SHAKE AWAY THESE CONSTANT DAYS

30 STORIES BY
RYAN WERNER

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by Ryan Werner

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Designed by Katie Duffy

The parts of this book that aren't fiction probably aren't about you. Don't make it weird.

Most of these stories previously appeared on the internet as part of the music/literature project Our Band Could Be Your Lit. Some of these stories appeared previously in other places.

"Look At How Fast I Can Go Nowhere At All" at *Amphibi.us*

Back and to the Left

Aside from his relations with Marilyn Monroe and being the most powerful man in the United States for a little bit, JFK wasn't the luckiest guy around. He was accident prone, more than anything. Still, he kept his humor. He'd call me a few times a year and say something like, "I just slammed my hand in a car door. First I get shot in the head and now this."

But he's dead now. For real this time.

A few months before that car ride in Dallas, John decided he didn't want to be president anymore, which would have been a hassle in and of itself, but he also decided he didn't want to be JFK anymore, either. There's a paper-trail a few miles long hidden away somewhere, but after it was all said and done, we managed to relocate him to Florida with fewer than half a dozen people knowing about it. He loved Scrabble and was big into anagrams, so he took the name John Zing, which, combined with the words "faked tenderly," have all the same letters as the name John Fitzgerald Kennedy. I can only imagine how long he thought about all this before he finally brought it up to me.

Part of this is a history lesson, and part of it is just history. The guy who got shot was an ex-marine who figured it was a service to the country to let JFK have his way. A little plastic surgery later and he looked good enough to be in public for a few minutes before we shot

him. While Jackie was picking up what she thought was the top of her husband's skull, her husband was getting some reconstructive surgery of his own, reshaping his chin, filing down his cheekbones, bending his nose around like silly putty.

Flash forward several decades and John dies of pneumonia. He was in his nineties. He had a pretty Cuban wife—his way of making up for the Bay of Pigs, I guess—and some kids. (He'd send me some pictures every once in a while. That jaw. Goddamn.) Everyone got what they wanted, really. Jackie became a symbol of feminine strength and didn't have a philandering husband anymore. Lyndon Johnson swore in as president. John was free. This is all his rationalizing. He told me that even America got what it wanted: a tragedy to unite it. "Only when consumed with grief can people wrap their arms around one another and be complete," he said. "Like fingers rolling into a fist."

Sergei Avdeyev

I'm sitting in a tavern in Moscow drinking by myself when I look over and see Sergei Avdeyev doing the same. Folded neatly on the bar stool next to him is a silver and blue windbreaker. I'm unsure if it's really him, but as I steal more glances his way, I notice an embroidered patch with the Russian space program logo sewn into the sleeve of the jacket. The sun is just starting to set and more people are filtering in. Still, the tavern is less than a quarter full. Sergei and I sit at the bar, two of only a half dozen people to do so. He's sitting there, his face looking interested but his body looking bored, hunched over slightly and tinkering with his change. Every few drinks he rolls his sleeves up a bit further and smiles modestly, as if he has just thought of an extraordinary idea.

I've kept up on space the way most men keep up with sports or politics. During Sergei's tenure as a cosmonaut he spent a little more than two years in space at about 17,000 miles an hour. He gathered enough speed over the course of enough time to move one-fiftieth of a second into the future.

I wave the bartender over. "Is that Sergei Avdeyev?" I ask.

"Yes, that is Sergei. He comes here often to drink

beers. He is a very quiet, very smart man."

"Do you think I could order him a drink?"

The bartender swipes his thick palm across the top of the bar before walking over to Sergei. Moments later, he's back and telling me that Sergei appreciates my gesture, but he has drunk enough for the night. I look over to Sergei, who is still looking forward, still grinning mildly. All at once, it becomes important that I interact with him, and in my head his presence becomes a reason for celebration, the mild hysteria normally associated with seeing a rock star or an actor. "Ask him if he'd like to play darts with me," I tell the bartender, who again brushes his hand across the bar and then knocks on it twice with his knuckles.

Sergei does not know any English, yet when he walks up to me from across the bar, already holding the darts, he lets me know his appreciation by extending his hand, which is solid and lean, as is everything about him.

