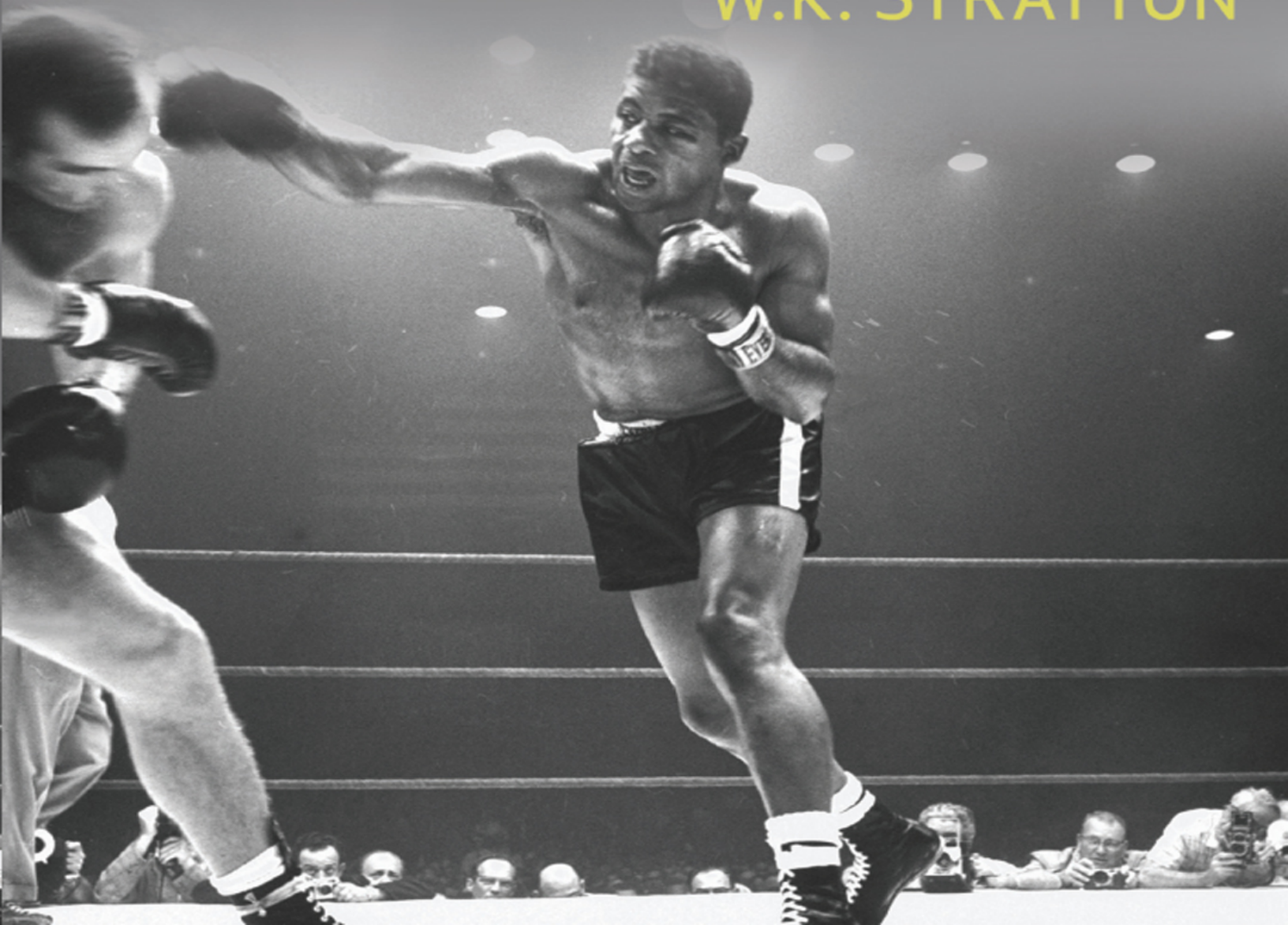
'A refreshingly honest and even-handed deconstruction of the owner of the uneasiest head to wear a crown this side of Henry IV'
George Kimball, author of *Four Kings*

