

145th Street
SHORT STORIES

Walter Dean Myers



Published by
Dell Laurel-Leaf
an imprint of
Random House Children's Books
a division of Random House, Inc.
1540 Broadway
New York, New York 10036

If you purchased this book without a cover you should be aware that this book is stolen property. It was reported as "unsold and destroyed" to the publisher and neither the author nor the publisher has received any payment for this "stripped book."

Copyright © 2000 by Walter Dean Myers

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without the written permission of the Publisher, except where permitted by law. For information address Delacorte Press, 1540 Broadway, New York, New York 10036.

The trademark Laurel-Leaf Library® is registered in the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office.
The trademark Dell® is registered in the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office.

Visit us on the Web! www.randomhouse.com/teens
Educators and librarians, for a variety of teaching tools, visit us at
www.randomhouse.com/teachers

ISBN: 0-440-22916-2

RL: 5.5

Reprinted by arrangement with Delacorte Press

Printed in the United States of America

October 2001

10 9 8 7 6

OPM

*To Beryl Banfield, for her contributions to
multicultural literature*

Fighter

Billy Giles told his wife that he was just going to the gym to work out. If he'd told her the truth, that he was going to fight again, he knew she would have cried.

"You're not going to eat anything?" she asked.

"No, I'm not hungry," he said. He had seen her making supper, and had known that he wouldn't be eating anything.

"Don't stay out too late," she said. She reached up and touched the tip of his nose with her index finger.

"I'll think you're out with another girl."

"I'll bring you some ice cream," he said, framed in the doorway of their apartment. From where he stood he could see into the bedroom where the baby's crib stood against the wall.

He closed the door, waited for a moment for the click that said that Johnnie Mae had locked it, and

started down the stairs. He felt a little sick to his stomach. There had been a time, not too long ago, when he would have been excited to be boxing. Somewhere between that time, between sixteen and nineteen, the nervousness had turned to a kind of nausea that he would dream about in the early hours of the morning.

Chops and Tommy were on the stoop talking to some girl he didn't know. The air was cool and he sucked it in between his clenched teeth. The smell of fried fish was heavy in the air and he wished that he had eaten something.

He started the long walk up the hill toward the Eighth Avenue subway. Win or lose he'd take a cab home. Now he walked slowly. There wasn't any hurry. It was seven and he wasn't scheduled to fight until ten. It would take less than a half hour to get to the Bronx gym and minutes to get into his gear.

On the corner a guy played a saxophone, the sound sliding into the darkness and echoing off the bricks. It was too cold to be out playing a saxophone but Billy guessed the guy was dealing with demons that needed to hear a tune. You did what you had to do, he thought.

The program hadn't started when he reached the gym and made his way to the fighters' entrance. There was a bunch of girls hanging around on the first floor, and Manny was in the middle of them. Manny flashed him the high sign and he flashed back. He went upstairs where Al Gaines was listening to the radio.

"Get out your clothes and I'll tape your hands," Al said. "Manny talk to you?"

"No," Billy answered.

"He said he might want to put you on early," Al said.

"It doesn't make any difference to me," Billy said. He took off his street clothes as Al tried to find a better station on the little radio he had been bringing to the gym since Billy knew him. Billy put on his groin protector and slipped into the green trunks he always wore.

Al kept up a steady stream of talk as he taped Billy's hands. Billy grunted his answers and tried to think about the first time he had fought for Manny. Manny had worked his corner that night, had kept yelling at him to "show strong," and he had won. After that first professional fight he remembered walking out into the night, his face still stinging from the blows he had received, and feeling taller than he had ever thought possible.

Al finished with the taping and Billy shadowboxed in front of a mirror. Other boxers were in the locker room; some were changing clothes, others listened to music. A young, awkward kid was bragging about how he was going to start the night off by knocking out his opponent. Billy knew he was afraid.

