

PREMONITION

John Boston

They were a rather motley collection of middle-aged gentlemen, meeting at a local watering hole for their monthly get-together. They had all gone to school together in Massachusetts. Some had gone into the military. Some went into business, and a few went nowhere. They had all met up at their 20th class reunion a year ago and had made it a point to try and keep in contact with one another. They had been close in high school but had drifted apart over the years. Time tends to do that, even to the best of friends.

John was the one who kept the group together. He certainly wasn't the leader, or the alpha of the group, more like the mother hen.

Carl had just closed a very nasty divorce. His ex had filed a restraining order against him. He had been single for almost a year and vowed to remain so until the day he leaves this Earth.

Cody was the dumb ass of the group, but the most fun.

The last one was Philip. He too was divorced, but unlike Carl, liked to think there are plenty of fish in the sea, even if the sea was horribly polluted and the fish were dying.

They met twice a month at a local diner off the highway. Each of them was required to pick up their share of the check.

Philip decided to bring someone new into the group. The weird kid in high school was now not so weird anymore. A few years back he had nearly won a gold medal in boxing at the London Olympics, only to lose the match by a judge's decision.

Derek Rudman was his name and knocking people unconscious was his game.

"Derek Rudman was in the Olympics? That fat kid who used to fart in class?" asked Cody.

"Knocked out five people in a row to get to the gold medal match. I couldn't believe it when I was watching him. The dude looked like he'd been boxing since he was five or something." said Carl.

"We didn't give him any shit in school, did we? I know some of the other kids were pretty mean to him.

Some people tend not to get over that so easily." said John.

"I never had a problem with him. He was really in the Olympics? Jesus, that's insane." said Cody.

"He would have gone pro, but he was too old. I barely recognized him in the interview. He was the oldest person ever to win a silver medal in boxing. He lost by a split decision. He even got to meet the President. He's kind of a big deal." said John.

"The kid who asked every girl in school to the prom and got turned down by every single one of them won a silver medal in boxing?" asked Cody again.

"Cody, he hit one of his competitors so hard, he shattered his jaw.....with boxing gloves on. He hit another guy so hard that he nearly ruptured his spleen. Some famous boxer was doing the commentary on TV and said it's been decades since the boxing world has seen someone with that level of punching power." said John.

"I remember the time he wore lipstick for an entire day on a bet." he won and nobody ever paid him the money.

Philip came into the diner with Derek behind him. Derek was noticeably larger than he had been in high school. He had his beard trimmed and his hair pulled back in a ponytail. He was well dressed.

Everyone in the group was nervous. Some in their graduating class had gone on to bigger and better things, but none had achieved the level of success like Derek. The last person anyone expected to succeed, let alone make records at the Olympics.

"Jesus, he looks like a hitman," whispered Cody.

"Boys, do you remember Derek Rudman?" said Philip as he sat down at the table.

"Sure do. Good to see you again, man."

"Derek, you're freaking awesome," said Cody as he threw his arms around him.

"Cody Marks.....how are you, man?" said Derek.

"John Druce? We were in band together."

"Derek, great to see you. Come on in and sit down. Foods not great, but neither is the price."

"Hey, I used to crash this diner all the time in school. Course, most of the time I had to eat alone," said Derek, smiling.

Derek didn't even really speak for the first half-hour. He wanted to know how everyone was doing. The rest of the group just wanted to know what it was like to compete in the Olympics.

"Really, really weird. I mean the stadiums are huge, but nobody really shows up until the medal rounds. I had no idea I had so many fans until I walked out into that arena and I could hear the crowd shouting U-S-A. It's something I'll never forget as long as I live. We both knocked each other down. It was a tough match. I thought I won. Winning a silver medal is nice, but it ain't like having a gold medal put around your neck.

"A gold medal being put around your neck.....that's what awesome looks like," said Cody.

"Derek.....I have to ask you something here. I think all of us are wondering, so I'll just bite the bullet and ask. How do you go from being the kid you were in high school to winning a silver medal in the Olympics? I mean I don't recall you playing any sports." said John.

