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Long Ago in *tokyo*

Long ago in Tokyo, a little man named Mike Tyson lost the undisputed heavyweight boxing championship of the world to a bigger man named James “Buster” Douglas. To someone not knowing what to look for, this result should hardly seem surprising, the age-old story of large trumping small. Yet at the time it was called unbelievable, because it was entirely inverted from what was supposed to happen.

Long ago, more than twenty years ago, in fact. And for at least ten of those years I kept a VHS tape of the fight, recorded from television, packed away in a jumbled box of old-technology plastic, from those quaint days of ownership and copyright when media, if it could be called yours, in any sense, was something you had to own, something you had to hold in your hands. Now that cassette is gone, along with the machine that could play it (as well as its streaking and stuttering and whining limitations), but the fight still exists on sleek silver discs and, more significantly, in some kind of aggregated electric cloud on the Internet, and it exists there, in many forms, because it is a cultural artifact, because it is memorable, because it is important, because it is one of the greatest upsets in sports history, and it has meaning beyond believing.

I have watched his fight many times and, because I know already what it is, each time it affects me in largely the same way—my face goes thick with pins, and sometimes I even cry. But does it reach me the same way because I’ve already prepared the road? In other words, am I so affected by its ending because I’ve always been affected by it, because I already know what it means to me?

How much do you trust your reactions? Do you trust what you see? Do you trust what others see, or what they tell you they see? So much now is mediated, or received, or interpreted. But sometimes the truth emerges within the time frame of a single event, so much so that everyone sees it, in the end, and they can’t believe that they didn’t see it coming, all along.

Yet look at what they show us. On that February 11, 1990, night in Tokyo, twenty-three-year-old Mike Tyson is 37-0 with 33 stoppages. “Iron”

Mike is the “baddest man on the planet”: a short, dense, animal triangle; berserk with voltage; a knock-out artist; a muscle-squished mass of surliness and rage. Again and again he demonstrates the slick veracity of massively channeled torque; just eight months earlier he had dropped Carl “The Truth” Williams in 93 seconds flat. “THE BEATINGS GO ON,” writes *Sports Illustrated*.

On that same night, on the undercard, a talented but lackluster Buster Douglas squeaks out a ten-round decision against a similarly uninspired Oliver McCall. The announcers have trouble staying awake. No one is surprised. This is, after all, the same Buster who had practically given up against Tony Tucker three years earlier. The night his father quit as his trainer. This is the Buster who didn’t train hard enough, or care enough, or have enough heart. The underperformer. But the issue of Buster’s lack of heart doesn’t matter when Don King needs an interim opponent for Mike while planning a mega-event with Evander Holyfield for later that year. The fact that Buster is willing to take a pay cut for the night doesn’t hurt either. Buster, with his hands out, is just grist for the Don King mill.



The fight takes place in Tokyo because this is the best place for everyone to get paid; Buster is expected to go down in one or two rounds, and no one in America is very interested in watching that, while in Japan, at least, Tyson draws crowds as a novelty act, like a King Kong Mini with boxing gloves.

Tyson is a 42-1 favorite. Buster is twenty-nine years old and already on the downswing of his abilities. Add to this the fact that his wife has walked out on him. That the mother of his eleven-year-old son is ill with leukemia. That Buster himself has some kind of flu, and goes into the ring sick and medicated. And thinking about his mom, who died just weeks before the fight.

Which Buster Douglas has come to fight tonight? asks the sportscaster calling the event.

What do they show us? What do we see? Buster tall and trim—6’3, 231 lbs.

What do we see? Buster up on the balls of his feet, Buster with lightness and alacrity, sticking his jab, being busy. Pushing away from the clinch. When Tyson comes in low, looking to launch his knockout sequence, Buster punishes him.

Describing Buster’s pretty good left hand, the announcer says, *if he’s able to hold Mike off, this thing could go a few rounds. If he can’t hold Mike off, Mike will dispose of him early.*

And yet, this looks like a fight. It looks like Buster is doing well. Do we

believe it? The announcer certainly doesn't believe it; he talks about how, while Buster's trainers have said they think he can win, they are probably too close to the fighter and guilty of believing in things you're hoping for.

The Japanese crowd is quiet. It feels strange and otherworldly, like nothing more than a large room full of watchful people. Like some kind of absurd dinner theater. You hear the squishy thud of the glove blows. You hear the trainers and the corner men.

Look at Buster with the movement, the announcer says, and he notes how flat-footed Tyson seems in comparison. Still, he reminds us, Tyson could turn off the lights at any moment. It is like we are looking into a dark cloud and the



announcer is there to remind us of the storm that lurks within. And then he speculates that it might all be by design, that the only reason it is going this long is that Mike wants it to go this long.

And on it goes, with Buster going way ahead on the judges' scorecards. *One of the real nice guys in the boxing game*, the announcer says, as if to give him some credit before the

curtain comes crashing down. But the fight, inexplicably, keeps going. The announcer turns philosophical: *And when a fighter believes in himself, and he's ahead on the scorecards, if he doesn't run out of gas, how dangerous can he be? I don't know.*

In round seven, Mike comes on a bit, gets busier, starts working the inside. And round eight looks like the truth, looks like Buster getting tired, getting sloppy, getting ready to be knocked out. But then they both start throwing big leather—big looping punches, and Buster is getting the best of it. Is this for real?

Watch carefully, you see Mike throw one vicious uppercut, which narrowly misses, and then he takes some abuse before he can get set again, pause/beat, pause/beat. Then he goes low again to come up with something nuclear, and this is an uppercut that sends Buster teetering, sliding, crumpling backward to the canvas. This is what everyone has been watching for, all these faces like clocks.

And yet, what happens? Buster gets up, at the count of nine. Wait a minute, he's not supposed to get up. *His eyes, from where I'm sitting, look fairly clear*, the announcer says, and then the bell saves him.

Now, right now, in the ninth round, Mike desperately wants to end this nonsense but Buster is back to throwing and connecting with punches again. *His mind is willing, are his legs still there?*

And they are. Toward the end of the round Buster catches Mike with a combination, and suddenly he has him, literally, against the ropes, throwing wild, obliterating punches, with everything he has.

But he can't finish him.
So what now? What are we
looking at?

We're looking at Mike's
eye, which by the tenth round
has been replaced by an egg
with some skin over it. We're
looking at Mike's plodding, as
the announcer comments on
how Mike doesn't have good
bounce in his legs.



And as Mike comes in, comes forward flat-footed,
Buster pops him with a string of jabs, and then
the short, fat uppercut,
and Mike is tilting, turning sideways, smashed down,
collapsing into the corner of the ring
and scrabbling on his hands and knees
like a bee with its wings pulled off,
searching for his mouthpiece,
the referee counting and counting and finally,
wrapping Mike in a restraining hug.

Unbelievable! Unbelievable! Unbelievable! the announcer screams.

Buster Douglas is the new heavyweight champion of the world!

And as he says that, every time he says that,
I see I see
but can't see anything.