The room was too small for all the nervous sweat, for all the odors, for all the heat that the bodies generated. Now he sat on the end of the rubdown table, smoothing the edge of the tape with his forefinger as if it were necessary, listening for sounds that would tell him the fight in progress was over and that it was his turn. He had been fighting preliminaries for nearly three years and knew his limitations and abilities. He would win or lose tonight—it made little difference. Either way he'd collect the one hundred and forty-five dollars for the bout. If he put up a good show there'd be another pre-

liminary bout for him when a spot became available. He could pay some bills and still have enough to take Johnnie Mae to a movie.

A fighter he knew, Jimmy Walls, was warming up in the corner. Billy watched him for a while; his black skin already glistened with crystals of sweat as he threw deft combinations against an imaginary, helpless opponent. It was an odd thing with Billy: He could never imagine, even when he shadowboxed, an opponent he could easily beat.

Billy heard a strong buzz from the crowd outside and knew that something had happened. Probably a knock-down or a knockout, he thought; maybe the brash kid had made good his boast. Billy's stomach tightened and he took deep breaths. He'd been knocked down in the last fight but had won on points. And after, when he'd gone home, Johnnie Mae made tea for him and offered it as he sat wearily in the faded, overstuffed chair they had somehow inherited from his married sister. When he reached for the tea he missed the cup, and Johnnie Mae had panicked.

"What's wrong, baby, what's wrong? You hurt?" She put the cup down on the table, tipping it over, ignoring it in her concern.

"Nothing wrong. I'm just tired," Billy said as the moment of dizziness passed over.

"You're not fighting anymore, Billy, you hear that? You're not fighting anymore, that's final now!" Johnnie Mae stood twisting a dish towel, letting her voice rise almost to a scream.

"You want to wake the baby?" he countered.

Billy knew that the money he was able to pick up in the ring meant more to him than to his wife. Being a man meant saying yes when your woman asked you for something. She didn't understand that, at least she didn't understand how it made him feel when he heard her making plans and dreaming about things that cost money he didn't have.

It was good, too, to complain about not being made of money but then to reach down and give her enough cash to have her hair done or get something for the baby. Later, when the baby was a little older, maybe they'd get a baby-sitter and Johnnie Mae could work for a while until they were doing better. Then he would give up fighting.

The door to the dressing room opened, startling Billy. The two fighters came in. It was easy to tell who the winner was.

"Hey, Billy, what's happening?"

The winner. The kid who had bragged about getting a knockout skulked to a corner, slipped out of his trunks, and fumbled with the lacing on his groin protector, the grease still on his eyebrow where he'd been cut. The fighter who had beaten him said he'd put up a good fight, said it loud enough for the loser to hear, as they always did. Billy felt sorry for the loser, knowing that at that moment he felt beaten and ashamed and hated the boxing he'd hoped would bring him to glory.

"Let's go, Billy." Manny Givens managed about six fighters, all of them fighting in minor fights, only a few of them still hoping for the big time. "Guy's a comer, kid, watch him."

Billy started the trek to the ring. This was the only good part of the fight—the crowd looking at him, wondering what he was made of, judging him by his swagger, by the expression on his face, his show of confidence. Unconsciously he tried to impress them as he walked to the ring, as if they were his adversary and not the other fighter. Manny guided him with pats on the back. Then he was in the ring. The other fighter was already there, a young Puerto Rican, close to his age.

Manny had said the guy was a comer. In Manny's ring talk it meant that the guy was being groomed, that he had been carefully brought along and given only fights he was expected to win. In the office, when they planned the fights and decided what the money would be, the Puerto Rican would be considered the "fighter" and Billy would be the "opponent." The Puerto Rican's name was Danny Vegas.

"Okay, boys, you know the game, keep up the pace." The referee had finished the introductions and called them to the center of the room. The heat was unbearable. "I don't want to have to tell you to fight. Give the folks a show. Touch gloves now."

Billy touched gloves and went back to his corner.

"If you get him," Manny said, rubbing Billy's shoulders, "there could be some breaks involved." He didn't sound convincing.

The bell rang.