"Good question. I can hardly believe it myself sometimes. About two weeks after we graduated, my mom met the love of her life and moved us to Los Angeles to live with him. He and I didn't get along very well, so I left. I was homeless in LA. Weather's great, but being homeless sucks, no matter where you are. I'm in the convenience store on LaBrea, buying some smokes with the last few dollars I have and these punks actually tried to rob me in the store. I got so mad at them, that I hit him as hard as I could. I heard his jaw crack. The others froze. I hit him with an uppercut that lifted him off his feet. Knocked him out cold. The clerk was this old black guy, who goes:

Damn son, is you a boxer or something?

"I am now," I said.

"The next day I walked into a boxing gym and knocked out two guys in a row who had been boxing for years. The rest is history."

"Derek, you were 36 when you competed. How the hell did you get on the Olympic team?" asked Carl

"I was an alternate. I wasn't even supposed to fight. I was just there in case one of the regulars couldn't fight. Whoever taped his hands did a shitty job. He cracked one of his knuckles. He was out. I was in. We had some great boxers, but none of them could defeat that Cuban De La Cruz. He's something else.

Made our guys look like amateurs. He was much faster than I was, but I was the stronger puncher. I had to wait for my chance and hope he didn't knock me out. I remember watching him hit the canvas. I couldn't believe he got back up."

"He had never even been knocked down before and you damn near killed him," said Cody.

"Yeah, he won the fight though. He got the medal. He's got his heavyweight title match coming up next month."

"You are one genuine badass Derek," said Cody.

"I'm just a good boxer, Cody. Believe me, I suck at just about every other sport."

"You never went pro?"

"No, I've seen what the sport does to people. It's terrible for your body and brain. What good does it do you to win a heavyweight title, but die in your fifties? I was on the fence for years,

then one of my coaches approached me about trying out for the Olympics. Most of the kids on the team were half my age. I was kind of a joke."

"I bet the first time they got hit by you, they realized you weren't a joke," said John.

"That's the thing about boxing. You can be the hardest puncher in the world, but still, be a terrible boxer. I'm just a puncher, not a boxer. I'm too old and too slow. You just better not get hit by me. De La Cruz got too cocky. I was waiting for him to make a mistake and he did. He lowered his hands. That's all it took. Most boxers would never have gotten up, but he did. He's got what it takes to be a champ.

"Man, I feel like one of those girls at a Beatles concert that's just screaming her head off right now." said Carl.

"Me too. I just can't get over how awesome you are. It's just so nice to finally be around someone awesome.....no offense guys." said Cody.

"Derek, I think I can speak for everyone here when I say that you are more than welcome to join us any time you like," said John.

"Thanks, guys. That means a lot to me."

"Seriously, stop by any time. You don't even have to come with Phil here," added Cody.

The boys didn't see him over the next few months. Each time they met, they hammered Phil as to why Derek wasn't with him.

"I don't know guys. Something threw him off his game. He barely leaves the house anymore, other than to go to work. Every time I talk to him, he just seems.....off." said Phil.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean he seems like he's in shock or something. He told me he has trouble sleeping at night. Says he can't make it through the night without having nightmares."

"You think he's losing it?" asked Cody.

"I don't know. He's obviously not firing on all cylinders. He just kept saying the nightmare, over and over again."

"Nightmare or nightmares?"

"Nightmare. Yeah, I guess there is a difference isn't there?" said Phil.

"Guys, he had almost fifty amateur fights before the Olympics. Could be possible he has some kind of brain damage," said John

"That would be terrible."

"It takes a heavy toll on your brain. You can't keep getting hit in the head and think it won't do any damage," said John

"I think we should try and go over to his place and cheer him up after we eat. It's still early. I know every time I'm going through something, I feel better after I've talked to someone."

"Do you think we know each other well enough for him to want to talk to us?" asked Carl.

"You know him better than all of us Phil. What do you think?"

"I know him from my AA group. He says if he hadn't been drunk all the time, he could have been the heavyweight champ. I wonder if it's tearing him apart. Other than people in the boxing community, I doubt anyone would even recognize him."

"You think he might have fallen off the wagon?" asked Cody.

"The thought did cross my mind."

"Well then, it's settled. We're going over to his place. No way in hell can we let a guy like him fall off the wagon. He has to know we're here for him." said Cody.

"Why do you care about him, Cody? We hadn't even talked to him in twenty years," said Carl

"He did what everyone dreams of doing. He actually did it. The dude's the real deal. He's got my respect. If nothing else, he is undoubtedly the most successful person in our high school class. It just wouldn't be right to let him crumble."