I lose three games in a row. I aim for the bull's-eye and hit it once. I'm gasping for technique, switching the fingers I throw with, shifting large handfuls of Russian coins from pocket to pocket trying to find a balance. Toward the end, when our scores are almost even, I keep busting, setting myself back again and again. Sergei throws with his engineer mind and his cosmonaut body: long, accurate tosses from his slender arm, sailing true and adding up to zero every time.

We shake hands again and head back to the bar. There is a brief interaction between the bartender and Sergei, and then Sergei removes his windbreaker from the stool, drapes it over his arm, and waves goodbye to me before leaving. When I order another beer, the bartender tells me

that Sergei has bought me three of them, one for each loss in our series of darts. I drink them slowly, and by the time I'm on the last one, the tavern has filled out. People are packed six to a booth. All the stools at the bar are taken, people crammed between them trying to order, trying to carry on a conversation. I finish and make my way through the crowd and out the door. Instead of hailing a taxi, I run, weaving through the city. I go for a half hour without stopping, twisting through all the dark parts and picking up speed with every turn. My pockets are filled with Russian coins and I begin throwing them in the air, making it rain dull rubles for several yards.

This is how long a second lasts.

Look At How Fast I Can Go Nowhere At All

As if I were the pin in the hands of a clock, time has moved around me. I'm the last one left. I speak to the wives now, maybe a dozen of them in the whole country, driving for hours at a time just to put them at ease. The first thing they always say is some remark about how well I've stayed put together, how lucky I am to have mobility at my age. Like me, they were barely twenty years old when the *USS Indianapolis* sank and stopped everything, became the moment that defined what happened before it, the reason nothing happened after it. I don't tell the story and they don't ask me to, which is good, because I tell it coldly, as pure fact, straight numbers. There's twelve: the number of minutes it took the ship to sink. There's one thousand, one hundred and ninety-six: the number of men on the boat. There's three hundred and sixteen: the number of men who managed to survive four days attached to a handful of lifeboats, fending off shark attacks, living without food or water. I mostly just listen. They tell me about their husbands. None of them have let it go. I get lonesome marriage proposals from a wife in Lawrence, Kansas, a wife in Ybor City, Florida. The one in Oklahoma City speaks at me in feverish, rabid French. Two rest home attendants have to come in and calm her down. One tries to get her to breathe

in a regular pattern while the other holds her hand and rubs gently between her shoulder blades. One time, as I'm leaving, I'm told that she's never happier than after meeting with me, but the excitement puts too much strain on her heart. I'm not invited back, and I drive on to Cheyenne and Philipsburg and San Diego. I drive to July 30th, 1945 and everything I drink along the way smacks of saltwater.

The King

Montoya will teach you how to box. Brooks will teach you how to kill. When I started, I started with Montoya, watching videos, learning steps. It became imperative that I seek out the rhythms. Montoya told me I hit hard enough already, but I need to find the balance of competition. I thought I'd be clever and ask him how delicate this supposed balance is.

"It's a balance," he said. "If it isn't delicate, you're just some *pendejo* standing there with padded mittens on."

He would yell at me, quiz me as I was doing shadow-rounds with the other mentees. "What is balance?"

Jab. "Balance is." Block. Block. "The absolute center between control and chaos."

"Good. Why is it important?"

Block. Hook. Block. "To cultivate virtue and grace and through those." Jab. Block. "Back to balance."

"Right, right. And what does that all mean?"

Right cross.

Ten count.

"Don't fuck with me."

I WON FIGHTS, MOVED UP THE CIRCUIT, FOUGHT FOR TITLES. I never won any. I began to lose fights and move back

down the circuit. I blamed Montoya and his ideas. I decided I needed more time in the ring, so I went to a different gym one day, alone, to take on anyone who was looking to spar a bit. I beat three men easily, tough guys who wouldn't have lasted long in a bar fight, let alone in the ring. I had hardly broken a sweat, so I threw shadow punches in the ring after everyone left.

I heard a voice from the entranceway of the room say, "I never seen someone punch like that. There's no way that greasy spic taught you that."

I stopped and turned around, half ready to defend Montoya and half just looking for any sort of a fight.

"I see the way you're looking at me, kid," the voice said. "But I'm not stepping in that ring. Not with you or anyone else. Montoya made you a decent fighter, but you wouldn't even last a minute going up against a pile of my soft shit."

