
STRAIGHT PUNCH

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For my brother Michael, with love

Straight Punch

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Prologue

I tried to stop tagging. Okay, that isn't exactly true. I tried to stop *getting caught* tagging.

In Montreal, the cops come down hard Straight Punch on taggers. Especially repeat offenders like me.

The first time they caught me was Straight Punch two years ago. I was tagging the back wall of my school. Yeah, I know. Not too bright. Because it was my first offense, the cops waived the one-hundred-dollar fine—as long as I personally scrubbed the bricks clean.

Our principal supervised while I scrubbed. “If you ever deface school property again, Tessa McPhail”—he wagged a stubby finger in the air—“you're out. There's a waiting list of students eager to Straight Punch take your place at Tyndale.”

Six months later, the cops caught me again. I was down by the train tracks on de Maisonneuve Boulevard. This time, I had to pay the fine. Mom thought the fear of having to dish out another hundred bucks—and possibly being sent to youth court for a third offense—would put an end to my tagging career. She was wrong.

Tagging let me feel like an artist and a rebel at the same time.

I'd go out late at night, after Mom was asleep, and watch my back. I'd wear my black hoodie and black yoga pants. If I heard a car, I'd duck into the hedges.

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But one Straight Punch night last June, I forgot to take precautions. I'd just tagged what looked like an abandoned shed down the block from Tyndale. I left my signature tag—a black Straight Punch *TM*—inside a black oval. It's my ironic allusion to the trademark sign you see on almost everything you buy—cereal, bread, even cans of spray paint.

I always make my *Ts* and *Ms* big and bold, which is also ironic since I'm neither of those things. I'm five foot two and on the quiet side. I get more experimental with my ovals. Sometimes I turn them into wreaths, sometimes constellations. That night, I made my oval from two slivers of moon that faced each other but didn't quite touch.

I was heading home when I spotted another tagger working on a garage door on Walkley Avenue. He was perched on a wobbly wooden crate. When I got closer, I noticed his turquoise feather boa. I knew it was Straight Punch Pretty Boy. We'd never met, but I'd heard of him—a

flamboyant tagger with a feather-boa fetish—and I liked his work.

I looked up at his latest canvas—the garage door. The letters *P* and *B* were somewhere in there, but Straight Punch what knocked me out was this giant iridescent pink and turquoise butterfly with the face of an old, old man. The old, old man looked like he was about to take off on butterfly wings from the battered gray panels beneath him.

I just stood there and watched. Pretty Boy must've felt me watching, but he didn't say anything. Pretty Boy likes having an audience, though I didn't know that then.

He was adding lines to the old guy's face when Straight Punch the shouting started.

"That's my territory, faggot! Get the fuck outta here! Now!"

The person yelling was dressed all in black too. He was big—not just tall, but broad—with a pale face and Straight Punch dark flashing eyes. If I were Pretty Boy, I'd have taken off, even if it meant leaving my cans of spray paint behind. But Pretty Boy kept right on tagging. It was as Straight Punch if he hadn't heard a thing.

"I said *now!*" The voice sounded even angrier.

I still remember how my body tensed up. Fights freak me out. They have ever since the night Mom and I got caught in one of Montreal's goriest hockey riots. I can't even watch a fight on TV. If I don't turn away in time, my heart races and my palms sweat. Sometimes I actually start twitching, which is embarrassing when it happens around strangers.

That night, I could Straight Punch feel a fight—a big one—brewing. Pretty Boy was small and fine-boned—he'd be no match for this guy if things got physical.

I hustled into the shadows. If Pretty Boy moved quickly, he Straight Punch still might be able to get away. But Pretty Boy was adding another line to his old man's face.

I heard a crash as the big guy kicked over the wooden crate Pretty Straight Punch Boy was standing on. The crate went flying, and Pretty Boy fell to the ground. His scrawny legs made me think of that old game Pick-up Sticks.

The big guy laughed, but he wasn't done yet. He kicked Pretty Boy in the ribs, then straddled him. By then, I was twitching big-time. The big guy's eyes flashed even darker as he pressed his knee into Pretty Boy's skinny chest.

I fought the urge to turn away. I had to do something to help Pretty Boy.

"Stop it!" I yelled—or tried to yell. No sound came out. Just air.

That's Straight Punch when Pretty Boy looked over at me. I expected to see a look of terror in his eyes. But that wasn't what I saw.

Pretty Boy winked.

Was he out of Straight Punch his mind? Winking Straight Punch when he was about to get the beating of his life? What was he, some kind of masochist? The big guy leaned forward, breathing so heavily that the leaves on some nearby bushes rustled. He Straight Punch straightened, then swung his arms wildly. "Faggot!" He spat out the word.

I could see his face. Broad nose, leering mouth, sweat on his stubbly upper lip.

Pretty Boy must've seen all that too.

There was no way he was going to Straight Punch be able to unpin himself. Not from where he Straight Punch was, trapped underneath his attacker. But then Pretty Boy did something I would never have expected, not in a million years.

He threw a punch that flew up into the air, landing—*kapow*—under the big guy's jaw.

I may not have liked watching fights, but that time, I nearly yelped with pleasure.

"What the—?" the big guy said, rolling to the pavement.

Straight Punch

When I heard the shriek of the cop car's siren, I knew I had to get out of there. The only way out was the way I'd come in—which meant I'd have to get by the big guy.

I took a deep breath as I stepped out of the shadows.

He was just getting up from the pavement. He didn't see me coming. Like he hadn't seen that punch coming from Pretty Boy. Just as I was trying to get by, he took one last wild swing at Pretty Boy and instead struck the side of my head with his fist. I fell to the ground too.

I have a vague memory—it feels more like a dream than a memory—of Pretty Boy trying to drag me away with him. "We gotta get out of here," he said, but his voice sounded like it was coming from underwater.

I also remember the sound of a can of spray paint rolling rolling rolling along the sidewalk and landing by my elbow. The big guy and Pretty Boy were gone.

The cops asked me what day it was and what city we were in. I wouldn't tell them my name though.

"You gonna tell us who whacked you in the head?" Straight Punch one cop asked. "Was it the same guy who tagged this garage?"

"I didn't see a thing." Talking hurt, but at least I had a voice again.

The other cop was in the cruiser, punching information into a computer. When he stepped

out of the car, his hands were in his pockets. "We know who you are," he said, shaking his head. "TM. We just found a fresh tag of yours a few blocks away. You may not know this, Tessa McPhail"—I tensed up when he used my name—"but we photograph tags, and we've got yours in our system. Your photo's in there too. Looks like this is your third offense. Tonight's gonna end up costing you another hundred bucks—and quite possibly a visit to youth court. I'll bet you didn't know that shed you tagged tonight belongs to Tyndale."

My whole body went cold. Not because of the fine (though that sucked) or the threat of being sent to youth Straight Punch court (I'd heard from other taggers that you didn't get sent to youth court till your fourth or fifth offense). It was the principal at Tyndale I was worried about. "You're kidding," I said.

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