, but that quality is something I am more ashamed of, than proud.

He later asked me what it has been like to leave Lorain and, by extension, to leave its values. Liberating and conflicting, I explained. The part of me that never belonged in Lorain still wants to belong, whereas the part of me that belongs in Lorain has not adjusted easily to the white-collar world, especially my professor world. In graduate school I once raised my fist and threatened to punch in the nose a fellow graduate student who thought he could get away with heckling me. I was a twenty-eight-year-old nerd bully. My old friend was pleased by this.

But in college, I told him, I had returned home for a weekend and visited a Lorain bar where I saw an old bully from the football team who told me to buy him a beer because I am such a pussy. It didn’t matter to him that I was with, finally, a girlfriend. It didn’t matter that he was living at home with his parents who had taken him in after he had failed out of college and fell into an alcohol and drug addiction. It didn’t matter that I had earned a 4.0 grade point average throughout most of college and ensured for myself an upwardly mobile future. He was the latest generation of a Lorain man, macho and vain and proudly ignorant. He asked me, in front of a table of people, “So Schnooky, have you come out of the closet yet?” It was a formative insult but I ignored it, resigned that the bullies and boors who run my hometown, whose values infect the

community, would never, in turn, respect me, no matter what I did, even if I tried being one of them.

“Sometimes I think of leaving, too” my young politician friend responded. “I have a daughter. I want her to have a good life, with more opportunities than she will have here. But you know what? I want her to know what we know. I want her to grow up to be tough.”

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