

THE WAY IT WAS APRIL 1966  
New York City: Da Gardens

The other day I was working the crossword puzzle and the clue was boxer Griffith and I thought of Emile and my heart froze for a moment because I was at Madison Square Gardens when Emile Griffith fought Dick Tiger a black man from Africa, a no nonsense fighting machine. It was the first fight for Griffith after the horrible 'Kid' Parret killing, where Griffith basically stood over the guy and beat him to death, in the neutral corner. I saw the thing on T.V. that night.

I just turned thirty and I was living in New York and I watched this horror show on the set in my local bar the Foxes Den, in the company of some large men awaiting the arrival of Carmine. Watching this killing on T.V., even the hearts of these cold goomba's were stilled. It is not to dwell on why Griffith did this; there had been a report questioning his masculinity, he took it personally and he settled the hash, at least in his mind.

Griffith's fight against Tiger was booked into the Old Gardens. Remember this is the Old Gardens of '66, since rebuilt a few times I guess, but in my Old Gardens, there were open steel beams and wooden fold-up seats. Ramps handled all traffic. It was a huge coliseum you might say.

Dick Tiger could make anybody's blood run cold. He wasn't a champion and he could be had, over twelve long rounds, and in the end, you were as battered as he was. Also the fever in the town was high. Benny "Kid" Parret was a flashy, popular Latin kid, a hero.

I followed boxing in those days. One time I even went way uptown to a rather forlorn little hall, where my fellow Canadian George Chavalo was going in against a fast and fit Mohammed Ali. It was a pay-per-view deal, and the outlet for this particular event were limited to basically, uptown, near the Yankee stadium. Chavalo had feet the size of boards and I figured Ali would pound my fellow compadre to a pulp but he wouldn't knock George over cause basically "His feets too big" to use the vernacular. Anyway I went uptown in the early sixties, at night, on the subway to a small hall filled entirely with large black men who had come to cheer for Ali, of course, and here I was a Canadian pimple who immediately shouted out go get em George and everybody laughed and so did I.

I don't remember if George fell over or not; I don't think he did. When it was over I was escorted back to my subway stop and put on the train by a couple of huge gentlemen from the event, who turned out to be off duty cops making sure the citizenry got home safely and that was a good thing about New York in those days.

As a young guy I bought Ring Magazine and I would read it on the bus north, going home, with the thing stopping every twenty miles or so,

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stopping at Gravehurst, I'd glance at the lake, notice if the maples were turning yet, then look back down at the mag. There was the onion farmer Basilio. His face is looking real scarred up and I'm wondering if he's punchy. Oh, yes, let's dwell upon that for just one moment. Today, we refer to young men who have taken too many hits to the head and have lost their wiggies. Today we say oh, Alzheimer's or some other bullshit name so fat white guys or a fat black man in particular can make their blood money having young men beat to uselessness.

When it went down with Ali, it finished it off for me.

As I recall New York was a bustle on the night of the Griffith/Tiger fight. The wind which could cut you in half earlier in the day, on the avenues where the buildings block the sun, into this wind I stepped. It was April, a nip in the air, and I headed for my subway stop Lafayette, then midtown to Da Gardens, Madison Square.

There was a mass of humanity heading for the wickets. I got in line and after a bit I bought a ticket, one place left, upper balcony. My seat was second row from the edge row, we all stood on our seats leaned forward and stared down into the ring, straight down almost because the second tier balcony hung almost directly over the ring or at least you felt so, standing on your seat, leaning forward along with three or four hundred other guys in your section all of us leaning forward and if one fell, lost his particular balance, stopped the hover that made you feel like the hunting hawk, staring down for small mice, a live killer, if you lost your balance and fell out of the stands, we all would have gone because we were jammed in, shoulder to shoulder, packed. If one fell and grabbed his neighbor for support who grabbed his neighbor you would have one gigantic ball of neighborliness, falling out of the second tier balcony of the Old Gardens, about a million legs kicking, a human octopi and a real spoil to the evening, so word passed kind of sublimely to keep your cool cause it's sixty straight feet down. In fact a lot of guys were introducing themselves, everybody around me were "Kid" Parret fans and wanted Dick Tiger to corner Griffith square him up and take him out, down him, who knows what all, everybody in the whole bloody place was talking Spanish, but I was jolly neutral and I figured that actually Griffith was good, he was fast, light on his feet, could hit, he could move, and had always shown great courage, before the Parret thing he had many serious long fights with guys who could hit and take a hit. It would be a good test I figured, Tiger was good, I'd actually rooted for him a few times; he was a very brave man and moved steadily forward bringing into play what later became the African national war cry, UHRHU, run forward, plant your flag, and occupy behind it, certainly a philosophy the Democrats of this day could use; the Republicans certainly have taken the lesson to heart. That was Dick Tiger Uhuru, stand and occupy.

