

2007

September, 1981

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Recommended Citation

Dolleman, Rusty. "September, 1981." *The Iowa Review* 37.1 (2007): 31-42. Web.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.6296>

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RUSTY DOLLEMAN

September, 1981

The casino is full of men from Michigan. They're wearing hardhats and blue UAW T-shirts, holding beers in their hands and clapping each other on the shoulders, wanting to show that they're unafraid to be here, a thousand miles from their homes, betting their savings, their houses, their children's college educations in this desert city that is still more myth than reality for them. It is Howard's first trip to Las Vegas, and all he has done for the past two hours is stand in line, first at the hotel, and now here at the sports book. Ahead of him, his son and two other men from the plant where they work are huddled together, and now his son breaks away, comes back to where Howard is standing. "Are you hearing this?" Perry asks.

"Am I hearing what?"

"Ted and Corey."

"I'm trying not to." Ted and Corey are both Perry's age.

"They're talking about getting hookers for the hotel room."

"Sounds reasonable," Howard says, and Perry grins. The five years they've worked at the plant together have dissolved most of the embarrassment the two of them had felt in discussing sexual matters, but it has been Perry's own marriage and fatherhood, the day-to-day intermingling of their two families, that has made the truth of human bodies and sex impossible to ignore and ridiculous to worry about.

"Blonde ones," Corey says, turning to wink over his shoulder. Corey's fiancée is a brunette. At that moment, Sugar Ray Leonard's image flashes across the television screens that hang from the casino ceiling, and all the men from Michigan raise their voices to meet it, call him Candy-Ass, a Pretty Boy, a Faggot, but then they realize that it's a replay of the Duran fight, and they turn their backs to the screens. *No más, no más*, they've seen it before, and it isn't until Thomas Hearns appears on the monitors that they turn again, throats roaring and fists in the air.

Even Howard can see why they're so proud to claim Tommy Hearns as one of their own: the way his wide, white eyes seem to contort in pain even when he's winning, the way he carries the lean,

dark columns of his arms, his legs, his torso, the way he makes it look *hard*, the Hit Man, the Motor City Cobra. He's proud but not prideful, a man in every sense of the word. And Leonard is detestable if you think about it in those terms, dodging and darting, with a face built for TV commercials, aping Ali every chance he gets, a man who does not carry himself with the modest nobility desirable in one who makes his living by hurting other men. Hearn's will not lose to this person, this much the men from Michigan know. "This is gonna fuck up the odds," Corey says, watching as the screens revert to their constant reel of hotel and casino advertisements.

"What do you mean?" Perry asks.

"Well everyone in here's putting money on Hearn's. It's gonna fuck things up."

Howard shakes his head. This is the problem with Corey and, to a lesser extent, his own son. They can only see what is happening right in front of them, then multiply it by the power of ten to get some larger view of reality. If two pair of brake pads in a shipment are defective, then the supplier sucks. If everyone in this particular line is betting on Hearn's, then the entire city must be betting on Hearn's. "There'll be plenty of people betting on Leonard," Howard says. "Trust me."

"Yeah, who?" Corey asks.

"You're next in line," Howard says, even though this isn't quite true.

Corey retakes his place in line, still protesting that he's right, that they won't get as big a payoff as they'd thought, that they'll end up as fucked over as usual. It is at this moment when Howard realizes that Hearn's *will* lose, that the fight will constitute yet another humiliation for the men in the line, and that Sugar Ray Leonard will slide in right behind Reagan and the Japanese on the list of those who torment the hard-driving American auto worker.

When it is Corey's turn to bet, Howard tries not to listen. He hears the amount anyway, and it makes him cringe. Ted bets even more, and Howard has to remind himself that these are young men without families, strong and highly skilled at what they do. Ted, at least, wouldn't bet anything he couldn't cover—the kid deals at the plant on the side, running two separate careers each shift he's on, working double-time every night. Ten years ago, five years even, anything having to do with drugs would have bothered Howard, but

he just can't summon up the outrage anymore. On his way past, Ted claps Howard on the shoulder, sucks in a breath. "Long ride home if Hearn's loses," he says. Howard smiles, squeezes the small stack of bills in his own pocket. He's glad that Ted has at least considered this as a possibility.

