



Fights I've Lost

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While I was never a tough kid, I wasn't a dumb one either, so I spent my childhood avoiding fights. Usually this wasn't hard. When you hit middle school on the wrong side of both 100 pounds and puberty, you have a natural safeguard against shooting your mouth off. (You have natural safeguards against teen pregnancy, hooliganism, sexually transmitted diseases, elder abuse, underage drinking, gang recruitment, and dignity as well. What are you susceptible to? Magic the Gathering. And noogies.)

On the rare occasions when things did degenerate into fisticuffs, I had a record worthy of Glass Joe. My one unambiguous win wasn't even clear-cut, as it came with an assist from a baseball bat and was entirely unintentional.

Still, if we're going to start disqualifying fight results for ticky-tack stuff like that, Hulk Hogan's a stock boy at the local Wal Mart and Abbot and Costello get their asses handed to them by Frankenstein. Nobody wants that. Anyway, the other guy was crying, and I wasn't. Win, me.

Unfortunately, run home crying, me, and assume the fetal position, me, were more common occurrences.

My most frequent nemesis was my best friend—Joe Rossi. Joe lived across the street from me since we were both six years old. For whatever reason—drugs, women, ownership of “Snake Eyes”—the two of us established a routine where we had to hate each other one afternoon every three years.

The biggest fight we ever had was completely senseless. Like *101 Dalmatians*, it was fueled by the capricious whims of an evil woman.

And not just any women. This was Amy Giordano. She was the kind of woman who would stab a man and then get pregnant by him in prison. Just the week before she'd put gum in my hair on the bus. My mom had had to cut it out with scissors.

Since then I'd been wary of her, but the worst thing I could imagine her doing was putting more gum in my hair. So, I wore a hat on the bus. Problem solved, right? (Unless, of course, she took off the hat, put the gum in my hair, and then put the hat back on, thus creating a hat-gum-hair combo. Luckily, I just thought of this now, or else I probably would have missed an entire month of 9th grade hiding in my bedroom.)

Her plan didn't involve gum, though. Instead, as we left the bus—Joe and I happily arguing about the Oakland Athletics—she turned to him and, gesturing to the A's keychain he was carrying, said, “You should hit him.”

“Don't hit me,” I told Joe.

“Are you going to let him tell you what to do?” she asked.

I could see the wheels turning in his head.

“If you hit me with that keychain,” I told him, “I'm going to hit you with my trumpet case.” (Did I mention I was in band? Or was that apparent?)

So he hit me. And I hit him with the trumpet case. And he tackled me and got a good punch in that knocked my glasses off. (Did I mention I wore glasses?)

I immediately started freaking out about the glasses, yelling at him to knock it off before they got stepped on. In the world of trouble, broken glasses were on par with Amy Giordano—orders of magnitude above mere fighting—so he got off of me. I stood up, picked up the glasses, and wound up for a punch that probably finally got there sometime last Tuesday. He ducked under it; we both stormed home.

Other notable fights with Joe included the time he stabbed me in the head with a Lego, and the infamous bird house incident, where my concern for our feathered friends was rewarded with me getting hit by a brick tossed from the roof of my garage. Amazingly, I was the best man at Joe's wedding.

As for my other childhood nemesis, I won't be attending his wedding, and that's only partially due to the incident with the bat.

Remember when you were a kid, and a new kid moved into your neighborhood, and everyone talked about him before they met him, wondering what he was like and whether he or she would end up being your friend?

Well, that was Eric Damon when I was thirteen years old, except he cleared up that last speculation real quick by shouting “Fag!” at me as he sped by on his bike the first time I ever saw him. I'm lucky he wasn't old enough to drink beer, because he would have crumpled the can and thrown it at my head.

Still, we gave Eric a chance, mainly because we were always a couple guys short for football. During his first game, I did something to make him mad (Breathing? Who knows?), and he prepped for the subsequent kickoff by shouting that he was going to fuck me up.

And fuck me up he did. As the ball flew to the other side of the field, he ignored it entirely to rush over to me, hoist me in the air, and slam me on my head.

Holy KAPOW!, Batman.

Dazed, I stumbled to my feet and did the exact thing every twelve-year-old boy wants to do when he's bodyslammed by a sadist his own age: I proceeded to bawl my eyes out. Eric called me a pussy, and I had to wait on the sidelines for a few plays until I caught my breath.

Long story short, I owed him one. And that's where the bat comes in.

We were playing baseball. The bat we were using had a foam coating over a hard plastic core, while the ball was hard foam—you didn't need a glove to catch it, but you couldn't really hit it out of the park either.

Eric was on the mound, and I was looking to get on base. He brushed me back a couple times, but I hung in the box, waiting for my pitch. Finally, he came high and inside and plunked me lightly on the shoulder. Pretending to be offended, I retaliated by lightly tossing the foam bat towards him.

Well, the bat spun through the air, once, twice, three times, violating the laws of physics by gaining momentum with rotation. As Eric stood motionless on the mound, the bat's hard plastic cap honed inexorably onto the most sensitive, Charlie-horse prone part of his upper thigh.

Eric went down.

"Holy shit!" I stepped away from the batter box, ready to make a break for home.

"Motherfucker!" he shouted. He started to get to his feet, but his leg buckled under him, and he crumpled back down again.

He couldn't get up. Interesting. I powered down my flight instinct to see what would happen next.

"You motherfucker!!" he shouted. He tried to come after me again, but went back down. Everyone on the field rushed over to see how badly he was hurt. I hung back, making sure he wasn't just trying to lure me within striking distance.

"I'm going to kick your fucking ass!" He was writhing on the ground and starting to emit high-pitched noises that sounded like, no, wait, it couldn't be. He was crying!

I'd made him cry. My friends had to gather to comfort him. As I saw it, I couldn't help but feel...terrible.

"Eric, I'm sorry," I said, walking over to him.

"I'm going to fucking kill you!" he shouted, reaching out to me. I stopped walking. He returned to writhing on the ground.

"We might have to carry him," one of my friends said.

I moved forward a little more, moving my hands soothingly. "Eric, it was an accident—I'm really sorry."

"Get the fuck away from me!"

"Just go home," another friend whispered. "You're making things worse."

What could I do? I left. But later that afternoon, I was still feeling guilty, so I came up with the idea of finding Eric's number in the phone book and calling to apologize. I dialed, and his mom picked up the phone. She sounded frazzled.

"Hello?"

"Hi...can I talk to Eric?"

"Who's calling?"

"James"

He heard me through the phone. "That asshole! You tell him I'm going to fucking kill him!" I was shocked. He'd just said "fucking," "asshole," and "kill" in front of his mother, all in one sentence, and she didn't even do anything about it. We'd apparently crossed a threshold where all behavior was excusable. There was a good chance he really was going to kill me.

"I don't think he wants to talk to you right now," his mom sighed.

"Can you tell him I'm sorry?" I pleaded, but she'd already hung up.

I hid out for the next week or so, but Eric never even tried to make good on his threat. Looking back, I realize that the Damon incident taught me two valuable lessons.

First, if you can't beat them in a fair fight, try to kill them with kindness. It would have been easy to gloat about my incredibly lucky shot (or pretend that I did it on purpose), but apologizing instead was the right thing to do.

And second, if kindness doesn't work, hit them with a fucking bat.
I think Teddy Roosevelt said that.