FLOYD PATTERSON

THE FIGHTING LIFE OF BOXING'S INVISIBLE CHAMPION

W.K. STRATTON



BOOKS BY W. K. STRATTON

Floyd Patterson: The Fighting Life of Boxing's Invisible Champion

Dreaming Sam Peckinpah

Boxing Shadows

Chasing the Rodeo: On Wild Rides and Big Dreams, Broken Hearts and Broken Bones, and One Man's Search for the West

Splendor in the Short Grass: The Grover Lewis Reader (coeditor)

Backyard Brawl: Inside the Blood Feud between Texas and Texas A&M

FLOYD PATTERSON

The Fighting Life of Boxing's Invisible Champion

W.K. Stratton

EDINBURGH AND LONDON

For Richard Lord and John Schulian

CONTENTS

Brother,
This is advice from a friend who has been watching you closely. *Do not go too fast.* Keep working for the people but remember that you are one of *us* and do not forget if you get too big *they* will cut you down. You are from the South and you know that this is a *white man's world.* So take a friendly advice and go easy so that you can keep on helping the colored people. *They* do not want you to go too fast and will cut you down if you do. Be smart . . .

— Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*

PROLOGUE

Nothing Short of Miraculous

The thermometers in midtown Manhattan registered a near-record high as dusk approached, but heat was not the worst meteorological malady afflicting New Yorkers that September day. Sulfur-based clouds floated eerily down the streets. A peculiar set of weather conditions had combined with the ever-present smoke belching from chimneys and exhaust pipes — common in the days before widespread pollution control. Calls from panicked city dwellers, their eyes burning and throats scratchy, tied up phone lines to police stations and newspaper offices. But neither cops nor reporters knew what to do about the noxious air, though there was a new word to describe this troublesome phenomenon: smog. Officials recommended that people stay inside until the situation improved.

That was not an option for seventeen-year-old Floyd Patterson. The newsreel announcers of the day might have pronounced Friday, September 12, 1952, as Patterson's date with destiny. At the very least, it marked the beginning of the prizefighting career he had dreamed of since elementary school. No way would toxic billows set him back.

Besides, the sulfurous air smelled sweet compared to what Floyd found inside the St. Nicholas Arena, where thick cigarette and cigar smoke all but obscured the boxing ring.

Though not as famous as Madison Square Garden, St. Nick's had hosted thousands of fights over the previous fifty years. In fact, privately staged matches were held there even before boxing could be legally presented as a public event in New York, and it had become a favorite venue for Manhattan fight fans. Novelist and boxing aficionado Budd Schulberg lovingly recalled it as a place where "Damon Runyon's guys and dolls were all around ringside, and the balcony was full of blue-collar holler guys ready to fight themselves."[1] On this night, they were all out in force despite the smog, the swells and the working stiffs alike sweating in the unseasonable heat, to watch Olympic phenom Floyd Patterson box professionally for the first time.

Patterson's manager, Cus D'Amato, had matched Floyd against a nobody from Harlem named Eddie Godbold for this first fight. The newspaper writers scoffed at the choice. Lewis Burton, a longtime boxing writer at William Randolph Hearst's *New York Journal-American,* dismissed Godbold as nothing more than a "sacrificial lamb," a "guaranteed knockout."[2]

Still, Patterson was anything but confident before the fight. Earlier in the day, as he fretted about the outcome, his mother had tried calming him by listing all he'd accomplished as an amateur. But her efforts were to little avail. Floyd remained nervous as he ate his typical breakfast — a chocolate bar — at the subway station, and he grew even more anxious at the New York State Athletic Commission offices and the prefight weigh-in. There, gravel-voiced reporters lobbed questions while photographers aimed their cameras at him, flashbulbs popping like punctured balloons. Floyd hated it. He didn't feel comfortable on public display like this, and he preferred having D'Amato answer questions for him. He was happy to flee when the weigh-in was over. Floyd ate lunch, and D'Amato checked him in to a hotel, which was blessedly

cool. Despite his nerves, he napped for most of the afternoon before departing for St. Nick's. He found it easy to fall asleep.

