

5-4-2018

## A Man Who's Tears Made Him Stronger

Sammy G. DeSilva

*California State University, Monterey Bay*

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### Recommended Citation

DeSilva, Sammy G. (2018) "A Man Who's Tears Made Him Stronger," *In the Ords: CSUMB Literary Arts Journal*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 2 , Article 36.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.csumb.edu/ords/vol1/iss2/36>

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## A Man Who's Tears Made Him Stronger

The bang of his weathered glove against the bag echoed in the empty room. Johnny punched out his anger and mumbled his worries.

“Man up, Johnny Boy,” *Bang. Bang bang.* “You man up, Ray.” A few more punches to the bag and Ray walked in.

“Hey, hey, Johnny Boy!” Ray cheered excitedly. The silent and short that was Harold Ferguson walked closely behind him. At a stunning four-foot-nine, everyone called him Stretch except Johnny. Johnny respected Harold too much for his academic success and silent-but-deadly attitude.

“Ray, what’re you doing here?” Johnny’s arms fell helplessly to his side. “Hi Harold.” Harold, a man of little words, smiled back and nodded his head in Johnny’s direction.

“Stretch here, jimmied the lock.” Ray laughed and jerked his thumb toward Harold. “Where’ve you been? I’m worried.”

“Thinking,” *Bang bang.*

“Thinking about what?”

Johnny didn’t respond. It was too painful to relive that memory because it was forever gone. Harold entered the ring, Ray following. Johnny took a seat at the rusty bleachers that sat beside the boxing ring. He squirted water from his bottle onto his face. The water dripped from his sweaty brow down to his eyes and nose and ceased at his chapped lips. He watched Harold and Ray fight. Harold was the best amateur boxer Johnny had ever seen. He was light on his feet and quick to the punch.

“You better watch out, Ray,” Johnny warned, watching Harold’s every move.

“I got this.” Ray did a little dance with his feet and faked a punch. “You just watch, Johnny Boy.”

Harold made his move. He took a swing at Ray but he dodged it and gave a cocky laugh. But before Ray could recover from his pride, Harold went at him again and then hit him in the gut and then Harold pulled his arm back and hit Ray square in the nose. Ray was shocked and

rocked back and forth before collapsing to the ground. Johnny jumped up to count down. All talk and no walk.

“Uncle!” Johnny wiggled in between the elastic ropes that wrapped around the ring. He helped Ray up since Harold was too small. “Alright, let me have it.” Ray waved Johnny to come at him. Harold stepped out to let them fight. He handed Johnny his gloves and flashed a hit-him-hard smirk and Johnny nodded to confirm his understanding.

Ray repeated his dance and practiced his punches. He wasn’t a serious boxer, but neither was Johnny; they both took advantage of the opportunity since Johnny’s father owned the place. Johnny laughed; Ray always thought greatly of himself but not too many people liked him as well as he liked himself. But Ray was Johnny’s best friend and he wouldn’t lay a finger on Ray if he didn’t have to. This was a friendly fight and it wouldn’t bother Johnny to take a swing at him especially since he very well deserved it.

“C’mon, Johnny, show me you’re a man.” Ray threatened. Johnny’s manhood was on the line, especially after what just happened with his ex-girlfriend. All his friends didn’t think it necessary to cry over any girl; even a girl of four years, even a girl who proved to love him not too long ago and then crushed his fragile heart with the humiliating news that she never *really* loved him. Johnny took a whack at him—for his comment and for the fun of it.

“Okay, that’s how it’s gonna be.” Ray jumped around and rolled his shoulders, preparing for his move or potential dodge but Ray didn’t wait for Johnny, Ray went right for it and beat Johnny to every punch, just waiting for the proof that Johnny was a real man. Ray was calling for it, summoning it out of Johnny; he was punching for that proof. Ray couldn’t have a softy for a best friend. Ray was all about image and it was being ruined by his one and only true friend.

Every hit was a hit from her and Johnny just could not stand to fight back or confront the pain that was her magnificent beauty. Johnny did not see Ray, whom he was fighting, but the auburn curls and slender body that he used to hold. All of a sudden, Johnny was overwhelmed with grief and he couldn’t take the last punch. Falling to the ground, the bells rang and in walked the heartless woman that was—

With a bang to the floor, Johnny’s head lay there, staring at her. “Linda?”

“What’re you doing here?” Ray snapped at the source of all Johnny’s current problems. Although Ray hated the fact that Johnny cried day and night for this girl, he still cared that Johnny cried for this girl and he hated her pretty guts.

“Shut up, Ray,” Johnny propped himself up on his elbows and stared at Linda, wondering about her presence.

“I thought you’d be here.” Linda confessed. She never came here. She didn’t like it here. But it was not the sweat and grungy men that kept her away.

“I’ll give you *one* minute.” Ray stepped out of the ring. He put on his Princeton letterman’s jacket to cover his bare chest and pulled Harold into Johnny’s father’s office with haste and watched from the window.

“Johnny, I only wanted to talk for a moment.” Linda stepped forward into the light. She was wearing Johnny’s favorite color on her. But now she was wearing it for someone else.

“I’m listening.”

“I’m truly sorry for what I’ve done to you and I really never meant to hurt you,” she began to cry, the tears streaming down her face. “I’m not asking for your forgiveness, but that you will accept my sincere apology.”

“I forgive you, Linda, and accept your apology.”

“Don’t forgive me, Johnny!” Linda shouted. “I don’t deserve your forgiveness! Please, Johnny, I know you don’t love me anymore.”

“Linda—”

She pulled something from her pocket and placed it in Johnny’s hand. It was his high school class ring that Linda had worn since the twelfth grade. That was his breaking point. Linda left without another word. She could not bear to look at Johnny anymore, knowing that she hurt the man she loved most.

Ray came out almost immediately. “Why don’t you come out with the boys tonight? It’ll be good for you, buddy.”

“Yeah, sure,” Johnny wiped the tears that could have been mistaken for sweat.

Drowning. He was drowning in his tears and no amount of booze could make it better. It was only making it worse.

“Let’s get a round of shots.” The bartender rounded up six shot glasses. Johnny took his shot before anyone else and slammed the glass down on the counter. Everything was moving in slow motion from there on out. And quickly Johnny was left alone with strangers and his worries.

“What’s got you down, son?” A large, red-headed Irishman sat beside Johnny at the bar.

“It’s nothing.”

“Ah, it’s got to be something.” He urged. “Don’t tell me you’re wasting them tears on a girl.”

Johnny gave no response. He didn’t need his manhood questioned by some stranger too. He took a drink of his whiskey. It burned as it slithered down his throat and down to the pit of his empty stomach.

“It’s a girl, I can tell. Get over her, lad. There’s no use in crying about her. What’d she do to you?”

*Why won’t this guy just leave me alone?* “She broke my heart. Any other questions?”

“Tough break, lad. But you’re better off without her. Look at you; you’re barely a man now with those tears in your eyes.” The Irishman laughed a hearty laugh. And Johnny left him with a good punch to the nose that left his nose gushing.

“He’s quite the man now, eh, Charlie?”