

Elaine McCluskey

GOING FAST
a novel



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To Tom, for his knowledge and humour



Johnny LeBlanc climbed two flights of creaking stairs. He leaned into a door. Tootsy's Gym had one yawning room with a sixteen-by-sixteen ring, a water cooler, and the disembodied air of a monastery or a fat farm.

Johnny ambled across the worn hardwood floor, a kit bag in his hand. An old-timer in a Legion blazer was leaning on the discoloured ring ropes, taking bets on a phantom fight, hair slicked, shoes buffed, waiting for a parade to form. CHAMP OR CHUMP? a poster over his shoulder asked and then replied with conviction: THE DIFFERENCE IS U.

“How are things, Barney?” Johnny asked, voice lilting.
“Superb.”

Sun streamed through Tootsy's bare windowpanes, casting crosses on the scuffed floor. The air was still except for the short puffs of wind that marked each blow to a stained heavy bag — *pah pah pah* — and the *rat-a-tat-tat* of the shuddering speed bag. A fighter, a kid who looked about twelve, was skipping a leather rope, spraying sweat through the air like a Gardena Sprinkler. His name was Ricky. He lived in a housing project the colour of Love Hearts, a bunker of dope and dysfunction, and he lied about his age.

Johnny nodded at Ricky and settled into a metal chair. Barney turned his head expectantly as though he had heard someone call his name and then headed for the door without speaking. The back of his neck was criss-crossed, Johnny

noted, like the imprinted lines on a supermarket turkey freed from a plastic net. He smelled of cologne. Johnny sniffled, wondering when Ownie would arrive. His stitches had dissolved, he noticed in a mirror, leaving a light scar that gave him an edginess, a touch of danger that he liked. The mark — on his right cheekbone — was shaped like a boomerang.

Tootsy's smelled musty, he decided, as though it was shaking off dust and depression. Mousetraps sat on the floor below laminated newspaper clippings tacked to the wall and curling around the edges. A fluorescent light dangled from two rusty chains like an empty trapeze. Out back, Tootsy's had a shower, ten rusty lockers, and more inspirational posters.

THE FIGHTER'S EQUATION

DISCIPLINE + DETERMINATION + DESIRE = A CHAMP

Tootsy's was in downtown Dartmouth, which the wise guys called Darkness. Johnny lived a couple of kilometres away in the north end in a cheap apartment over Video Madness, a store that specialized in X-rated movies and Martin Sheen epics. Open twenty-four hours a day, Madness also offered well-priced milk, Lotto tickets, and an excuse to leave home at midnight.

Johnny stole another look at himself in a floor-length mirror and smiled.

Last week, he had collected four stitches and two hundred bucks for going six rounds in a New Brunswick rink that smelled of stale beer and soggy plywood. It was the usual crowd: stews, old-timers, and rows of Annie Oakleys. September 20, 1992 — he had recorded the date in his head. A plastered bar owner sat ringside, his face twisted into a grotesque smile, teeth exposed, straining so hard that sweat rolled down his fleshy face. Why, Johnny wondered, would a man with dough look so lame?

It had been Johnny's first fight in eight months, and he'd busted a gut to make 145, running six miles a day in a Glad jogging suit, and then climbing into a sauna. Ownie, his trainer, had him cut down to birdfeed in the final weeks, which had been cruel but necessary.

"C'mon." A stocky man named Louie Fader appeared before him. "Let's work the ball 'til Ownie gets here. Make the most of our time."

"Awww." Johnny shrugged ambivalence and then struggled to his feet. Slowly, he removed his red jacket, which had the name of a brewery on the chest and *LeBlanc* on the sleeve. Johnny was handsome, born with the kind of looks that established the psyches of working-class stiffs, who became angry wife-beaters or genial charmers who fumbled for your name. Johnny was smooth.

"They asked me to show up at one of their events as a celebrity and I told them I'd need some grease," explained Johnny, pointing to the jacket. "They said there was nothing in the pot, but they gave me this. I figure it's worth a C-note."

"At least," Louie allowed. "It looks waterproof."

"It's good P.R. too." Johnny nodded. "It could lead to an opportunity down the road. Them brewery reps, they make serious dough, drive company wheels, don't take too many shots to the head."

They both laughed.