Floyd's nap did nothing to relieve his prefight jitters. He continued to worry about how well he would perform in the ring as his trainer, Frank Lavelle, wrapped his hands and laced on his gloves. When it was time for his bout, Patterson climbed into the ring, wearing the robe he'd earned as a member of the US Olympic team. The scene could have come straight from a Warner Bros. film noir popular at the time. Sportswriters, press cards stuck in the bands of their fedoras, crowded around the platform. Photographers with their ever-present Graflexes jockeyed for position along the ring apron. Stocky made-men with their ladies of the moment lounged in the expensive seats just behind the press. In the smoky darkness beyond them were the shouting stevedores and longshoremen in the cheap seats.

The bell rang, and Patterson delivered his first punches as a professional boxer, quickly making it clear that the prognosticators had been right. It was no contest. Godbold made it only to the fourth round before Floyd knocked him out. Patterson collected $300 for his night's work. He cared about the money, but the important thing was that he was now in the books as a prizefighter. He sensed a whole world of possibilities opening up for him.

Virtually no one who stepped out of St. Nick's into the foul vapors of that New York night could have fully known what had just been witnessed — the beginning of a two-decades-long career that would change sports in general and boxing in particular. A career that set records, earned Floyd Patterson millions of dollars, and made him one of the most famous people in the world, at least for a time. A career that thrust him to the forefront of the civil rights movement, gave him access to the most powerful American politicians

of the day, and set the mold for athletes desiring to speak out about social causes. A career that would be wrapped in controversy, winning him both devoted fans and harsh critics.

Young men on the bottom rungs of American society have long turned to boxing to climb toward a better life. No one had a greater distance to scale than Floyd, a troubled kid who befuddled even those closest to him. “He’s a kind of a stranger,” D’Amato had said.[3] He was a walking contradiction. At times he was astonishingly well spoken, given his education. “Indeed, among contemporary boxers,” novelist Joyce Carol Oates once observed, “no one is so articulate as Floyd Patterson.”[4] But mostly he was quiet, disengaged from what was occurring around him. Muhammad Ali, who would become one of his great rivals, listed Patterson with legends Sonny Liston, Joe Frazier, and George Foreman as the best prizefighters he had battled. “Floyd Patterson was the most skilled as a boxer,” Ali would say.[5] But Floyd also endured countless blows to the head over his long career, often winding up on the mat. No important boxing champ was knocked down more during vital contests than Patterson. Yet he possessed an extraordinary ability to get up after those knockdowns and battle on to claim victory.

Patterson was an overachiever who bootstrapped his way to the top, an all-American success story. As happens with many, perhaps most, such American heroes, he fell from popular favor as his skills waned and the nation’s tastes changed. But on this smoggy New York night, he had no notion what fate awaited him. As he rode the subway home, he had money in his pocket and the prospect to make more, in a sport he loved. Such good fortune was beyond the fantasies of poor kids from Brooklyn’s Bedford-Stuyvesant. For people who had known Floyd Patterson as an invisible ghetto child — a child indistinguishable from thousands of others trapped in urban poverty — his becoming a

professional boxer was nothing short of miraculous. Just a few years earlier, it seemed unlikely he’d turn out to be anything at all.

1

I Don’t Like That Boy!