For a long time, Howard hadn't even been sure he would make the trip. But Jenny had prodded him, assured him that he'd have a good time, and they'd decided that two thousand dollars would be enough to make it exciting and not too much to lose in the name of civic pride. When Perry bets three times this amount, Howard feels something slump in his chest. There's no way his son can afford to lose that much. Not with three children under five and a new house in a neighborhood much nicer than the one where he and Jenny had raised Perry and his two older sisters. When Howard had suggested that maybe it was too early for Perry and Mary to get a place like that, Perry's face had taken on the look of a much older, much more frightened man than Howard had guessed his son to be. "You been downtown lately, Dad?" he'd asked. When he passes by Howard now they do not look at each other's faces. As he approaches the window himself, Howard feels it again, that same dull kicking that he'd felt last November in the voting booth. It'd come on so strong that he'd had to punch Carter's name and then exit the polling area immediately, without having voted in any of the other races, or for any of the half-dozen state bond issues besides. It was the feeling that, just once, he'd like to be on the winning side himself.

He finds the others at the bar at the back of the casino, sitting at a table and talking shop with some GM workers from Flint. Howard leans into the stiff wooden back of the chair, listens to them trade tales of their forays into insubordination, of battles won and lost inside the factory walls. When they'd driven in earlier this afternoon, he'd seen hills in the distance, strange eruptions of earth at the far edges of the city, and he wishes he could see a little bit more of the area, since they'd come all this way. He'd at least like to walk up and down the Strip for a little while. Maybe when he retires he and Jenny will come out here in a big fat camper, use all the gas in the world and look ridiculous doing it. They'll dodder around in out-of-date clothing, lose money on the cheapest slot machines they can find, then pack it all back up and head somewhere further

north, like Alaska or British Columbia. Across the table, Corey is bragging about this past spring, when he and Perry and Ted had gotten fed up with one particularly unbearable shift supervisor. They'd begun sending defective units up the line in an attempt to get him fired. "Yeah," one of the men from Flint says. "How bad?"

"Just little stuff," Corey says. "But stuff that had to be fixed."

"You get shit for it?"

"Fuck yeah." Corey runs the palm of his right hand through the red stubble on his cheek. "But they couldn't prove it was us, so big fucking deal, you know?"

"Did it work?"

"Do cars need brakes?" Corey shrugs. "He was gone in two weeks."

"No shit." The man from Flint raises his eyebrows, and his buddy, a short black man with a large stomach, makes a noise that is part admiration and part disbelief. "Yeah, and the new guy is a hundred times worse," Howard says, and the table cracks up.

"That sounds about right," the black man says, smiling as he crumples the top of his beer can under his hand. "That would be the way."

"But you don't have to sweep the break room anymore." This is the first time Perry has spoken since Howard has sat down, and he can't tell if his son is trying to be funny or if he really thinks that Howard's having to spend five minutes at the end of every shift with a broom in his hand was that much of an insult. It had only been an excuse for them anyway, a convenient minor outrage.

"No," Howard says. "I don't have to sweep the break room anymore."

"That's right." Perry nods, pretends to watch TV again.

"They made you sweep?" the bearded man asks.

"This guy was such an asshole," Corey says. "You'd think Howie'd built up some sort of seniority or something. He's only been working there for eight hundred years."

Even Howard has to smile at this, but it is true that the new supervisor is worse, if only because he picks his battles more intelligently. And before, at least, no one could accuse them of not doing their jobs. They've played their last card with management, and now, when the next round of temporary layoffs came around, there will be nothing to keep the low men on the totem pole (Perry, for example) from hav-

ing to jockey the midnight shift in some downtown convenience store until either work picks up again or he gets shot.

“Where’re you guys watching the fight?” Ted asks. It goes without saying that none of them have tickets.

“I don’t know,” the bearded man says. He leans back, stretches his arms out above his head. “Right here’s lookin’ pretty good. How about you?”

“We got a hotel room,” Corey says. “I don’t want to be out in public if Hearn loses.”

“He ain’t gonna lose.” There is a degree of certainty in the black man’s voice that makes them all feel better. He cannot be wrong, Howard thinks, when he looks them all in the eye and says that Hearn is going to “beat that nigger within an inch of his life,” his invocation of that word in their presence, white as they are, proof of his conviction.

They watch the fight sitting two abreast on each hotel bed, pull cans of beer from the red and white cooler Corey brought from Michigan. They can see Caesar’s Palace from the window, the ring of lights where the real Leonard and the real Hearn are dancing around each other. The girls (one a real blonde, the other a fake) have tossed the pillows onto the floor, are sitting behind the men with their backs to the headboards and their legs tucked underneath their miniskirts. They drink screwdrivers from glasses Ted found in the bathroom and talk to each other in low, barely perceptible tones.

