

MAYBE MEEKATHARRA

By Matt Burch

The first punch pounds your gut like a mortar blast. Rattles your rib cage. Wobbles your spine loose on its hinges. Except, it ain't a punch, it's a kick. That's the twist of it.

This kangaroo's wearing leather mitts like you. But that's just for show, just for the flashbulbs and the coochie-coo, the way nickelodeon hucksters dress up babies as proper ladies or gents for penny laughs. It's not the swinging gloves you gotta watch out for, it's those hind thumpers. And when that long red tail goes brickhouse stiff, Jesus-Joseph-and-Mary, get ready 'cause the legs are coming and coming fast.

I don't know how they do it—keep their balance on that hose-of-a-thing. Guess I shoulda sussed it before the fight, the way I study the footwork on any regular boxing joe. Murray the Shill said this would be easy scratch, just a promotional type fix. One round and a few jabs with the 'roo for the paying stumps and that's all. But don't you know it, Murray says lots of things.

I shake off the last gut-quaker and glance to the ref. He stares at me all pop-eyed and flushed, sweating and shrugging like your cousin's dumb uncle. Some squirrelly rumhead Murray pulled off the street and put in stripes. Probably gave him a flask of bathtub to call the match. After all, no real ring-man's gonna officiate such sideshows.

Now the crowd's flipped its can, the 'roo's last wallop to my mids catching them blinder than me. They're cheering the dumb animal who's hopping in place, six foot high with eyes like black marbles glinting under house lights. The rummy nods me back in,

and I dance cautious towards center ring—not because he says so, but because I'm a professional. My breadbasket may be mushed and quivering, but you don't gotta tell old Fast-Hands McGreavy to fight twice. These days, you just gotta make sure the check don't bounce.

And bouncing's my game now, even springier than the 'roo. This gets the stumps howling, back in my corner. The sight of a man hopping around a kangaroo, the 'roo dressed in bright red trunks and brawler's gloves—two species having a chuckle at each other's expense. The stumps want Vaudeville or Charlie Darwin, well, they're getting 'em both on a stick.

Except the animal, it ain't laughing. It's just hopping in place, clocking my moves with that knobby head and those stiff ears real serious-like as I bounce around the mock-up rubber ring. Maybe it don't know this is supposed to be for laughs. Just a busker bout for extra dough, a buy-in for another title shot with Crutch Mandelbaum after the beating he gave me two years ago in Frisco. Maybe the 'roo, he don't read the fight pages. Maybe he ain't even a he.

How do you know with these bush bunnies anyway? The girl ones got the pouches, for carrying the little joeys and such. But what about the Jakes? I don't see no slits in this one's belly. Then it's got those red trunks hiked awful high. Could be a pouch under there. Could be a girdle. Christ, I hope this thing's a Jack and not a Jane. It's queer enough Murray's got me slugging it out with marsupials without punching on some lady 'roo as bonus.

This reminds me of the dame. So I look over and catch her there in the front row. Those ruby reds of hers are painted up real nice, munching on crackerjacks. I cut a grin

her way, remembering the smear I put on those lips last night, the tangle of knots we made out of those flophouse sheets. "Don't muss the paint," she said, but I did it all the same. Made her mad as a basket of cobras, but she didn't seem to mind so much when I started kissing other places.

I must be thinking out loud because the stumps start booing me now, lobbing hard-shell peanuts. They're getting wise to my play: starve out the big clock, shove off, collect the purse. So I give 'em what they came for, go in for a little pitty-pat, toss a few light jabs at the 'roo's leathers. It don't punch back exactly. Just tries to hold my taps in place with clumsy man-size mitts. It wants to set me straight for another belly bomb, the only trick in its kit. But I'm smart to that now. Beast or Bowery brawler, Fast-Hands don't give out freebies. I duck and bob, keep an airy pocket. I teach the animal how a man can dance.

This gets the 'roo steamed, all lathered that I won't stick to one spot. It's flailing its twig arms, wants to pin me in a corner, but I ain't letting it. I don't have it in me to slug the dumb animal—not yet, anyhow—so I spin out and under like a ballerina, yank at its bright red trunks on the way just for laughs.

The lousy seams must break free because I turn up at the corner buckle with a scrap of cheap sateen in my mitt. The stumps are hoo-haaing their heads off, eating it up like a salty porterhouse. I wink to the dame and hold the shiny scrap up for show, the gist being: "Ain't this kinda like what we rolled around in last night and maybe for an encore tonight." But the dame's not howling like the rest. She ain't even looking at me so much as looking past me, those ruby-reds twisted up into some kind of worried pretzel.

I take her cue and turn back center ring. The 'roo's hopping there in the buff—if an animal without pants can be considered as such—its lower half on grand display. There ain't no pouch on this bush bunny. Not an honest one anyway. Just a line of hash marks running cross-wise along its belly. It's all lumpy scar tissue and ragged black stitching. Like somebody cut the 'roo a pouch it never had, changed their mind and sewed it back.

