

By Laurie Lynn Drummond
forthcoming in *Creative Nonfiction*, Spring 2004
EXCERPT

Girl, Fighting

The first time I got punched in the face—punched, not slapped or shoved or struck or thumped by a flying elbow gone astray, but punched as in a fist landed squarely on the lower quadrant of my right cheek—it was delivered just after midnight in an apartment parking lot off Airline Highway in south Baton Rouge by a man at least five inches taller and a good 70 pounds heavier than me. I was not his intended target. He intended to hit his wife. She ducked. I didn't.

A heavy throbbing spread quickly out from the point of contact midway between cheekbone and jawbone; my jaw buzzed with bees, all armed with tiny hammers. My ear whooshed like some huge underground river.

For several seconds the three of us shared a common emotion, shock—shock that he'd gone and hit a cop. We all froze. His wife, a tired-looking girl of maybe 23 with a mass of dark curls, crouched at my feet. His face went slack, mouth dropping open to reveal crooked lower teeth, eyes both expanding and softening above drooping pockets of flesh. I have no idea what I looked like; I was still processing the fact that she'd ducked, and he'd hit me. My face felt like an overripe watermelon on fire. For the briefest moment I was tempted to giggle: it was so ludicrous, him standing there appalled, knowing what was to come, unable to turn back time. *What a friggin idiot*, I thought with a glee that quickly turned to righteous anger.

He back-pedaled, hands crossed in front of his face, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry," as I cleared the huddle that was his wife and went after him. He provided little

resistance when I body-butted him up against the hood of my police unit, turned him around, cuffed him, frisked him, placed him in the back seat, then spoke my first words since his fist had landed, “You’re under arrest, mister.” It hurt to talk.

My back-up, Carolyn, a stocky, ineffectual woman of whom I now thought even less, didn’t realize anything had happened until she heard the slam of my unit door. She’d been talking to neighbors, her back turned to the scene. She hustled over, ready for a tussle about two minutes too late.

“Damn, you got popped,” Carolyn said. “What happened?”

I waved her off with my left hand, the other hand gently probing my jaw for altered topography. “Just what it looks like,” I said.

“Damn.”

“Yeah, thanks.” I turned to the wife. “Are you okay?”

Fine, fine, fine, his wife said; he hadn’t laid a hand on her; She stood with her hands clenched in front of her, working her wedding ring round and round below an enlarged knuckle, begging me not to arrest him, said he hadn’t intended to hit me.

“Oh, I know that,” I said. “He was aiming for you.”

“But he didn’t hit me,” she said. “We was just arguing. The neighbors shouldn’t have called, it was just an argument.”

“Well he hit ME, lady. You can’t hit a cop and not take the fall for it.”

“But YOU got in the way,” she said.

No arguing that one; it was my job to get in the way.

After I’d processed him at downtown booking—fingerprints, mug shot, inventory of his belongings—and put up with the ribbing from the guys doing jailer duty, I headed

over to Our Lady of the Lake to get my face checked. It throbbed like a hip-hop band had taken up permanent residence in my bone marrow.

“Yowzer, girl,” said Miceli, the wiry Italian doctor I knew from several months of working extra duty at the Lake’s emergency room every Friday night, midnight to 6 a.m.

“What’s the other guy look like?”

“Wearing orange,” I replied, referring to the East Baton Rouge Parish prison garb.

“Not a scratch on him.”

“Really?”

“Miceli, I don’t hit people unless I have to.”

He nodded slowly, carefully processing the concept of a cop not hitting people unless she had to. After an X-ray determined I had no broken bones, he sent me home with an ice pack and a prescription.

* * * * *

I’d been a cop since 1979, almost three years by that time—two years as a plainclothes officer with the Crime Prevention Unit at Louisiana State University and nearly a year as a uniformed officer with the Baton Rouge City Police Department, working out of Broadmoor Precinct, a mostly white, mostly middle to upper class area.

In all that time, I’d never had a reason to hit anyone. Get physical, yes—it’s nearly impossible to arrest someone without shoving, pulling, turning, or frisking them. I’d even had to tackle some, all men of course, but there was never any need to hit—with my fist or nightstick.

Certainly I’d worried about getting hurt, but hurt in the sense of shot or stabbed. I’d worried about being overpowered, but more in terms of having my gun taken from

me—I was barely 5'6" and fluctuated between 122 and 128 pounds. I was twenty-three years old. And I was female.

I had no illusions about my physical abilities up against the average male, so I'd pushed myself hard in the City Police Training Academy during the two hours of PT in a gym with no air-conditioning every afternoon for 20 weeks in the dead of a muggy Louisiana summer. I lifted weights. I practiced take-down holds relentlessly. I was triumphant when I did 20 push-ups properly (not the knees-on-floor version). I could handle Lt. Martello's full weight on my stomach for five seconds during leg lifts. I even conquered the damn rope climb.

Out of a class of 47, I graduated second in academics and second on the firing range, which earned me an expert marksman badge. I ranked in the bottom half physically—I'd failed to make the 6 minute mile by 48 seconds, and I could only do 14 pull-ups instead of the required 20. But I passed all the other physical agility tests and graduated in superb physical shape.

Three months out of the academy, I took up White Crane Kung Fu. My younger brothers, both over 6 feet tall, had been training for several years, and I was impressed with what they were learning despite the cultist feel I'd picked up from their conversations—they practiced the forms obsessively and seemed to view their Sifu, or master, as some minor deity. I wasn't looking to become anyone's Little Grasshopper. But I couldn't deny they were good at sparring. I couldn't deny that either of them most likely could whip my butt if so inclined.