

May the Best Man Win

Kit de Waal

5 Patti looked up. He was a white. In those days, in that corner of Birmingham, everyone that drank in The Carpenter's Arms used the side entrance; only strangers made use of the front doors, slabs of carved black teak, ornate brass and stained glass, one side boarded up. So when those doors swung open at nine thirty on a damp Saturday night in December 1981 everyone knew it would be a stranger, someone from out of town. But no one expected the somebody to be white. The man walked right in, pushing both doors wide, holding them open for those that followed.

10 Twenty-year-old Patti Rooney, mid-shift behind the bar, counted four of them, all men. The only other white people in the pub were herself and Stella Hickey, who had been living so long with Delroy Barratt that she was a black woman in all but hue.

15 Patti stopped wiping the dull counter and looked from the strangers to the four black bus drivers gambling a week's pay in the ripped leatherette booths; the rheumy-eyed West Indians in trilbies and overcoats huddled over their chipped ivory dominoes. Then to the three urban warriors, louche and unripe, scratching the paint off the starving jukebox. Nothing had stopped, exactly, but everything was half-speed and it had all become very quiet. Patti's boyfriend Fitz was the only one still making a noise but that was because he was propped up on a high stool at the bar singing into his empty glass, too drunk to notice that walking right past him was a white man in a blue leather trench coat carrying thick black gloves with the sure-footed swagger of a king. Behind him, looking ill at ease, were three men. The last two carried between them a huge television set.

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30 The King stopped right next to Fitz, who looked up, jolted backwards and had to clutch the man's coat to stop himself falling off his stool.

'Hey, man! You! You can't just come in here!' he shouted. 'Hey, man! You! What you doing in here?'

35 Fitz poked the King in his chest and shoved his face up close. Patti held her breath. If there was another fight she would lose her job and if she lost her job she would lose her little flat and if she lost

her little flat she would never speak to Fitz again. The King's followers looked around. One of them took him by the arm.

'Eddie, mate. Come on. Let's go.'

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But the white man sidestepped Fitz and shrugged off the cautious hand. He moved the empty glass aside and slapped the counter twice. He was smiling.

'Perfect, this is! Bloody perfect. You can stop struggling, lads. Put the box here.'

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It took all the King's men to lodge the television safely on its stubby legs and manoeuvre its huge grey face towards its audience. Only then did the King deign to notice Fitz.

'What you drinking, mate?' asked the King.

'Me?! You asking me what I'm drinking? You come in here, move my things and ask me what I am drinking?!'

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'That's right, chief. Shall we say rum? Looks like rum to me. Smells like it and all.'

Without waiting for a reply, the King turned to Patti and winked. Patti almost laughed. His eyes were bright, and the same blue as his coat. They lit up the room.

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'If I'm right, and I think I am, love, fill him up, there's a girl. A double. Quick as you can. And when you've done that, set me up with a Jameson's and the same for my boys. We've just carried that bugger five hundred yards or more.' He turned around and pointed at his men.

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'Don't just bloody stand there, you lot. Get it working. The fight's about to start!'

He pulled from behind the television a long grey lead and held the plug up to Patti.

'You got a socket anywhere behind you, love?'

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She looked up above her where there was a small grey television hissing on a narrow shelf, jagged white lines sprayed all over the screen. She looked back at the King and shook her head.

'I can't get it to work.'

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'Unplug it, love. It ain't worth the electricity. Stick this in instead and then stick another rum in his glass when he's finished that one. Keep him topped up.' He nudged Fitz. 'Alright, mate? Don't want to disturb no one. Just want to watch the boxing. Got halfway down the bloody M6 and there's nothing moving. Didn't budge an inch for two hours. Never gonna make it home in time for the fight.

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Even bought myself a new telly for the occasion. So I says to myself, Eddie, I says, find yourself a plug, find yourself a bottle of the finest

John Jameson Irish and find yourself a bit of company that know a
blind punch from a swipe. Went to a right dodgy place up the road
but they didn't look pleased to see me, if you know what I mean.
80 Walks in here and, well, I feel welcome.'

He said the last bit loud enough for everyone to hear but the pub
was still unnaturally quiet. One of the King's men began fiddling
with a button on the front of the television and another with the
aerial behind, and as Patti put their drinks on the bar the King
85 caught her eye and gave her another wink. He looked at her as
though they had a secret together. As if they had met somewhere
before a long, long time ago and he was reminding her of what they
did and what they knew.

'That's my girl,' he said.