They’d been friendly enough when they’d arrived, giving hugs and kissing cheeks, but now that the fight is about to start they’ve retreated into their own private language. They know that they’re just a sideshow, a story to tell back home, and even though Howard can’t hear what they’re saying, he can tell they’re talking shop, their words sawed-off, their laughter clipped and knowing. “You girls from Vegas originally?” Corey asks.

The girls stare. “No,” the one behind Corey and Ted, the real blonde, finally says.

“No? Where’re you from?”

“California.” The girl takes the last drink from her glass, swirls the ice around its bottom. Corey nods and they all turn back to the TV, except for Ted, who (even though he knows less about boxing

than Howard does) had never taken his eyes from the screen in the first place.

For the first minute and a half, no one says a word. Even the girls fall silent, respecting the enormity of the moment. Hearns stalks Leonard across the ring, left arm slung down to his waist, daring the quicker man to come to him, to show off those sweet skills. But Leonard doesn't bite, backpedals away. After the bell, Leonard gives a playful push to the side of Hearns' head, and Hearns responds by punching him on the chin. "Good for you, Tommy," Howard hears himself say, but Leonard just waggles his rear end against the ropes, is still smiling when the camera cuts to his corner a few moments later.

When the bell for the second round sounds, Hearns practically leaps off his stool. "Long fight, Tommy baby," Corey says, "long fight," and the men all murmur their assent.

"Yeah, Jesus Christ Tommy, relax." Perry takes his company hat off and then immediately places it back on his head in what seems like one complete, fluid motion, a nervous habit Howard remembers his son displaying as far back as little league. On the other bed, Ted shifts his weight. "For Christ's sake, calm the fuck down," he says, his voice so soft that Howard isn't sure if he's talking to Hearns or to himself.

"Did you call Mom?" Perry's hat comes on and off again, this time punctuated by a quick run of his hand through his hair.

"She wasn't there." Howard can feel the girls' eyes on the back of his neck. What Perry is really asking is whether or not Howard had told her how much money he'd bet.

"Who'd you talk to?"

"Valerie was there," Howard says. "She said Rick's pissed he didn't come."

"Yeah right," Perry says.

"They're all there now, though," Howard says, meaning in his living room, and the whole family—Valerie and her husband Rick, Perry's other sister Cindy and her husband Andrew, Perry's own wife Mary and all of the grandkids. Jenny would be there now as well, home from her doctor's appointment, all of them watching the fight on his big screen TV, eating and drinking daiquiris and taking turns to go out onto the deck and smoke and watch the kids jump in and out of the pool.

“And here we are,” Perry says.

Howard had been relieved himself to have Valerie pick up the line when he'd called. He'd known that she wouldn't ask about the money, and when she'd told him that Rick was second-guessing himself for not going, he'd told her that they were just going to watch on TV like everyone else. “Come on, Dad,” she'd said. “You're having fun.” And just because it was easier, he'd agreed that he was.

By the middle of the third round, the men have begun to relax. Leonard's face, that perfect, pretty face, has finally been marked, and he is not so much backpedaling now as he is simply fleeing, side-skipping away and away and away from Hearn's. With a minute left, Hearn's finally finds him in the middle of the ring, and when he actually makes Leonard miss twice in a row, the men rise off the beds, high-fiving and shouting, the girls holding their palms over their drinks and smiling at them. Even as the men sit back down they can hear celebrating in the next room, reminding them that they are not alone in this, and when the fourth round begins in the same way the third ended, the girls trade their drinks for beers from the cooler and move to the front of the beds. The real blonde wraps her arms around Corey's neck, watches with her head on his shoulder, and the other girl (whose name is Charity) does the same with Perry. “Is this okay, honey?” she asks.

“I don't know,” Perry says. “Let me check with my dad.” Everyone laughs, even Howard.

“That's your dad?” the blonde asks. “Oh my god, I thought he was your *brother*.”

“I know,” Charity says. “How old are you?”

“Old enough to know better,” Howard says, but he's still smiling.

“Better than what?” the blonde girl asks. The fourth round ends, and when the network cuts to a Toyota commercial, a hail of obscenities comes through the wall from the next room. The men grin and chuckle, feel lucky that their own company is doing relatively well against the Japanese.

“What's that about?” The blonde is up on her knees now, massaging Corey's shoulders and leaning in close, brushing her breasts against his back.

“It's the competition.” Charity sighs, looks at Howard. “Right?”

“Right,” Howard says, and he wonders why she’d looked to him for confirmation on this.

“I buy American.” She takes Perry’s hat from his head, places it on her own. “See?” She cranes her neck to peer out from underneath the brim.

