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UNDERDOG

It is a rough road that leads to the heights of greatness.

—LUCIUS ANNAEUS SENECA

WHEN I WAS in first grade at St. Ignatius elementary school, Sister Jean Agnes, a teacher who never hesitated to smack my fingers with a ruler to punish me for my poor handwriting, walked up to my mom and dad on parents' night. I was standing next to my father when he asked the Sister how I was doing in school.

"Well, Mr. McDermott," she said, all but ignoring my six-year-old ears, "Bill's a good boy and behaves well, but just don't expect too much of him. He'll probably be a mechanic, or maybe a truck driver." My parents had nothing against mechanics or truck drivers, but a few weeks later, they pulled me out of St. Ignatius.

It was too late. I had overheard the bleak forecast, and despite my parents' obvious disagreement with the nun's assessment of me, her words stung, and then they stuck.

STREET FIGHTER

I remember the date: March 8, 1971. It was the day that Muhammad Ali and Joe Frazier fought at Madison Square Garden for the world heavyweight championship. The bout was called the Fight of the Century. Everyone in my neighborhood was talking about it. The fight had also captured the imaginations of people around the world. In America, the boxing match became a sort of release valve for a slew of tensions that gripped the country at the beginning of the 1970s: Vietnam. Intense racial divides. Women's lib. These and other conflicts that swirled around society didn't penetrate my life—my parents didn't argue about the war or debate President Richard Nixon's policies—nor did the outside world take up a huge piece of the real estate in my ten-year-old mind.

On the afternoon of the Ali-Frazier duel, I was riding the school bus home to our second-story apartment in Brentwood. My family had just moved into one of the identical, two-story brick structures built as part of a new housing development. The block I lived on was so fresh from construction that there was no grass, only gravel mixed with chunks of cement. I didn't know many kids yet, but we'd relocated so many times that I'd honed my senses, and could walk into a school yard and figure out who was in charge. That afternoon on the bus, the kid in charge was an eleven-year-old boy named Angelo.

I was looking forward to listening to the fight on the radio with my dad, and everyone on the bus was talking about the night's big event. Ali was seeking to regain the title that had been stripped from him in 1967 when he refused to obey his draft notice to join the US Army. He'd fought only two times since coming back to boxing in 1970. Like the country, the bus was slanted heavily toward Ali. Secretly, I also liked Ali, who was physically much bigger and a more compelling figure than Frazier. But my dad, he was rooting for Smokin' Joe, the current heavyweight champ. So I was, too.

“Who you for?” Angelo asked me as we got off the bus. I told him I was for Joe Frazier. Wrong answer.

“I’m for Ali. Let’s fight.” He punctuated the statement with a right hook to my chin.

Even though my dad, a former US Marine, had taught me how to fight, I had never been in a real match. I didn’t even like to get angry or raise my voice. I was competitive, sure, but never a troublemaker.

Unlike me, though, this kid Angelo was a street fighter—the kind of boy who probably spent more time outside than in. He also was older and bigger, and while I was a decent size for my age, good at sports, and no lightweight, I was no Joe Frazier. The school bus rumbled off, leaving Angelo and me standing face-to-face in the unfinished gravel lot. We began to pummel each other, as kids and even adults formed a circle around us; a main event before the main event. Angelo was relentless. He kept coming after me with his fists. I was holding my own, but he had the edge. He also had the crowd on his side. They knew him and started chanting “Angelo! Angelo!”

He backed away for a moment, just long enough to reach down to the ground and pick up one of the cement chunks left over from the construction. He jumped on top of me and started pounding me with it. I tasted blood on my lip. But no one shouted for him to stop. Their hoots and chants only got louder, encouraging him to keep going. I knew I was on my own and risked a lot more than a bloody lip. No way was I going to lose an eye, or die, in some cockfight over Joe Frazier. My fear turned to resolve. By being the first to draw blood, Angelo had, according to street-fighter rules, given me the right to defend myself in any way I could.

The jagged chunk of concrete came at my face, and my survival instincts kicked in. In an act of self-defense, I reached into my pocket and pulled out the first thing my fingers touched: a pencil. Just a regular lead pencil. Frantically, I thrust the sharpened end at Angelo, and it punctured the skin on the right side of his face, just below his eye

and near his ear. When I yanked out the pencil, it created a two-inch gash down his cheek. The face bleeds heavily, and Angelo jumped up and off me, dropped the rock, and grabbed his cheek. I stepped back, relieved but also in shock from what I had done. But the kid had gone too far with the rock. He left me no choice.