90 And then he turned, addressing everyone and no one in particular
in a loud clear voice.

'Hope you don't mind! Hope I'm not intruding, friends!' he
shouted. 'Only I want to see the greatest boxer in the world! Anyone
with me?'

95 The pub was full. Every black face turned to look at him. The
King's followers took a step back, pressing themselves together
against the bar, but the King still smiled, not taking his sparkly eyes
from the television. He turned a big dial on the front and suddenly
the noise of cheering and clapping filled the room. A voice said in
100 feverish tones, 'Three-times heavyweight champion of the world
Muhammad Ali has entered the ring!' The King alone cheered.

'Go on, mate! Go on!'

Fitz brought his drink up to his lips and muttered something
under his breath. The white man caught it.

105 'You're joking, aren't you, chief? Losing it? Did you say losing it?
He ain't losing it! Got a bit older, that's all. Look at him! Look at
him! He, that man there, he is the greatest boxer this world has ever
seen or ever will see. Look at him! He's fucking beautiful!'

The King blew a kiss to the beautiful man in his white robe and
red gloves. Someone laughed. The bus drivers got up from the
tables and walked slowly towards the bar, towards the screen. One
of the King's men caught Patti's attention and asked for more
drinks, three pints of lager and some peanuts. The leather jackets
hovered near the edge of the television and the trilbies with the
110 dominoes told them to move aside, they were blocking the view.

115 Ali began sparring around the ring, throwing punches at
imaginary foes, prancing and skipping to the adulation of the crowd.

120 And then another black man entered the ring. The noise was deafening. People were chanting 'Ali! Ali!' but the second black man whirred around holding his arms aloft, throwing punches and, as far as Patti could tell, pretending that they were shouting for him.

'Get out of it!' shouted the King.

125 One man stood away from the rest. Everyone called him Reds. He had been watching the white men since they walked in. He wore a suit with a tuft of crimson silk in the pocket and his dreadlocks lay like skeins of rope over his chest.

'Hey, you there.'

But the King took no notice.

130 Reds took a step closer to the television. 'I said, you there,' he repeated.

The King turned and Reds spoke to him, slow and clear.

'I don't want Ali to win. Berbick is from my parish, mister. My countryman, that.'

135 'Is he?' the white man responded. 'Kingston man, ain't he? Jamaican. Yeah, he's good, big geezer, got some weight and he's tidy but have you seen who he's up against tonight?' He let the question hang. 'What you drinking, anyway, chief?'

140 Without waiting for a reply, the King nodded to Patti and she quickly pulled the top off a bottle of beer and placed it in front of the Rastaman.

The King walked round the bar with his hand held out. 'Eddie Lovett, mate.'

145 Patti watched. Everyone watched. The Rasta paused and then took the hand and they shook. The white man held him long and close.

'You've got a great countryman there, my friend. A great fighter. But as far as champions go, I've got to go with Ali. May the best man win.'

150 The King released him and went back to his friends and the crowd from the tables. Drinks were ordered thick and fast and Patti was soon rushed off her feet. Men were shouting at one another about weight and statistics. Patti didn't understand a word but from time to time she would look up and see the blue eyes of the King on her. The King's smile reminded her of Mr Cunningham who gave her an 'A' for Irish Composition. 'A lovely story and a neat hand,' he wrote in red at the bottom of the page. She showed her father, who gave her two shillings, and ever after her mother would hire Patti out to write wedding invitations and thank-you notes for
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160 family and neighbours. Patti earned enough to buy a new fountain
pen. She still had both, the composition and the pen, in a painted
wooden chest at home in her little flat overlooking the canal, down
the hill from The Carpenter's Arms.

165 Every time the King smiled, she smiled back and tucked her
white-blond hair behind her ears. And somehow, she kept up with
the orders and clearing the tables and wiping down the bar. She
hoped the beer would last.

170 The boxing match had started in earnest now. The noise in the
ring and the noise in the pub was deafening. It was like a party.
People were taking sides and there were good-natured arguments,
pushing and shoving and a lot of swearing, more than usual.

175 The King kept his smile throughout the fight and even his men
seemed to have forgotten where they were. Every time a round
ended there was a loud discussion of tactics and replaying of
significant punches. The King was in the thick of it, fan, tutor, jester,
star, and then there was Fitz, now so drunk he had slid off his stool
and someone had propped him up in one corner of a booth. He was
singing into his glass again and Patti wondered how she was ever
going to get him home.