Thump. Johnny caught the medicine ball and threw it back. Johnny wondered why he was training so soon after his fight. He should be taking it easy, he decided, enjoying some downtime. On the wall, he noticed a Caesar's Palace poster with head shots of Leonard and Hagler, the personification of good and evil. The poster listed the undercards like an eye chart, the letters shrinking along with the purse.

Thump. Louie returned the ball with force.

Unlike Johnny, who was 12-4-3, Louie had never had a

fight. Since he'd started coming to Tootsy's three months ago, he had collected every fight book and video he could find: *Great Grudge Matches*. *Tyson's Best*. *One-Punch Knockouts*. With an endearing earnestness, he called himself a student of the game. "He's got the time and money," Johnny had explained to Ownie. "He's a fireman."

A former bodybuilder, Louie looked determined in his tie-dye sweats and a Pit Bull Gym singlet he'd purchased from Stripped and Ripped, which also sold leather do-rags, XXX Amino Liver Extract, and huge jars of a mystifying substance called Protein Plus, thirty-four ounces for \$29.95. Louie swore he was off the gorilla juice since Kevin, a powerlifting buddy, had gone to London, Ontario, for a seven-hour heart transplant that ended with him having a donor heart grafted to his ravaged body and his breastbone secured with steel wire.

Louie caught the fifteen-pound cowhide sphere as though it were a beach ball. About five-six, he was runner-up in Mister Nova Scotia 1991 Short Class, an honour he was quick to mention to the ladies. Louie's pad was filled with tapes from his bodybuilding career, including one in which he stormed off the stage, waving his hand dismissively at the judges as though he had been robbed.

"You know my brother, Marcel?" asked Johnny, already bored with the ball.

Louie nodded. He'd met Marcel, one of those guys who lived in the margins of life with hot plates and shopping carts and flammable winter jackets.

"I saw him yesterday outside the liquor store and he says to me, 'Hey, Johnny, I'm a counsellor now.' And I said, 'Okay, sounds cool,' since he's been on the disability for about ten years. 'Who are you counselling?'"

Louie returned the ball with too much force.

"And he said, 'People who have lost their pets.' It turns out he's a grief counsellor at the animal shelter, which sounds all

right.” Johnny nodded his head in approval, suggesting, it seemed, that Marcel’s new vocation was a sign of good things to come.

“What’s that involve?” blinked Louie, who appeared unsettled by the mention of Marcel, who reminded him of people and circumstances he would rather forget. Louie had protruding eyes that he blinked constantly and brows that peaked in an inverted V, giving his face a quizzical look.

“He does most of his work by phone at the shelter. But sometimes he’ll go with people if they are having a funeral and they need someone to fill up the place. He said they had a dandy send-off for a Maine coon cat named Jackie. There wasn’t a dry eye in the room. It’s working out good for him.”

“Right on.”

Printed signs laid out Tootsy’s rules in inch-high letters: DON’T SPIT ON THE FLOOR. PAY YOUR DUES EVERY FRIDAY. FILL WATER BOTTLES BEFORE LEAVING. A log sheet had been posted to record roadwork and sparring minutes. The handwritten entries were smeared by sweat.

To keep the business viable, Tootsy, a taxi driver who was rarely at the gym, had started admitting civilians: cross-trainers, women, ninety-pound weaklings plotting revenge. With the fight game at a low, it was hard for the absentee owner to make ends meet.

“Hey, Ownie.” Johnny spotted the trainer easing through the door in a heavy sweater, pockets filled with unknown objects. The old man lifted his head, and Johnny, smelling work, wished that he had stayed home.

“What?”

“I was talking to Dylan Atwood.”

“Yeah?”

“He was up in Moncton for my fight the other night.”

“I hope he paid for his ticket this time,” snapped Ownie. “Cheap bastard.”

“He says I should’ve taken the fight to Cormier, that I wasn’t aggressive enough.”

“Yeaah.” Ownie zipped open his kit bag. “Spectators don’t get hit much.”

Ownie had a slow, droll way of talking, a way of taking something serious and giving it a jab into the absurd. Sometimes, he telegraphed his intent with a shift in tone; other times he caught people cold. It reminded Johnny of an artist he’d seen at the mall. The guy started off drawing something that Johnny thought was a clown, and then, at the last minute, he added a line and Johnny found himself looking at a bull elephant, which made him laugh.

Ownie pulled out a piece of wood with padding attached. “I’ve been in this business fifty years, and no one’s had the sense to come up with a decent taping device.” He paused, admiring his apparatus. “Of course, most guys I know are brain-damaged.