Billy came to the center of the ring and snapped a glove out. It was a quick move and hit Vegas on the forehead. Crouching low for a minute and then quickly

straightening, he faked Vegas out of position and banged his hands to the wiry body. They backed off and circled each other cautiously. Billy told himself that he would win, that he could take this guy. He threw jabs, feeling Vegas out, checking out his moves. Vegas, for his part, seemed not too anxious to mix it up with him and they spent most of the first round fighting at a distance.

Sitting in his corner always made Billy think of commercials being played on television between the rounds. His trainer gave him a swig of seltzer, which he spit into the bucket. He'd been shocked, after his first fight, to discover that he was expected to pay for even the seltzer he used between rounds.

In the second round, Billy found out why Manny had called Vegas a comer. They were in close, shoulder to shoulder, and Billy was again throwing punishing hits to the body, hearing Vegas grunt from the force of the blows. Billy could have continued fighting on the inside while he had the advantage but elected instead to back away for more power. He had, for a moment, an image of himself, fists flashing, rendering Vegas helpless against the ropes. Billy backed off, feinted once, jabbed, feinted again, twice, disregarded completely a right thrown by Vegas as he prepared a series of blows to the body and head.

He didn't see the blow coming and it stunned him. There was a sudden lack of focus and a scary awareness of his knees. Billy pushed off and bobbed and weaved. Vegas didn't know that he'd been hurt, and when Billy managed to throw a light jab it was Vegas who grabbed

and held on. Then they were apart again and Vegas was snapping his glove in Billy's face. Billy thought he was cut.

The glare from the overhead lights gave Vegas's face an unreal appearance. Billy felt almost as if he were fighting a thing rather than a man. Vegas would try a move and Billy would know what he was going to do, but he couldn't stop it. He could see the confidence in his opponent's face.

Now he was against the ropes with Vegas punching him in the body, jolting nausea into him in sharply swelling waves. Billy was having trouble keeping his mouthpiece in. For a moment Vegas dropped his hands and with a frenzy Billy lashed out at him, more in fury than with any plan.

There were noises from the crowd as Vegas backed across the ring. Billy was surprised to find himself following, throwing punches. They were apart again, circling one another, when suddenly Vegas turned and went to his corner. Billy hadn't heard the bell ring but walked back to his own corner.

"Maybe you could go to school. Take IBM or something." Johnnie Mae sat on the bed, pushing the baby back into the middle whenever she crawled near the edge. "It would be hard but you have to make sacrifices."

Some people could do it. When Billy thought of them he always pictured young guys with glasses and attaché cases sitting primly on the A train and thumbing through a thick book. He had told Johnnie Mae that he'd finished high school, but he really hadn't.

And now that she had made such a big deal of it, he

couldn't tell her. School. Billy remembered standing in the back of the room at Junior High School 271, not being allowed to sit down until he had brought his mother in to see the teacher.

"What are you wasting your time for?" the guidance counselor had asked him. "You think it's going to be easy out there?"

That was the last day Billy had gone to school. Not that his mother wouldn't have taken the day off from the button factory where she worked to come down, but because it seemed true, that he was wasting his time. Learning for him had always been hard, like catching water in his bare hands, it would all slip through, all be so near and yet somehow not useful to him. If only they'd talked about things that he knew something about.

"The rounds are even," Manny said. "Start fast."

Vegas hadn't been expecting it and was momentarily stunned when Billy threw a high right to his head.

Billy followed it with a left hook, leaving his feet for a moment, seeing the force of the blow contort Vegas's face. Vegas slumped to the floor. The referee was counting over him.

"One . . . two . . . three . . . four . . . five . . . six . . ." Vegas was on one knee at six and on his feet at eight. Billy moved in fast. Vegas moved away, slid along the ropes, picked off a wild left that Billy threw, and missed a jab himself. He tried to clinch and Billy pushed him away with one hand and swung for his head with

the other. He missed and Vegas threw a right hand that caught Billy just in front of the ear.