180 Patti realised the match was coming to an end and Ali was going
to lose. The commentator said so and everyone but the King agreed.
The King's man was tired and had begun to stumble. The King had
his arms up, doing the work for him, fists clenched, throwing them
forward, up and under. One two! One two!

185 'Go on! Go on!' he bawled. 'Get off the fucking ropes!

Hit him!

The commentator said there was a minute to go. 'Knock him
out!' screamed the King.

190 The crowd was alive. Drinks were being spilled all over the floor
and the counter. Patti could only glimpse a corner of the screen at
a sharp angle but she could see the King and while everyone else
had their eyes on the telly she could look at him properly without
anyone noticing. He had long hair, light brown with streaks painted
here and there of grey and blonde. A lovely face, strong like a man's
should be. A dimple on each cheek and dark eyelashes curled, up
and out, a frame for the eyes. Sapphire, she thought. He was tall,
broad-shouldered, upright, solid. She noticed then that his shirt was
195 blue as well as his coat and his eyes, and she wondered if everything
else that Eddie Lovett wore would turn out to be blue. His socks,
his vest, his underpants. She'd never seen anyone like him.

200 The commentator said the fight was over.
 ‘Who’s won?’ she asked. Nobody answered. The King held his
 hands up and the room went gradually quiet until only the
 commentator could be heard.

205 ‘This has been a tremendous fight. Ali, in much better shape than
 many people anticipated, has done all he could. But is it enough?
 He’s been slow tonight, slow and—’

 ‘Fuck off!’ the King shouted. ‘Slow my arse!’
 Someone laughed and slapped him on the back.
 ‘...and as we wait for a decision now, it’s anyone’s guess...’

210 The King was swearing again and banging his fist on the bar. Patti
 couldn’t stand it any longer. She ran round to the front of the bar,
 scooped up some dirty glasses, shoved in and got to see a corner of
 the screen. A short man with a bow tie entered the ring and began
 shouting numbers into a microphone. There wasn’t a sound in the
215 pub. Some glasses stayed halfway to the mouth, some were lowered
 in slow motion on to the bar. Suddenly the King put his hands up
 to his face and shook his head.

 ‘Out-fucking-rageous! No way! I don’t believe it!’ He turned to
 the crowd in the pub.

220 ‘Are they joking? Are they fucking joking!’
 Patti ran back round behind the counter as everyone began to
 commiserate with the King, even those who had been cheering for
 the other man. Bits of the fight were replayed on the telly and the
 conversation turned to the beautiful man’s future and whether or
225 not he would ever box again. The King beckoned Patti towards him
 and put a fiver on the counter.

 ‘That’s for you, love. You’ve been diamond tonight. Diamond.’
 She blushed. ‘I can’t take that. I’ve just done my job.’

 ‘Go on. Get yourself something nice. Been on your feet all night
230 in this din. Hard job, bar work.’
 ‘I know, but ...’
 ‘But nothing. Unplug that lead and pass it here. And look.’
 He slid a piece of paper towards her under the money and on it
 was a telephone number.

235 ‘If you ever need a job in London, look me up.’
 As she went to take the paper, he held on to it for just another
 second.
 ‘In fact, if you don’t need a job look me up. Or ring me on this
 number. Tomorrow maybe.’

240 Patti wondered if anyone had overheard but no one seemed to be listening. So she took the number and the five-pound note, gave him the plug and he went back to the fight's post mortem. By eleven thirty the pub was almost empty. Only the King, his friends and a few stragglers were left, with Fitz drunk in his corner.

245 'How you getting home, love?' he asked her.

Patti felt ashamed but she had no choice. She looked over at Fitz and decided to say it all at once.

'I live with him and we have a child together, Damian, and he's six.'

250 The King didn't miss a beat.

'Good-looking, I bet.'

He didn't raise an eyebrow. He didn't look her up and down or make quick calculations about her age, poor judgement and easy virtue. He didn't wonder whether her mother had thrown her out for being a slut that had brought disgrace on her family and Catholics all over the world. He just looked at her with their secret between them. And his eyes the colour of summer skies and tropical waters.

255 And just like that he told his men to pick up the telly. The King turned and left, his blue leather coat disappearing like a cat's tail through the polished brass of the strangers' door.

Patti cleaned up, tidied and chivvied the last man out. Bar towels in her bag for the wash. Coat on. Took the keys from the hook. She slipped the money and the phone number in her pocket. Lights off.

265 'Fitz,' she said, once and then louder.

The drunk stirred and opened an eye. 'Who won?' 'I did,' she said.