“Yeah?” Perry half-turns in her arms. “What kind of car do you drive?” She grins, ducks her head, says something indecipherable into his shoulder. “That’s what I thought,” Perry says, reaching around to pull the hat back off her head. “No hat for you,” he says. Charity laughs, smoothes her hair back into place, then slides her arms back around his waist even more tenderly than before.

“Hey,” she says. “At least it’s an American car.”

“For the moment,” Perry says, and the men murmur again. When the fifth round is underway and the men are once again lost in watching Hearn’s track Leonard around the ring, Charity takes the hat from Perry’s head a second time. When she catches Howard staring at her, she shrugs.

In the sixth, Leonard stuns Hearn’s with a left hook, and Howard is not sure if the roar they hear is coming through the TV or from outside, from the fight itself. The room falls silent again, and now it is Leonard who is stalking Hearn’s, getting inside on him and throwing hooks to the chin. The crowd grows louder, and at one point a woman in white stands up in the third and fourth row, clapping as Leonard forces Hearn’s up against the ropes again. “Sit down, you fat fucking cunt,” Perry says, and Howard is pretty sure this is the first time he’s ever heard his son use that word. He gets up and goes to the window, looks down, down, down onto the floodlit Strip below, wishes again that he was out *there*, a tourist, someone for whom betting and winning and losing were all just good, old-fashioned fun, and not an extension of one’s true self. And it still could have been that way for him, that was the thing. If Perry hadn’t bet so much, if he would just go to work and do his job, if he would just *choose* to be the kind of man who wasn’t affected by all of the silly things other men took so seriously, then Howard could stop thinking about all of these things.

“See anything good down there?” Charity asks, and although the men do not look at her, Howard can see the skin on their temples straining.

"I don't know," he says. "Just people, I guess."

"People, people everywhere." Charity sighs, smiles. "It's so crowded this weekend."

"Well, that's probably good for you, right?" On the bed, Perry leans forward, thrusts his hand back inside the cooler. When he sits back up, his wrist drips ice onto his pants and the bed, and he makes no attempt to re-establish himself in her arms.

Howard turns back to the window, but even now his eyes are drawn to the circle of brilliance adjacent to Caesar's, and the way he feels now reminds him of when he first started at the plant thirty years ago, the sounds of the lines inescapable, in his ears even when he slept. Some nights, he'd woken up to find his arms sticking straight out toward the ceiling and his hands clenching and unclenching, and the next morning Jenny had told him that he did it all the time, attaching brake lines in his sleep.

As the fight wears on, Hearn begins to reassert himself, winning the ninth, tenth, and eleventh rounds, and when he goes back to his corner after the eleventh, a chant of "Tommy, Tommy, Tommy" goes up, and Hearn pumps his arms above his head before sitting down. "Obviously fans from Detroit," the play-by-play announcer says, and then even the girls are getting into it, cheering and hooting until the blonde girl finally breaks down laughing.

"I'm sorry," she says. "This is exciting."

"Don't be sorry," Corey says, slapping her thigh. "You're rooting for the right man."

"Yes," Charity says, "our hearts are in the right place." She looks at Howard again, sticks her tongue out between her teeth.

Someone pounds the wall in the other room and Corey gets up, pounds back. Howard thinks of the family assembled in his living room, of Mary, sitting on her knees next to the couch, refusing a chair, and even though he knows it's bad luck to do such a thing, he hopes that Perry does something for her with the money. She wants to go to Ireland, to see where her family came from, something she's talked about more than once. And he imagines Jenny, standing in the back, cigarette in hand because Howard's not there to nag her to quit, a slight smile on her face. Howard wonders if she will tell him the truth when he asks what the doctor told her about her cough. But that is another thing he's not supposed to be thinking

about on this trip, and he gets up, goes to the bathroom, and when he comes back, Perry is in Charity's arms again.

"Dad, sit down," Perry says. "You're making me nervous." When Howard does, Charity leans over toward him.

"You let him order you around like that?" she asks.

"Well," Howard says, "I'm just happy he didn't call me a fat bitch." Charity laughs with the rest of them, but she gives him a sad look afterward, as if she really believes that this might happen, and no one mentions the fact that he could not bring himself to use the word Perry had.