"We can try Cody. I've been involved in AA long enough to know that once someone relapses, it can be pretty ugly. You sure you're ready for what you might find?"

"I can't just sit here and do nothing. Wouldn't be right."

"Well then, let's pack up and head over to his house," said Phil.

The boys had no plan. No real idea of what they were going to say or how they were going to say it. They figured they would just shoot from the heart and see where it landed.

Derek lived in a condo in a very upscale part of town. Clearly, he had done quite well for himself.

Phil knocked on his door. They had to wait for over a minute before Derek answered. The boys were all shocked at his appearance. The well-kept, well-dressed man they had met two months earlier, now looked almost like a homeless person.

"Hi Derek," said Phil nervously.

"Oh, hey. To what do I owe this honor?"

"Derek, I'm not going to beat around the bush here. We were all a little worried about you. I thought I should visit you."

"You think I've been drinking again?"

"I was worried, yes."

"Well, I haven't had a drop in almost four years. Well, come on in since you're all here. Sorry about the mess." he said and motioned for them to come in.

They sat down on his sofa. He didn't even offer them anything to drink. He didn't seem to want any of them around.

"So.....why are you guys here?" he asked.

"We just want to make sure you're okay," said John

"I'm fine."

"You don't look fine."

"Ok, I'm not fine."

"Do you want to talk about it?" asked Phil.

"Not really."

"We can't help you if we don't know what's going on," said Carl.

"I'm having nightmares. Actually, just one nightmare. Over and over and over again. It's the same one."

"The same one?"

"I'm dying. I can feel myself dying. I'm witnessing my own death."

"Well.....how long has this been going on?"

"A couple of weeks."

"So, this isn't your typical bad dream then?" asked Phil.

"It's not a dream. I'm seeing my future."

"Well Derek, everybody dies at some point. That shouldn't be too terrifying."

"I see myself and I look exactly like I do now. It's going to happen very soon. Very soon, I don't know when, but very soon, I will be dead. I don't have much time left. Very soon, I'll be in the ground. I'm having a hard time trying to adjust to that." he said with tears in his eyes.

No one in the group said a word. What could they say? Cody finally stood up and put his hands on Derek's shoulders.

"You ain't dying. Not on my watch," said Cody.

Derek smiled.

"Cody, we haven't seen each other in twenty years, why the hell would you care what happens to me?" asked Derek.

"Because you are the most awesome person I have ever met. You're like a movie character in real life. You're the person I always wanted to be.....that's why."

Derek put his hand over Cody's.

"I appreciate all of this guys, I really do. I'm glad we got to reconnect after all these years. But, the fact of the matter is, when the grim reaper comes looking for you, there's nowhere left to hide. It's just my time."

"Derek, it's just a dream. It doesn't mean anything. Hell, I had a dream last night that my ex-wife had a dick. It's just imaginary." said Carl

"Have any of you ever had the same dream over and over and over again, without one single detail changing? Not one? No, dreams don't work that way. You can have similar dreams, but never the exact same dream."

"It's just a dream Derek. Ok, it's got to be creepy having the same dream every night over and over again, but when you wake up, you're not dreaming anymore. That imaginary world is gone. It's over." said Phil.

"I just wish I could believe that.....I really, really do."

"You remember Derek, you are the only boxer to have ever knocked down Jose De La Cruz, and you did it at 38 years old. That guy wouldn't just sit back and crumble like this. I know he wouldn't."

"I don't want to die guys.....no one wants to die. I was going to try and make a comeback like Foreman did. He won the title at like 45 or something. He showed everybody it's possible. I can barely hit a bag now. I don't know if I can ever get it back."

"Derek.....you take one drink and you will die. You know that. Promise me and everyone here you won't take that first drink, no matter how strong the urge."

"I definitely don't want to pour any gas on this fire."

"You know you can always call me or any other sponsor. Any time, anywhere."

"You can call all of us too," said Cody.

"Thanks, guys. I guess this is just something I've got to get over myself. I appreciate the concern. I guess this is the toughest opponent I ever faced. I just hope I don't fold." said Derek.

The boys left his apartment that night and didn't hear from him for weeks. One night at the diner, Phil told them what he had learned from someone in the AA group who was a co-worker of Derek's.

"It's bad guys."

"What happened?"

