

I Don't Drink Spirits

Your activities at the Birdsville race week are very basic. You drink beer, you go to the horse races, you bet. You go to Fred Brophy's Travelling boxing Troupe, you drink more beer, you sleep, you wake, you do it all again. You love it. Fred's Boxing Tent is the last of its kind in Australia. Every night, for three nights you answer Fred's rally, calling you to the boxing tent. Fred introduces his fighters – The Stallion, Johnny Valentine, The Ranger, The Caveman, The Chinaman, The Scotsman, The Barramundi Kid, The Duke of Earl, The Afro Savage and The Friendly Mauler. The more you punch him the friendlier he gets. You see the challenger climbs up onto the stage, you go inside the tent, you watch some fearful poundings dished out by Fred's Boxers, you cheer wildly, you take photographs, you wonder what would make anyone in their right mind climb up onto the challengers platform to take on Fred's boxers. You will not have to wait long for your answer.

You have been at the last day of the races to witness the running of the Birdsville Cup. You return to town, you have been drinking steadily for a few hours. You attend the first boxing session at seven thirty, you watch, you cheer, you leave. Fred calls the rally for the second session at nine o'clock. It is now that things become strange. Your strangeness comes from a can of rum and coke that you foolishly consume. This may not seem like a drama for drinkers of spirits but you are strictly a beer drinker, as in beer only. You drink the strong sweet brew, you feel instantly silly. Fred thumps his drum as he calls for the first challenger. Before your brain can stop you, you find your arm strangely lifting itself, in an aggressive fashion. You shout, 'Over Here!' as you make your way to the stage. With Caroline you briefly discuss your sanity and possible injuries that may be inflicted on you. Caroline seems strangely optimistic. You climb the stage to an enormous cheer, you state your occupation as bar owner and your residence as St Kilda. Fred hails you as 'The Publican from St Kilda', the crowd goes wild. You wonder how the hell you got to where you are – you know the rum has something to do with it. Your whole world starts to spin.

You are matched to fight the Duke of Earl. You turn to him and ask if would consider going easy on you, he smiles. You wonder, what have you done? You cannot run, you cannot hide. All the challengers and boxers move into the tent. You get seated and wait for your fight – you look over to Caroline, she has become a celebrity with a dozen or so revellers sitting around her. 'Wow! Is that your husband over there?' they point at you, a couple of them give you the thumbs up, you don't know whether to laugh or cry. You search for a positive, you cast your mind back to your last boxing bout, grade six. You recall that you lost convincingly. In fact, you can't box chocolates!

Your fight is announced. You see your opponent The Duke prancing about, shadow boxing in his shining yellow robe, you pinch yourself. Yes it is real. You survey the surroundings, you see the rudimentary square of canvass that is the ring, you look to Caroline who appears confident, you immerse yourself in the moment... Your corner man sprays some water on your face, rubs some Vaseline on your brow and tells you to keep your hands up. You repeat to yourself. Hands up! Hands up! Fred rings the bell. You are up and into it. You poke out a few jabs to test the waters, The Duke throws a couple back at you. You are still standing and greatly relieved. You try your luck, move in a step and land a couple of decent punches on The Duke. You look into The Dukes face, he is smiling at you loving life, you know that he is being kind and fighting to your ability. This is a huge relief. Your confidence grows, you cop a few shots to the head that get the adrenalin flowing. Hands up! Hands up! You make a charge at The Duke, landing two punches to the chest. You are astonished as The Duke loses balance and falls backwards into the front row, the crowd roars, the bell rings for the end of the first round. You are careful not to gloat. You are completely exhausted, your head is spinning, you hear, 'Go Publican,' calls from the crowd. You think that you are half a chance to go the distance. You look across to The Duke, he has not raised a sweat, your confidence ebbs somewhat. You refuse the chair at the end of the round in some desperate attempt to psyche out The Duke. The corner man sprays your face with the grubby water bottle again, your mouth is horrendously dry, so dry that you cannot speak, your chest heaves, you pant, you are absolutely stuffed.

Ding, Ding. Round two, your step has lost its spring, you hope that The Duke will not notice. You dance around, essentially trying to run down the clock, The Duke will have none of it. He comes at you.

Hands up! Hands up! You cop a hammering, you lash out with a huge right thrown from the pie stand, you miss. The momentum carries you forward, flat on your face. The crown is in hysterics, you are in survival mode, no time for embarrassment as you pick yourself up off the ground. You lunge again, you land one, you catch The Duke by surprise he goes down, hams it up, the crowd cheer for the Publican. You are absolutely rooted. Hands up! Hands up! You make a desperate assault on The Duke's defences, you swing, you miss. You let your guard down, your hands drop. The Duke sees the opening, he lands a savage right jab, you feel instantly sick. You reel backwards, you bring your left glove to your left eye in some pathetic protective gesture, your right hand waves The Duke away as you retreat out of the ring in a comical fashion. You hear the crowd roaring with laughter assuming that you are hamming it up, you are not. You are in a heap of trouble. You think to yourself, 'If I get hit in that area again, I may die,' you are not exaggerating. You foolishly shape up again, make brief contact before hearing the sweetest sound you have ever heard in your life – the bell to end round two.

You take the chair, in fact you take everything, the water, the Vaseline, the chair, the towel, the standing count. Fred asks you how many fingers he is holding up. He holds up four. Fred is missing half his pinky. You answer 'Three and a half.' 'Very good,' says Fred with a smile. You think, shit! He wants to send me back out there, you regain your composure, you gargle through the blood, 'the fingers are a little blurred.' You now have claret running freely out of both nostrils, you feel like spewing. Fred breaks your thoughts, 'Have you had enough Publican?' You respond, 'Plenty!' Fred leads you back into the ring, towards The Duke, Fred lifts The Duke's arm in triumph, then, a moment later he raises your arm too. The crowd goes wild, hailing The Publican. You stand there, arm raised next to Fred and The Duke, bloodied and beaten, yet somehow triumphant, a hero to hundreds for a few moments.

You shuffle to your seat, you are now bleeding profusely from both nostrils and your head feels terrible. You fall into Caroline's arms. Caroline is wonderfully comforting you and holding your face together. A Dozen backslappers tell you well done, the St Johns nurse applies first aid. The Duke approaches, he hands you a cold can of beer, tells you well done, you mumble thanks through the wads of bandages. You give the can away, unable to drink, you now feel very sober and very sore. You seem okay. You then shuffle to your tent. You sleep very well.

The next day you depart Birdsville and you drive in the direction of Windorah. On the way a funny thing happens. You are the habit of pinching your nose and blowing to equalise, like you do on the airplane. You are driving, you pinch your nose, you blow. You feel a strange sensation in your left eye, your eye lid has completely inflated, filled with air. You cannot see a thing out of it, it has completely closed over. You casually turn to Caroline and announce, 'Caroline, we have a problem.' You pull over and relinquish driving responsibilities for the day. You see an ambulance paramedic that night in the Windorah pub, you are reassured that, 'she'll be right mate.'

You call your doctor the next day, he has a fit, tells you to go to the nearest hospital for x-rays, a course of antibiotics, you are also told, 'It is not good to have your eye connected to your nose for obvious reasons.' Your x-ray at the Longreach hospital reveals a broken eye socket, ouch! Your injury eventually heals. You make a note never to drink spirits again. In another foolish moment you do, the result is a mysterious puddle on Caroline's side of the swag. This is a different story.