It reminds me of that Boris Karloff picture I saw not too far back, the one with the Frankenstein's monster. And I got a pretty good idea who played Dr. F with the scalpel in real life. Probably used this bush bunny in the traveling carnies. Turned the poor animal into the 'roo version of a bearded lady, one of those he-she's you got to watch out for in certain downtown bars. When the stumps see a kangaroo, they expect a pouch, so a pouch they're gonna get even if it's not natural. Christ, the things people do for a little kale these days. Sometimes, it makes you want to give the whole sick world a pop in the mouth.

I don't have time to crawl too far out of my skin because the 'roo is suddenly back on me with a flurry of twig arms, its dignity in question. Like a first-fight palooka, I mount a high guard batting away its rat-a-tat mitts but leaving my breadbasket wide. It's a dumb busker's move and long enough for the 'roo to pogo on that red tail, stiff like a hydrant hose shot through with water, launch another hip rocket into my mids. Don't you just know it—the Frankenstein 'roo, it kicks even harder now that it's free of those shiny red trunks.

When I go down, I hear ribs cracking. Or maybe it's flashbulbs popping. Hard to tell over the stumps roaring crazy for the 'roo. My head goes all soft and light like a balloon. I'm seeing things in the house lights I know ain't there—cobwebs and soup

spoons, the doughy face of the basset hound I had as a kid, my mother's scuffed ankles in borrowed high-heeled shoes.

I gotta get up from the canvas, but it feels like flypaper and me the dumb insect with glued-down wings. I hear the rumhead counting ten, forgetting the number, starting over. I smell the dame's dime store perfume wafting from the front row. Probably should have held off on the sheet action come to think on it, the way I do before any regular match. Turns the will into oatmeal, the head all soft like a pickled egg. Maybe if I just lay here a few seconds, I can pull myself together, figure out where it all went topsy-turvy. Crutch Mandelbaum, the dame, the 'roo. I was on my way up once, getting punched on by reputable humans.

When I roll my head sideways to get another look at the dame, who's sliding into the seat next to her like a greased eel with another box of crackerjack? You guessed it—old Murray the Shill. Watching the two of them there side by side, my past turns see-through, like the time that fight doc in Toledo showed me the black and white snap of my insides with three busted ribs. I see the night before the Mandelbaum fight the same way. How Murray kept the bottles of bathtub flowing my direction. How he put me onto the cheap blonde in the corner, batting her lashes at me like a tabby in heat. I had a mattress tumble with her too, come to think of it.

A sick notion starts to grow on my brain sponge like a fungus—like maybe Murray fixed those tumbles the same way he fixed up these fights. I was never supposed to win any of them—Mandelbaum, the dames or the 'roo. I'm just another one of his sideshows, some lousy speed bag to get pounded on, bet against the other way. The 'roo may be his Frankenstein's monster, but I'm worse—his dumb, devoted humpback Fritz.

This gets me real steamed, blast furnace steamed. And it's engine enough to peel me off the canvas, hoist my hundred-ninety pounds up the ropes to a woozy stand. The rumhead is just reaching nine when I get level, and I push him out of way for a clear eye on the 'roo. It's just bouncing there calm under the white hot arcs. Like maybe it's the one suddenly starving out the big clock.

The nerve of this bush bunny. The stumps are howling, lapping it up. The hash marks on its belly stand out like the XXX on a bottle of rat poison under the white hot lights. Except, for me, it ain't so much a warning as a welcome. A sweet spot is a sweet spot—pouch or no pouch, Jack or Jane.

I hits me then that this ain't no promotional type fix. Just a stop-and-smell-the-daisies bout on the way back up Candy Mountain. This is my comeback brawl, my last and only chance. Like it or not, I had to lay this hopper down for the ten-count, show this freakshow 'roo what The Man with Hands can do. Two solid rights to the pouch is all I need. I ain't nobody's humpback.

I rush in low and hard, blast through those front twigs in clumsy mitts like a scalding knife through butter. I commence wailing on the 'roo's stitched mids. Not just a single combo, but a thunderstorm of rights and lefts. I hear the stumps go from laughs to gasps, but I keep pounding low and tight. "Step right up, ladies and gents, witness what the man with hands can do."

The 'roo's not even blocking my jabs now; it's just letting me wail on its belly. And that's when I realize I can't hear a thing no more. Not the stumps, not the 'roo. Just my own lousy heartbeat echoing in my ears, and it's pumping gushers.

That's probably because the 'roo's got my melon in its mitts, holding it low and steady like a walnut in a vice. I try to squirm out, but it's no use—the animal's got me too tight. I've got no choice but to watch up close and personal as that long red tail goes lamp-post stiff on the canvas, pushes those hind thumpers mid-air. I see the feet have black shiny claws on the tips, and this worries me. Until I see another thing that gives me bigger jeebies—there between its haunches, red and whip-like, jutting heavenward like a kid version of that long red tail. Yeah, this 'roo's definitely a Jake.