ONE THING YOU could always say about Thomas Patterson:[1] he worked hard. People in Waco, North Carolina, bore witness to that fact as Thomas put in long, brutal hours on the Seaboard Air Line Railway line crew. But, like nearly all black Americans in the South, Thomas never saw much in return for his labor. In 1936 he had a growing family — including his one-year-old baby, Floyd, who had been born on January 4 of the previous year — and could have used some extra dollars. But there was not much opportunity to make money in Waco, a poor hamlet in a poor part of a nation suffering through the Great Depression. He and his wife, Annabelle,[2] heard from relatives that things were better up north. So they decided to depart North Carolina, with its poverty and its segregation, and seek out a better life elsewhere.

In the years following World War I, black Americans like the Pattersons began abandoning the rural South by the hundreds of thousands to flee racism and seek jobs in the industrialized Northeast and upper Midwest. Eventually, some seven million people took part in this Great Migration, forever changing the cultural landscape of the United States. American popular music would never be the same because of the demographic shift, nor would politics, cuisine, literature, fashion, or sports.

Thomas chose the Bedford-Stuyvesant area of Brooklyn as the new home for his family. Although blacks had lived in Brooklyn for more than two hundred years, Bedford-Stuyvesant, with its graceful brownstones and tree-lined streets, had been off-limits to them for decades. But in the early 1900s blacks began moving into Bed-Stuy as New York's burgeoning population forced the breakdown of old barriers. It became one of the first urban areas in the United States to experience white flight, as property speculators used the growing black population to convince whites to sell their homes at prices far below even the depressed market values of the 1930s. The once stately houses in Bed-Stuy were then gutted and reoutfitted as cheap apartment houses. In 1930 fewer than thirty thousand nonwhite residents lived in the neighborhood, but that changed quickly with wave after wave of black immigrants. Soon, Bed-Stuy was a large African American ghetto.

What Thomas Patterson found for his family in Bed-Stuy was different from what he'd known in North Carolina, but it would be hard to make the case that it was much of an improvement, at least as far as the family's livelihood was concerned. The Pattersons had simply traded small-town poverty for urban poverty. In Bed-Stuy, the sidewalks were crowded, and discarded newspapers took flight with each gust of wind. The buildings were dingy, rapidly falling into disrepair, and infested with roaches and other vermin. Crime was commonplace, and the family was forced to contend with street hustlers and gang members, something unheard of back in Waco. Yet Bed-Stuy was a place where blacks were free to speak much more openly than they could back in North Carolina. The Pattersons would have been exposed to the progressive concepts of W. E. B. Du Bois and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and to the street-corner preachments of radicalized followers of Marcus Garvey, something that would have been unheard of in the South of

the 1930s and 1940s. However, the family's struggle to keep a roof overhead and food on the table overshadowed the lofty idealism surrounding them.

The Pattersons fell into a pattern of frequent moves within Bed-Stuy as the family grew larger. Floyd remembered six or seven apartments from his childhood, but there might have been more. All were four- or five-room dwellings known as railroad flats — apartments whose rooms are in a line with doors between them, not dissimilar to shotgun shacks in the South — with no running hot water, heated by coal or oil-fired stoves. "The only windows were in the rooms in the front and the back, and it was always too hot in the summer, too cold in the winter, and never big enough," Patterson recalled in his autobiography, *Victory over Myself.*[3]

To pay the rent on these shabby dwellings, Thomas Patterson worked long hours on construction crews, for the city sanitation department, as a longshoreman, and at the mob-controlled Fulton Fish Market on the East River waterfront in lower Manhattan. He was in his forties, and the harsh physical requirements of these jobs took everything out of him. He came home at night exhausted and frustrated. Sometimes he skipped dinner and went straight to the bedroom, where he collapsed into sleep, still wearing his work clothes. Every Friday he handed all his pay to Floyd's mother for household expenses. But his workweek wasn't over. He took odd jobs on weekends to bring in a little more cash. "I felt very, very sorry for my father," Floyd remembered. "I'd see him go out to work at six in the morning and come home sometimes at one the next morning. Some days he'd take a drink when it was cold outside, after he got home. I was the one who would take off his shoes and clean his feet. I enjoyed it."[4]

Annabelle also worked, first as a maid, then later at a bottling plant. With both parents employed, the Patterson children were on their own for most of the day. They, like

other neighborhood children, had plenty of opportunity for getting into trouble on the streets. Fights, often involving clubs and knives, were common. Fruit carts and stores provided temptation for shoplifting. But the young Floyd Patterson had problems beyond those of a typical ghetto kid, problems that mystified his parents, his teachers, and ultimately himself.