I had to get out of there, but I didn't run right away. As in the movie *The Godfather*, where Michael Corleone shoots a mob rival and a corrupt police captain in Louie's Italian restaurant, and then calmly drops the gun on the floor and walks out the front entrance, I dropped my pencil, backed away without looking anyone in the eye, and walked to the street corner—where I stepped it up until I was safe at home behind the bolted door of our apartment. When my mom saw me, I was caked in sweat, dust, blood, and tears.

"Mom, I felt like it was me or him! I had no choice but to get him with the pencil, and I'm just telling you because I think they're going to come and try to kill us, and I don't know what to do!"

"Bill, don't you worry about it," she said as she walked me into the bathroom to clean me up. "You are safe now." She wasn't angry. She knew that if I hurt someone, it was because I had to defend myself, not to prove I was a tough guy. "If they dare come to our home, I'll take care of it." She wiped a wet washcloth across my face and kissed me on the head.

That night, Dad and I listened to the radio as Muhammad Ali dominated Joe Frazier for most of the first three rounds, before Joe delivered a head-snapping blow to Ali's jaw. Good ol' Joe held his own, attacking Ali's body for twelve more rounds. In a brutal battle that lived up to all the hype, Frazier won.

Walking to the bus stop the next morning was the second scariest thing I'd ever had to do on my own, after fighting off Angelo. *Would he and his friends come after me? Harder?* I had no interest in fighting him again. But when I saw Angelo, the side of his head plastered with gauze and tape, he didn't do or say a thing. I didn't say anything either. Maybe someone told him that I had every right to defend myself with

the pencil, since he'd started with the rock, or maybe he and the other kids now knew that I could defend myself. Whatever the reason, it was over between us, and I was relieved, but I wasn't proud that I had to hurt someone to end it. I never had another problem with Angelo or anyone else in that neighborhood again. Plus, I had proof I could survive on my own. The underdog could win.

JOB ONE

My parents gave me permission to dream big and got me believing that I could do anything I set out to achieve. So when I decided to start earning my own money, I had very high aspirations—especially for a paperboy.

At eleven, I was young to be delivering newspapers, but still I answered an ad to be a paperboy for the largest newspaper on Long Island at the time. Each morning, a truck dropped off a few stacks of flat papers in front of my house. After stuffing any special inserts into each paper, I'd load as many as I could into the big metal basket on the front of my blue Schwinn bicycle and the two baskets on either side of the back wheel. I carried the rest of the papers in my backpack. School started at eight thirty, so to get through the roughly 150 houses on my route in time for the first bell, I was usually pedaling by six o'clock in the morning.

The more houses I had on my route, the more money I could make in tips, so soon I was going door-to-door to sign up new subscribers. I had my shtick down:

“Good morning. I'm Bill McDermott, the newspaper boy in the neighborhood, and I noticed you're not currently getting the paper home delivered, so I just want you to know about my services.”

I had studied what good newspaper delivery looked like. Some delivery boys were sloppy: they just threw newspapers on lawns, rain or shine, but if there was even a drizzle, someone's paper lost its value. I made it clear to people that I took the job seriously and wanted to be conscientious about how I served my customers.

“I can be flexible in terms of how you’d like the paper delivered, ma’am. Inside your door. In the mailbox. In plastic, so it won’t get wet. And I always put the coupons in the right place, so you never have to worry about that.” Eventually I more than doubled the number of houses on my route.

The key to getting good tips was whether or not the newspaper showed up how people wanted it. Most people asked for it in the mailbox, but older folks preferred it between the screen and the door. Back then, a few people requested the paper in a plastic bag, so I always had some on me.

The job got trickier as the number of houses on my route increased, but my two-hour delivery window stayed the same. Delivering all the papers in one run became impossible, so I had to bike back home to replenish my supply. To make sure the papers arrived before people left for work and before my school started, I thought through my route. Speed alone would not solve the problem. I could pedal only so fast. I came up with a methodology to maximize the time by redesigning the route in a way that allowed me to cross town quickly, come home to reload, and finish in an hour and a half.