You don't got to be a boardwalk fortune teller to know what comes next. But, the twist of it is, I don't feel the explosion to my ribs when it comes. I don't feel my spine crunch into the corner buckle or the 'roo having at me over and over again with those hind rockets and ragged rear claws. I don't hear the stumps gasp in horror, see the crackerjacks topple from the dame's mouth as she screams, or spot Murray calling to the rumhead to stop the fight. I'm already gone, you see, out over their heads and into the blazing house lights. I'm in the red desert.

It's nice here, quiet. Rainbow colored lizards and birds in fur coats like you've never seen, making whizzing noises I never heard. Crooked trees sprout from the red dust like gnarly old Grandma hands reaching for a blue lap-blanket sky. There's rocks here that have seen a few centuries. There's no water for miles, but, for some reason, my cotton mouth don't seem to mind.

I watch them go at it in pairs under the rippling sun. Twenty or thirty 'roos all sparring in the brush like in some Skid Street gym. Except there ain't no skipping ropes or speed bags. No crusty trainers named Moe. Just a sea of bush bunnies having at it peaceful-like with fluttering twig arms, shiny haunches, ramrod tails. The air ain't heavy

with sweat and frustration like a normal jab joint, but breezy and fragrant with desert flowers and such.

I'm enjoying the scenery until gunshots tear up the sky from a distance. The 'roos start running, scattering in every direction. Pretty soon I'm in the middle of a stampede, pounding 'roo feet all around. They're fleeing an oncoming jalopy full of hunters in tan safari jackets, firing their monkey cannons like the end of days. The Frankenstein 'roo bounds by, grabbing me up in his tiny twig arms. I hear something unzip like my own fight bag, look down and fall into a dark, soft fur pocket.

Inside the 'roo, everything's warm and wet and snug. The sounds of the outside world have a nice muffle. Even the gunshots from the hunters' rifles sound like far-away sleigh bells. I hear his heartbeat mostly, or maybe it's my own. Hard to tell in this blackness. Freakshow or no freakshow, it feels good to be in motion inside the 'roo, like a soft machine working inside another soft machine. Reminds me of the dame. Except it's way better than the dame. In here, the whole warm wet world surrounds you, takes you into moist and musky embrace. Out there, the world—she don't want to smudge her lipstick.

I ain't got long to enjoy it before there's a bright light creeping in, blasting into my eyes—those same white hot arcs. Someone's cutting into the 'roo's belly with a scalpel, reaching in with rubber gloves and yanking me out. I don't want to go—not just yet—so I try and grab onto the 'roo's insides. But it's too slippery, like a plate of buttered linguine slicking through my mitts. It's Murray in bloody doctor's scrubs, grinning and pulling me out by the ankles like some crazy Caesarean. He's spanking my bare hind quarters like a

newborn, and I'm screaming and bawling. That's when I snap out of it, come back to the mock-up rubber ring.

I see now the gunshots ain't gunshots but the rumhead ref banging the fight bell hard like last call. The screams ain't my screams but the stumps shrieking and fleeing their seats. I've got a bad feeling about the buttered linguine. And when I lift my blurry eyes to the rummy, I see he's got the worried look to match, his pop-eyes wider than ever staring down ringside at my mids.

Somehow, I got the ring ropes in my hands. They're warm and wet and knotted, so I give 'em a little tug until I feel 'em slipping out of me. That's when my eyes go sharp, and I see the ring ropes ain't ring ropes but my own guts flopped onto the canvas from my ripped open belly. The longest tube is stretched ten feet to center ring like some kind of bloody umbilical. Except it ain't my mother at the other end, but the Frankenstein 'roo hunched over, chewing on the tip, calm and peaceful.

Here I thought these bush bunnies only munched grass or leaves. Who told me that anyway? Old Murray, probably, but then Murray says lots of things. And, right now, he's saying lots of things louder than usual, standing on the cheap seats and yelling for the stumps to come back as they scream and make for the exits.

I look to the front row, see the dame still parked there, those ruby reds pulled wide in a Great Big O. I cut a sly grin, give her a woozy wink—the gist being "don't worry, all part of the show"—until she upchucks a belly full of crackerjack into her purse. This strikes me as queer, seeing that I'm the one with pulled-out insides. But—dames—what are you gonna do? I turn back center ring, try to head back to that red desert place. I keep my eyes on the munching 'roo.

I wonder which of my guts he's got in his mouth now—the large one or the small one. That fight circuit quack in Toledo, the one who showed me the picture of my insides, he told me it's really the smaller tube that's the longer of the two. Why do you think they'd do such a thing? Name the longer one the small one, I mean? Seems like a backwards proposition. Like dressing up infants as grown ladies and gents. Or putting brawler's trunks on a wild red 'roo. Sometimes, this whole world seems twisted up in a mad pretzel. You don't know whether to kiss its sick lips or give it a great big pop in the mouth.