Later, when he's at the restaurant, Howard sees Charity again. He's sitting at one of the outlying tables alone, and it's well past midnight. She's wearing a different outfit now, a leopard-print shirt and black leather pants. As she snakes her way through the rows of slot machines, she seems to match them in the way they reflect the lights in their sheer, dark surfaces. Howard gives her a small, reflexive wave, the kind he gives to the people who live on his street that he has never spoken to. She comes over, puts her hand on the rail that separates the restaurant from the casino. Behind her, packs of bitter-faced auto workers roam the casino floor, looking for fights, looking like they've been in fights already. "You celebrating?" she asks. About twenty yards away, one of the auto workers stops, shouts the word "Fuck" at the top of his lungs, drawing it out for as long as he can.

"My guy lost, remember?"

"No." Charity shakes her head. "I knew you'd won money as soon as it was over."

"What? Just because I didn't put my foot through the TV?"

"Hold on." As she walks around to the entrance, she trails her fingers along the round, metal railing behind her. It's a practiced gesture, to be sure, but one that's become part of her. It had been Ted who'd broken the TV, the remnants going flat and gray, as if the set had never been turned on, and they'd heard something break in the next room as well—not the TV, but something made of glass. The girl slides into the seat across from him. "So how much did you win?" she asks. When he tells her the amount, she nods. "That's not bad."

"It's not good, either."

“Yes it is,” she says. “It’s a good night. You should be happy. Or do you wish you’d lost?”

“So how did you know?” he asks, ignoring the question, the whole idea of him being happy.

“I just knew.” She folds her arms, purses her lips. “So how much did Perry lose?”

“Too much.” Howard is touched that she remembers his son’s name, to the point where he almost reveals that amount to her as well. It’s so much easier now, when they’re alone and he knows that nothing bad will happen, and his sudden erection has more to do with the fact that this is the first private conversation he’s had with a strange woman for thirty years than her being a prostitute. He is tired, it’s late, and his bed is half a country away.

“Are you going to help him?”

“I don’t know,” Howard says, and this is the truth. After Ted had walked out and Corey had gone into the bathroom to puke, Perry had just sat on the bed with his head in his hands, and Howard had been unable to do anything but imagine his son being dragged into the back of a convenience store, of young black men mocking him and his fear, waving the gun in his face and telling them what they’re going to do with it. Now, hours later, Howard realizes that this will not happen, that things will just be very hard for his son for a long time to come. The girls had left as soon as they were sure they wouldn’t be following Ted directly down the hall and before Corey came out of the bathroom, looking for a return on the one investment he had left. Charity had kept her hand on Perry’s back as she walked around him, squeezed Howard’s arm in a quick and quiet goodbye. “So how much did *you* make tonight?” he asks.

“Too much,” she says. “Not enough. I don’t know.” She leans forward, puts her elbows on the table and looks down at her fingers. “Actually, it was a good night.”

“You would’ve made a lot if Hearn’s’d won.”

Charity pulls a pack of cigarettes from her purse, begins fishing for a lighter. “I would’ve made a lot no matter who won,” she says. Behind her, the TV above the bar is showing the replay of Leonard’s trainer, the one who’d trained Ali, addressing his fighter in the corner after the twelfth round. You’re blowing it, Son, his lips are saying, you’re blowing it, and Howard remembers them all cheering, since it had seemed so true at the time. In the thirteenth,

Leonard had knocked Hearn through the ropes not once but twice, and after that it was as if Hearn couldn't control his own body, his legs and his head going in opposite directions, eyes blaring around the ring, unable to even find Leonard until the other man was up close and hitting him. When the fourteenth had started, Leonard had been the one sprinting off his chair, and the referee had finally stopped it with about a minute and a half left in the round, Hearn not protesting in the least, barely able to straighten his knees.

"Have you called your wife yet?"

"No."

Charity pulls her lighter from her purse, lights her cigarette. "How are you going to hide the money?" She is smirking, as if she's familiar with this kind of problem. "Have you thought about that?"

"I don't know," Howard says, and for the dozenth time he touches his left pocket, the bills all folded back over each other, thick and unreal, like a second wallet, almost.

Charity leans over to the next table, grabs the ashtray. "Have you thought about how you're going to spend it?"

"No, I haven't thought about that either." Howard laughs, and Charity laughs, and when the waitress comes over, Howard buys her a drink.

"Well, it's something to think about, anyway."

Howard nods, wonders how long he can get her to sit here without availing himself of her services. Before long, he knows, she will give up and not think him one bit of a better man for having resisted her. Charity's drink comes back, and they sit and watch the people pass. Howard tells her about the camper he's thinking of buying, and about Jenny's visit to the doctor, and she tells him about where she lives, out on the edges of the city, in the shadow of the strange mounds of earth that rise up out of the desert.