Collecting my money each week required another plan. Most folks left my weekly fee—and hopefully a generous tip—in a white envelope that I’d left for them; some scribbled “Thanks” or a smiley face on the front. I’d toss all the envelopes into a bag, and then go home and dump the bag on the kitchen table to count out who’d given me what. I was meticulous in tracking how each customer paid me, information I recorded in a little green book. I put circles around the names of the good tippers, and I treated those folks extra nice, maybe taking the time to put a special weekly flyer *on top* of their newspaper, with a note calling it out, so they’d be sure to see it.

The biggest problem was that some people ignored the envelope and didn’t leave me any money, which became a cash-flow issue, since I paid the newspaper company for all the papers myself. To get

the money I was due, I had to knock on my customers' doors and ask for it. I didn't like to do this, but I did it—usually on weekends when I had more time and people were more likely to be home. Still, some folks could go for weeks without answering their doors. It could have been easy for me to lose track of who owed me how much, but with my careful record keeping, I could always defend myself when someone who owed me \$7.50 denied it.

“What are you talking about, kid? The paper is only a dollar fifty a week.”

“I know, sir,” I'd say, pulling out my little green book. “But my records show you haven't paid me for five weeks.” I'd smile, and, invariably, because my notes were so good, I'd get my money with little hassle—and often with a substantially bigger tip, as those late payers got a little sheepish about stiffing the polite paperboy. “Keep the change, kid,” they'd say and hand me a folded ten-dollar bill.

I became keenly aware of the connection between my money and my customers' happiness. If I gave my customers what they wanted in the way they wanted it, they would give me more money. And for a kid who wanted to make money, this was an important revelation. In addition to the cash, I considered it an accomplishment if people liked me. I felt good when I got a nice word out of a grouchy man who just wanted to get back to his football game, or when someone's mother thanked me for doing a good job and invited me inside for a glass of lemonade.

Over time, I expanded my business. “By the way,” I'd say, “I also have holiday cards, if you'd be interested.” Back then it was common to sell boxes of American Greetings cards to households, and I would bring a bunch of boxed cards with me on days when I went door-to-door. I figured that adding another product was a good way to make the most of the opportunity I already had, standing in front of my customers when they had money in their hands.

Later, when I sold cookies door-to-door, I loved the sense of anticipation whenever I rang a stranger's doorbell, and the more

heated rush I felt when that stranger said yes. If we had a friendly conversation, all the better. A nasty no or a slammed door didn't faze me. I just walked faster to the next house, where the potential for another yes awaited.

I was enjoying *the process* of making money more than counting or even spending it. Pitching Christmas cards to newspaper subscribers. Tracking customers who didn't pay to keep my cash flowing. Chatting over lemonade about a housewife's new couch.

At the end of each week, I took my route money and wrapped rubber bands around the stack of worn bills, and then stashed the thick rolls in a hollowed-out cross of Jesus Christ that hung over my bed. While other kids were saving up only for baseball cards, I was after something more. Something bigger. Anything I could do to make my parents smile—buying a little piece of jewelry for my mom or picking up the dinner check at Howard Johnson for my dad—brought me incredible satisfaction. Having a steady job and money saved gave me a sense of control in my unpredictable world.

WEAR THE JACKET

Most people in our neighborhood knew that I was always trying to make a buck, so they often asked me to babysit their kids or do odd jobs.

Once, a young couple who lived down the street offered to pay me twenty dollars to move an enormous pile of dirt into their backyard and spread it out so they could reseed their grass. The couple was nice, and twenty dollars was another twenty dollars. Unfortunately, I misjudged the time it would take, as well as the intensity of the labor. I had no gloves, and the shovel's wood handle began cutting into my hands. This work was hard and physical, but even as the afternoon I planned to finish turned into a second afternoon and then a third, I didn't stop. There were moments I wanted to throw that shovel into the canal at the back of the house, but I didn't quit. I'd watched my

dad get up in the middle of the night often enough to know that work is sometimes doing what we do not want to do, and I believed it was important to do the job I promised. I kept shoveling.

When I finished, it didn't feel right to ask the couple for more money. We had an agreement, and I didn't want to ruin my relationship with the husband and wife, because I liked them, even if they knew they were getting a sweet deal. Besides, asking for more money would come with a megadose of guilt—the kind that comes with a Catholic school education. If I gave anyone any reason to think I was cheating him or not delivering what I'd promised, guilt engulfed me.