A photograph hanging on a wall in the Patterson home showed Floyd at age two, during a trip to the Bronx Zoo with his brothers Frank and Billy. As Floyd grew older, he frequently stared at the picture, silent rage building inside him. He would point to the photo and shout to his mother, “I don’t like that boy!” Annabelle Patterson had no idea what caused these outbursts. Her son’s obsession with the image eventually took a darker turn when Floyd carved an X over his face in the photo, shocking his mother, who could not understand what would provoke such a destructive act.

Nor could she understand her son’s odd nighttime behavior. Nightmares and screaming fits were regular occurrences. He also began sleepwalking, sometimes strolling the busy sidewalk outside the apartment house in his pajamas. The sleepwalking alarmed his parents so much that they took Floyd to a doctor, something that would not have been undertaken lightly given the family finances. The doctor charged the office-visit fee but offered no remedy.

When Floyd started elementary school, his troubles only increased. He was convinced the other kids were making fun of him. He saw himself as the perfect butt for jokes — a tall, skinny, gawky kid with a grimy face. His hand-me-down clothes were oversized: shoes too big for his feet, cuffed trousers with a waistband drawn tight with a belt to keep them from falling down, a shirt so large it flapped in the breeze. Beyond his appearance, Floyd knew there were other reasons for people to ridicule him. His social skills

were all but nonexistent. He couldn’t bring himself to talk to other people, nor could he look anyone in the eye.

Floyd quickly fell behind the other students. He went from one year to another without learning how to read or write, though later IQ tests showed him to be of average intelligence. Even when he knew the answer, Floyd did not raise his hand in class, not wanting to call attention to himself. Teachers had little opportunity to get to know him. He once estimated that he attended as many as ten Brooklyn elementary schools because of the family’s frequent address changes. “The schools he went to in the area,” Jimmy Breslin once wrote in his popular newspaper column, “have old, faded record cards showing he attended nine days in one of them, a couple of weeks in another. The rest of the time he ran the streets, a strange, illiterate kid who would stick his chin on his chest and look at the ground when anybody tried to talk to him.”[5]

Floyd didn’t care about schoolwork or whether he was promoted to the next grade. At the same time, he despised himself for not caring. He sought out dark places to hide whenever he had the chance. Frequently he hid in the school’s cellar and stayed there until class was dismissed. The teachers became accustomed to his vacant desk. Eventually, he started skipping school altogether — especially Fridays, assembly day.

School rules required him to wear a white shirt and tie on Fridays, and his only dress clothes were hand-me-downs from his father that were much too large for him. Floyd believed he looked like a character straight from a comic book. The other kids laughed at him, even more so than usual. Or so it seemed to Floyd. Plenty of Bed-Stuy kids had it just as tough as he did, but Floyd was blind to them. On those Fridays, he could see only the kids who were better off, and register humiliation because he was not among them.

As Floyd’s truancies became more frequent, he began prowling the streets of Brooklyn, finding alleys or shadowy corners where he could be by himself. If he had the eighteen cents for admission, he slipped into the comforting darkness of second-run Brooklyn movie houses like the Banco, the Regent, or the Apollo. If he didn’t have the eighteen cents, he sneaked in. He might remain in the theater all day and into the evening, staring raptly at the giant images on the screen before him. The white actors represented to him what “normal” life should be: people who lived in comfortable houses, families with well-mannered children, a father who didn’t come home completely used up by his job.