His vision doubled. He was in trouble. From every angle there seemed to be someone throwing punches. Billy's mouthpiece had fallen to the canvas and the referee kicked it toward his corner. He tried desperately to keep his hands up. Pride would keep him in the fight.

In the appliance store, when the clerk had asked if he was interested in the nineteen-inch screen Billy had said no, he wanted the thirty-two-inch screen.

"That's a good choice," the clerk had said. "It's a good buy at seven hundred dollars."

Later he would have to tell Johnnie Mae that he had changed his mind, that the thirty-two-inch set was too big for their small living room, but for the moment, in the store, he couldn't back out of the game.

Billy couldn't tell for sure where Vegas was, only that he himself was being hit. Barely conscious, he spread his hands, knowing he was going down. Still Vegas smashed his fists into his face. He heard the cheering of the crowd as he fell. Above him a brilliant confusion of lights glared down. There in the middle of the arena, in the middle of the ring, in the middle of the light, the referee standing over him, he felt like he always knew he would feel, alone.

Then, somehow, he was up, and Manny was forcing the acrid smelling salts under his nose, forcing him back to reality. He knew he must have been knocked out. Manny asked him something and he felt that he had slurred the answer, but Manny seemed satisfied.

Vegas was lifting his arm, saying that he had fought a

good fight. The special policemen were coming into the ring for the next fight. They told Manny to have Billy leave from the corner without stairs and he had to jump from the ring.

Billy didn't stop to pack his gear neatly, just crammed it into his bag. He showered slowly, surprised to find out how sore he was in the body. Later there would be blood in his urine. Later there would be the headaches that kept him up in the early mornings. He had been knocked out before. He knew what he would feel like in the morning and told himself that it didn't matter.

He got the money from Manny.

"Billy, give me a call in a month or so." Manny looked away from him. "When you get yourself together."

At the gate he had to wait until a special policeman opened it so he could leave the arena. Behind him the crowd was noisy, cheering. It had started to rain. Billy decided to take the subway home. He didn't deserve a cab. On alternate stations he tried to figure out what he had done wrong against Vegas and then what he had done wrong in life that had him in a half-empty train trying not to throw up.

He remembered his promise to pick up some ice cream for Johnnie Mae, but the grocery store on the corner was closed and he didn't feel like walking down to 142nd Street to the one that was open.

Johnnie Mae was awake. When she saw him she knew that he'd been fighting and that he'd lost. She didn't say anything, just helped him undress.

Outside, the rain picked up and now beat hard against the window. From down the street a tinny-sounding radio oozed out a slow blues. Johnnie Mae was crying, but she didn't say anything. Billy took the money out of his pocket and threw it on the table. Johnnie Mae picked it up and threw it on the floor. Then, realizing that she had hurt him, picked it up and put it carefully back onto the dresser.

Johnnie Mae wiped the traces of alum from his face with a wet, cool cloth. It should have been left on, but he let her do it anyway.

"I love you, baby," she said. "I love you so much."

Later Billy, lying in the darkness, listened to the even sounds of his wife's breathing. He wondered if somewhere in the city Vegas was lying in bed dreaming about fighting, about their fight. Billy checked the time; it was a little after two. He found Johnnie Mae's hand and held it. Even in her sleep she took his hand and squeezed it gently. He needed that squeeze, that gentleness, the knowing that the gentleness would always be there, that through all the nights of pain to come, she would be there for him. He closed his eyes and hoped he wouldn't dream.

Angela's Eyes

The wind, whistling across the vacant lots and through the redbrick and fire escape canyons of the neighborhood, had taken another summer. Old men brought out their faded suit jackets and moved their domino games inside. Theresa, the mother of Angela Luz Colón, finally emerged from her grief and called the factory where she had worked before her husband, Fernando, had been killed. They told her she could come back to work, and she did.

That is not to say that she had stopped crying against the wall at night or stopped reaching out her hand in the darkness to where he had lain by her side for so many years. It was just that she had also begun to rise, once she had watched the gray mist of twilight give way to early sun, and leave for work.

"You should go out more, too," she told her daugh-