My first chance for better-paying employment came when I was on the cusp of fifteen, and the Finast supermarket chain opened a store in our neighborhood. When I heard that Finast was hiring, I picked up a job application and filled it out at home. My mom signed it because I was a minor. On the appointed day, I stood outside Finast in a line of applicants that stretched two blocks from the store's front doors and bright red signage. Scanning the competition, I realized that I was clearly the youngest person in line, the least experienced, and thus a definite long shot for one of the few openings. *Why hire the kid?* they'd think.

I was edging closer to the front of the line, where a woman behind a card table was accepting applications. When I stepped forward and handed her mine, she placed it on a pile of indistinguishable white forms. That's when I noticed a man wearing a green sport jacket standing a few feet away. *Nice jacket*, I thought. *Must be the boss*. I thanked the woman behind the table after she told me the store's manager would review my application and be in touch, and then I walked straight over to the man in the green jacket. The name Jack Kelly was embroidered on it.

"Hi Mr. Kelly, I'm Bill McDermott," I said and put out my hand. "I just want you to know that I waited on line for the last hour to submit my application because I really want to work here." He shook my hand and looked down at me, an eyebrow raised.

“Sir, I guarantee that if you give me this job, I’ll work very hard for you. I just need a chance.” Jack Kelly looked over at a coworker who was within earshot, and they both thanked me for my interest. When I left the store, the applicant line was still down the block.

The new store was less than a mile from my house, and the second I shut our front door, my mom called to me. “Bill, there’s a Mr. Kelly on the phone, and he wants to speak to you! A Mr. Finnegan is also on the line. They’re with Finast.” She smiled as I took the receiver.

“Hello, Mr. Kelly, Mr. Finnegan. How are you?”

“Bill, we think you have a lot of energy,” I heard Mr. Kelly say. “You can start tomorrow.” Just like that, very brusque. “Make sure you dress in nice pants and a collared shirt, and get here ten minutes before your shift at four o’clock. I’m a real stickler for being on time, you hear me, kid?”

“Yes sir, Mr. Kelly, I’ll be there!” Me being me, I arrived a half hour early.

The work wasn’t glamorous, but I was excited to have a real salary. I started out corralling shopping carts from the parking lot. I was careful never to ram them together and shove them against the store’s walls. I treated those carts like china. In the parking lot, if I saw a customer struggling to get bags into her trunk, I’d run over to help but refuse to take the quarter tip if she offered. “No thank you, ma’am, just doing my job. Really, it’s my pleasure.” I wasn’t lying; I loved that job.

I graduated from the parking lot to stocking shelves. The day I accidentally cut my hand with a box cutter as I sliced open a carton full of canned goods, a coworker drove me to the hospital and waited while they stitched me up. I was back at Finast within a few hours. The way I saw it, I owed Finast at least ninety minutes. Plus, I wanted to prove that my injury wouldn’t stop me from completing my stocking duties, and get me demoted back to collecting carts.

I took every job seriously, and whether I was stacking cans in a supermarket smock, digging dirt in muddy shorts, or delivering papers

in my school clothes, I started to develop basic work habits. By maximizing my time, being polite and conscientious, staying true to my word, showing up on time, and holding myself accountable, I was acting like a professional before I had to look like one. I was “wearing the jacket” long before I could afford or need a real jacket of my own. I understood that whether someone’s pay was hourly or salaried, his collar blue or white, professional work habits alone wouldn’t get people promoted, but a lack of professionalism wouldn’t get people anywhere. So even when my jobs were small, I acted big.

I don’t think my boss, Mr. Kelly, who was a good man and wore his own green jacket well, employed a lot of kids like me. “He’s going places,” he told my dad one day, which was a much rosier outlook than Sister Jean Agnes’s prediction about my future.

EVEN BETTER

I was fifteen, making minimum wage, about \$2.30 an hour. But it was a union job, so, like my dad, I took every ounce of overtime I could get because it paid time and a half. Double time during holidays. As I’d stopped doing the paper route, I had hours that weren’t being eaten up by Finast, school, or basketball, so I took two other jobs. One consisted of doing mundane tasks for the village of Amityville, like painting fences or picking up litter around town. The other job, I liked much better: I was a floating busboy at a white-glove Italian restaurant, Amato’s, which was so high-end that it took American Express cards and even had its busboys wear tuxedos—a uniform that demanded more respect than the job itself. I loved the tux.