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So there I am on a spring night standing on my seat leaning forward vaguely watching the prelims that are taking place, kind of below my feet. Then that's all over. I can't really see ringside too good but the guy announces some of the celebrities and a few guys file off front row seats and climb through the ropes and stand in nice dress suits to moderate applause. Artie Arragon, from the west coast, Chavallo was there, I think, a bunch of guys and I'm thinking this is a good turnout, I don't think it was even a title fight, although it might have been but it wouldn't have mattered, the word was out, we'd see Griffith, what he was made of, Tiger was rough. Then the announcer guy welcomes Ray Robinson and he holds the Robinson like it was a homerun call: "RRRRay Robinsonnnnnnnnnnnnnnn"

In those days great racehorses and great fighters were held in high esteem by the general public. That night the place went berserk, Ray was at ringside, now I see him, he's wearing a bright purple suit, good fit, I see immediately; he looks good, trim, he glides through the ropes. He has beautiful brown girls on either side, he waves, the crowd loves him, the ball of neighborliness sways as if in a trance, me too, I forget about the sixty feet to the floor, so do four hundred Puerto Ricans, Ray Ray Ray we yell.

I don't know if I'm going to be able to remember blow by blow of this, we're going back a long ways. I think now, that this could have been for Griffith's welterweight title because of the events that happened next. The crowd quieted down now, Ray and the other guys were no longer the focus, they left the ring and I watched Ray snuggle firmly between the girls. Good I thought, the planets are in alignment let the show begin. There was just a low buzz in the hall, we couldn't see under us but as the fighters were coming out, the sound came in waves up to us, and then Dick Tiger came into view. He was wearing a black and yellow silk robe, no hood, and as he climbed in I saw his boots were black. He turned to the corner on my left and Griffith came in. There was a fair amount of noise but up where I was nobody was out of control no booing, not much noise. Griffith wore a plain black robe, also no hood, and black boots and was in the corner on my right. The announcer was a serious short guy in a dress black suit and he called them forward. We were all frozen, flash zapped for a second, a dead silence as the two men came together, then he announces DICK TIGER. The boys in my section whoop again. Spanish words are thirteen to the dozen and I watch Mr. Tiger from Nigeria. I think at home, this guy must be a real hero, people must wave to him in cafes. To me he seemed like a guy who would mingle with real people, like the bunch around me. Then they introduced the champion Emile Griffith, I looked immediately to see what Ray Robinson was doing. It was important for me to see how Ray would handle this rather delicate moment in the Face business. Ray applauded

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politely, after all this was the World Champion, in the days when there was only one guy.

The fighters returned to their corners and the hall lights never dimmed, the place was packed, people in the aisles, no vendors, standees on every stair, the place standing, everybody standing, me on my seat, leaning, I notice an underarm holster on the guy next to me, probably a cop, he's for Tiger.

Tiger wore black trunks with a yellow stripe up the side, Griffith wore plain black, when the bell rang they came out fighting. It would be impossible for me to recall the exact blows. At one point I thought Griffith had his eye knocked out but it was a gob of Vaseline stuck to his eyebrow. It looked fatal. It was close, some murderous exchanges, Tiger with his back to the ropes beneath us, Griffith battering him blood flew but Tiger would fight out of the corner, duck and weave, nod up and down his head a pendulum which Griffith tried to pin. Then Griffith takes a fall in the ninth, he's down on one knee.

Just a short left hook that travels about nine inches. Tiger is in the corner across from us the referee is counting, the Gardens crowd is frantic, but Griffith gets up holds on and the bell rings, round ten. I've seen a lot of fist fights in my time, in Canada, when I was a young guy, fighting on a Saturday night, downtown was practically a ritual, and I saw some beatings handed out, man a mano, guys knocked in the ditch, dress shoes flying, suit torn at the shoulder, but this night, in the gardens, I saw professionals at work, the job was meticulous, surgery on both sides would be required. The rounds counted themselves off without the help of some half dressed bimbo, all of the WWF puffery came along later. A sober lad in a white shirt and a black bow tie carried the round signs. After all these were quality people, no cheap suits or tricks were going to make it here.

As I watched the fight unfold before me, I thought about the two men, both black men, one from Africa, one from the Mid West, how much would Dick Tiger buy into the roar of the white guys in his corner, the guys who nod to distant figures as if the fix was in, but maybe the two fighters had more to settle than a business idea, I couldn't get a real read, except there was nothing phony about fifteen brutal rounds of fist working out a successful conclusion of effect at distance, an exercise our ancient ancestors learned when they discovered that rocks could travel.

In the end it was a split decision that went to Griffith, I don't know if Dick Tiger got any more paydays, he took his shot, he was lucky to get it, lucky to have the shit whacked out of him, lucky to have a room to go to, lucky to have a car and a house in Vegas, lucky to have friends like Blinkey and the boys in Philly, lucky to be in America, he was just lucky all around. Griffith, not so lucky. He still fought tough guys, but the legs

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were gone and soon so was he. Nothing ever got decided, everything was sort of the way it was before.

I filed down the walkways and out of the building onto the Avenue, and I walked along looking in store windows, for awhile, thinking about what I had just witnessed. I saw my reflection in the clean, clear windows of the shops and I saw the passersby to and fro behind me. I was one of them, passing by a store window, looking at my own reflection, and for the first time I saw the sheer courage that would be needed for manhood.