"A few weeks ago Derek and co-workers were using a cutting torch on some metal. I don't know exactly what happened, but somehow Derek lit one of his co-workers on fire. Burned him pretty bad. I guess he just wasn't paying attention. Derek hasn't been back to work since."

"Jesus. That sucks."

"It wasn't intentional, obviously. It just sucks to know that you put someone in the hospital with second-degree burns."

"Have you tried to reach him?" asked John

"Yeah, a few times. It just goes right to voicemail."

"Damn. We're losing him guys," said Cody.

"Not much we can do at this point. He knows he can call us or anyone in the AA group. I guess they're going over to his place tonight to try and have it out with him. One last-ditch effort to try and get him back on track."

"Has he been drinking?"

"I don't know. If he can get through this without having a drink, I'd say he's cured," said Phil.

"Damn, this sucks. I wish I could help him."

"He's the only one who can help himself right now, Cody. He's got to be his own life preserver," said John.

A few months went by. No one asked about Derek anymore. No one mentioned his name. Everyone in the group, except Cody, pretty much wrote him off. Cody was the one who kept asking Phil if he had any news about Derek. One night as the waitress was taking their orders, Phil said he had some news about Derek.

"He's still alive. I saw him a week ago. Ran into him at the hardware store. He looked like a homeless person. I tried to talk to him. I can honestly say, it did not look as though he had been drinking. You can see it in their faces. His face looked totally sober. Crazy, but completely sober." said Phil.

"What did he tell you?"

"He's checked out. Stopped going to work, stopped paying his bills. Stopped paying the mortgage on his condo. Just said eff you to life. Broke my heart. I guess he owns a house in the Cedar Heights neighborhood he bought with his medal earnings. There's a very large basement in the house. He's going to basically hold up in the basement and not venture outside until the nightmares stop. He said he just can't afford to take the chance."

"You're serious? So, then no comeback for Derek Rudman? Too bad, I was going to be his manager," said Cody.

"He's just convinced himself that these nightmares about his death are some kind of premonition. He's convinced himself that if he leaves that basement, he's going to die. He says there is a giant steel door on it. The only way to get downstairs is to use a cutting torch on it."

"He really won't let it go, huh?"

"Nope. One bad dream just ruined his whole life. I guess he just isn't the champion we all thought he was."

"It's got to be very hard to have the same bad dream over and over again and not let it affect you," said John.

"I would think you would just get used to it and it wouldn't seem so scary anymore. All you have to do is wake up and the bad dream is over. It's that simple."

"Well, so much for Derek. Too bad. He really could have made something of his life," said Carl.

"Yeah. I just wished we could have saved him. To let your whole life go down the toilet from one bad dream. Hope I never do that," added Cody.

It was exactly four months later to the day when the group met in the diner. New group members had been added, including Jennifer and Karen. They were all proud members of the Class of 1994 at their tiny regional high school in western Massachusetts right on the Vermont border. Phil was casually late, like he usually was. He had a huge crush on both of the girls when he was younger, but now only had a crush on his wife. He liked to make an entrance, which is why everyone was kind of surprised when he sat down at their booth and said nothing to anyone. There was clearly something on his mind.

"What's up, bud?" asked Carl

"Guys.....I've got some bad news. Derek Rudman was found yesterday morning dead, at his house in Cedar Heights," he said

Everyone in the group had pretty much figured this day was coming, it still sucked when it did. No one had mentioned him in months.

"What happened?" asked Cody.

"Police were doing a health and welfare check on him. I guess his brother asked the cops to look in on him. It took them a few hours to get the basement door open, that's when they found him. He had been dead and decomposing for weeks."

"Man.....I was kind of expecting this, but still. This sucks."

"You okay, Phil?"

"No. No, I am not okay. Derek wasn't wrong. I mean he was, but he wasn't at the same time."

"What do you mean?"

"The cops have air meters with them now after what happened last Christmas. They turned it on and after a few minutes, it started flashing. Derek's cause of death wasn't alcohol poisoning or suicide. He ended up killing himself."

"What? How?"

"The air meter detected a radon gas leak in the basement. Not huge, but enough to kill someone over time when they never leave the area. He was breathing it in day and night for weeks. It was radon gas in that basement that killed him. If he had never barricaded himself in that basement, he'd still be alive today!" said Phil, throwing down the newspaper on the table. Derek's death was front-page news, but not for the reason most people thought.

Derek turned out to be one opponent he couldn't beat, no matter how skilled he was.