At Amato’s, I made \$10 for a five-hour shift plus any money the waiters shared with me for taking their customers’ dirty dishes to the kitchen and pouring coffee. After every shift, as the waiters tallied their tips, I prayed they would take into account my efforts to treat their customers well and throw me several bucks. I always

asked diners if they enjoyed their meal, and suggested a cannoli or some spumoni for dessert.

By the time I was sixteen, if I wasn't at school, I was busy stocking, bagging, hauling, and busing. For a while, I even worked the midnight shift at the Merritt gas station, where just trying to stay awake was a chore. From midnight to eight in the morning, I'd service twenty cars at most. Not an ounce of skill was required. The boredom was torturous.

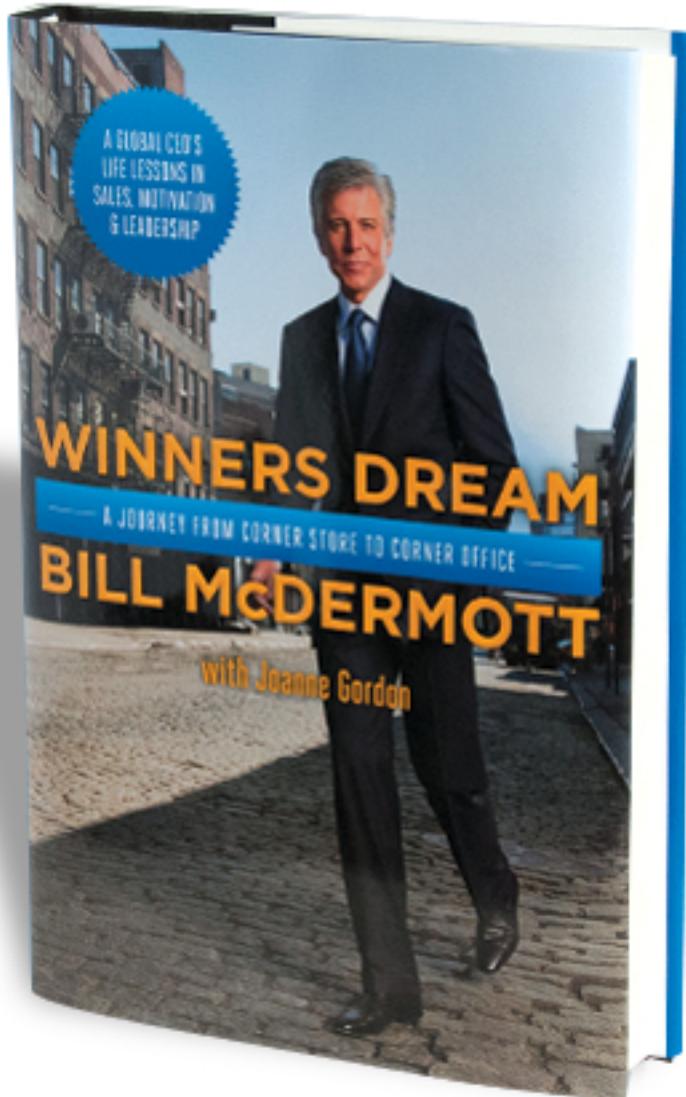
Still, I had more money than ever—too much to keep in the cross above my bed and enough to buy myself the occasional luxury. My favorite purchase was a hardy sheepskin coat, the kind with the faux fur trim, chic in the 1970s. I picked it up for about \$200 at an outlet shop that sold clothes not quite as high-end as Macy's. The minute I saw that coat, I wanted it. Walking the streets of Amityville in what became my signature coat, I felt as cool as New York Knicks basketball guard Walt "Clyde" Frazier.

I was grateful for the work I got, and to men like Mr. Kelly, who took a chance on me. And while I loved the work and the money, I suspected a hodgepodge of minimum-wage jobs wasn't making me as much cash as my time and effort deserved.

One afternoon, walking home from Amato's in my waiter's tuxedo and black velvet tie, I noticed a Help Wanted sign in the window of Amityville Country Delicatessen on the corner of Bayview Avenue and Merrick Road. I walked in. It was a small box of a place, nothing fancy. A pay phone. Racks of chips. Beer, soda, household goods, and a deli counter.

"What are you looking for?" I asked the man standing behind the cash register.

"I'm looking for someone who wants to work hard and is willing to put in a lot of hours." I smiled, partially at him, partially to myself. Work hard? Please, this guy had no idea who he was talking to.



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