I bounced on my toes a bit to keep the blood flowing, but before I could respond, Brooks said, "So, kid, don't fucking look at me that way."

I climbed out of the ring and stood in front of him, noses an inch apart. He was surprisingly tall. "If it's your job as a boxer," he said, "to win the fight, then that means it's your job to hurt, to cause pain. You can get in my face all you want and you can even keep listening to that wetback Montoya, but right now, I can tell you don't have the nuts to do your goddamn job. If I'm wrong, then do it."

It was just me and Brooks. When I hadn't taken a swing after about a half minute, Brooks moved so close our noses touched and, without lowering his voice, said, "So. Kid. Don't fucking look at me that way."

I began training with Brooks the next day. He never stipulated that I had to stop training with Montoya, but I never went back, never even called to tell him I was through.

HE ALREADY TOLD ME I HAD THE BEST RAW PUNCHES HE HAD ever seen, but Brooks said that Montoya had cluttered me up with jargon to make me do whatever he wanted.

So I spent most of my time training with ropes around my waist and hands: if I wanted to be a puppet, Brooks would treat me like one.

We went back to the same gym I had beaten the three chumps at. Brooks laid out the open challenge for anyone to step into the ring with me, but word had gotten around about my training, my past. And underground, Brooks' reputation outweighed even Montoya's.

Brooks had anticipated this, so he offered me up tied in the ropes. I would have to be smarter and faster than not only the man I was fighting, but Brooks as well. When I went to throw a punch, Brooks would jerk my hand in the other direction. If I was trying to move into position quickly, he would tug the rope around my waist to the side and throw me off. It was dangerous, nonsensical the way he pulled me around the ring. I lost every fight.

"I don't know about this, Brooks," I told him at the end of the day.

"You're goddamn right you don't. Take that shit off and get back in there."

I took off the ropes. The men who stepped up lasted ten seconds.

A FEW WEEKS INTO MY TRAINING, MONTOYA SHOWED UP WITH a few of his students. I recognized the one walking next to Montoya, the star pupil behind me. He was a mountainous, 290-pound Hispanic kid who had been making a name for himself in the circuit. I had fought him only once before leaving, but I remember him throwing clunky haymakers that, if aimed correctly, could keep the regional dentistry business thriving for years. I knew by the way his feet rolled on the ground, the way his arms hung by his sides, that his unwieldiness was gone. Manny Guererra. The Marauder.

The history between Brooks and Montoya became apparent almost immediately. They approached each other slowly. As if in a film, Marauder and I stood behind our respective mentors and stared stone-faced into one another as they bickered over everything, not just the difference in their styles, but money that was owed from one to the other in the 1970s, girlfriends who had defected from Brooks to Montoya and then back and then back and then back.

Men who had been jumping rope and sparring stopped to listen. As everyone began to anticipate the showdown between Marauder and me, I broke my stare. I closed my eyes and thought of the things they had taught me separately and, now, together, their breaths hot and vitriolic, mixing in one another's faces.

I WON'T SAY WHO WON THE FIGHT. I WON'T EVEN SAY IF IT actually happened. I will say that I stopped training with both men and, years later, fought Marauder in his last match. He died in the ring of a massive heart attack. I was past my prime, and a hardness in me peeled away as he

fell. When his gloves dropped and he began to topple, I did not swing, did not even think of it.

When the autopsy results came back, we found out that Marauder's heart was the size of a normal man's head. His lungs were like sleeping bags. How all that viscera fit into one man, nobody could understand. I went to the funeral and saw Montoya and Brooks for the first time since the incident at the gym years prior. I began training by myself after that day at the gym, and whether or not Marauder had switched from Montoya to Brooks and back I don't know. He was alone when I fought him, on top of the world and nobody even close to him. I would have lost the bout had it gone another two rounds.

I paid my respects and walked back to my car. As I sat down, Montoya knocked on my driver's side window. A moment later, Brooks knocked on my passenger side window. They were ignoring each other and I was ignoring them. For some reason, I thought of when I was a young kid, maybe four or five, and I heard that Elvis had died. Something important I knew nothing about was gone and never coming back.