Sometimes he boarded the Eighth Avenue subway and rode it all day. One day he discovered a little room off the tracks near the High Street station. When no one was looking, he’d climb the metal ladder leading to it and push open the door. The tiny enclosure housed tools used by subway crews. He’d step inside and close the door. Suddenly, he’d be in complete darkness. And it was silent in that room, except when a train roared past. Floyd felt safe there, no eyes peering at him, no voices talking about him. This tool closet became his refuge from the real world, a place where he’d spread old newspapers on the floor, lie down, and drift into dreams of candy, nice clothes, and money.

But he couldn’t stay in his hole in the wall forever. Skipping school was a serious offense, and Floyd drew the attention of truancy officers. He tried hiding from them, but they caught him often enough. He became familiar with courtrooms and judges. He pleaded with his mother to let him just quit school altogether. He fantasized that he could get a job, do a man’s work, and supply badly needed income for the family. His mother would hear nothing of it. She adhered to the adage that staying in school meant staying out of trouble, so his fantasies of becoming a full-

time worker evaporated. But he still skipped class as often as he could. And, as his mother feared, he found trouble.

He regularly snatched fruit from delivery trucks as well as from the Ess & Effstores and Sam's Grocery. One night, he burglarized a shop to steal food. He took his booty to a corner two blocks away and began eating while sitting on a curb, convinced he'd pulled off his crime undetected. But he was wrong. A policeman soon nabbed him. Floyd was off to juvenile court yet again, where authorities added the incident to what was becoming a growing record of truancy offenses and petty crimes. Once, he stole for his mother. He saw female teachers wearing pretty clothes but never Annabelle. He resented this, so he broke into a store at two in the morning, grabbed an armload of dresses, and ran out the front door. "I carried them all the way home," he said, "taking special care when I had to jump over a wall. When my mother asked where I got the dresses . . . I told her I found them."[6] His mother grew suspicious about the mounting number of things young Floyd "found," but there was little she could do to stop him. His daring escalated. He even managed to steal a truck from the Sheffield Farms milk company and take it for a short joy ride, though his legs were hardly long enough to reach the pedals. He ran home after abandoning the truck, with no one pursuing him. But he knew this act, like his other misdeeds, would catch up with him at some point.

One day, the Bishops, a group of Bed-Stuy toughs, cornered Floyd on the street and tried to steal his pocket change. Outnumbered and smaller than his assailants, Floyd nonetheless flailed at them wildly until someone pulled a knife. Fortunately for Floyd, his older brother Frank happened along at that moment. Frank grabbed a stick in the gutter and threatened the thugs, who fled — without Floyd's money. In fighting back, Floyd had tapped into a familiar well of rage within himself. It proved effective

against the Bishops. But when it surfaced during a confrontation with a cop, Patterson's whole life changed.

It started when Floyd snatched a case of soda from a bottling plant. As he hurried away, a police car pulled up.[7] A whole case of soda was too much for a ten-year-old boy like Floyd to carry while running, so he dropped it, snatched two bottles, then took off again. But even those two bottles were too much to handle. He threw one aside. Then, after a few more steps, he tossed the other one away. He made it all of a half block before the policeman from the patrol car collared him.

"You just robbed the factory down the street," the officer declared. "I saw you. Let's go."

The patrolman led him back to the soda plant, where he tried to make Patterson fess up. Floyd refused, claiming some other boy had given him the sodas, so the officer started slapping him around. The policeman also accused Floyd of hurling soda bottles at him. When Patterson began crying, the patrolman picked up an empty wooden crate and smashed it over Floyd's head. In that moment everything changed: Floyd went from the reclusive, shy, quiet kid to being "crazy mad," as he later described it.[8] Snatching up a crate himself, he attacked the officer. The patrolman later told Annabelle he'd never seen anything like it. Floyd had become a miniature wild man, screaming and fighting. It took two or three more cops to subdue him.

The incident sent Floyd back to juvenile court, where he went before a judge who knew him all too well from previous appearances. Patterson stared at the floor as he listened to the judge tell Annabelle that he feared Floyd was headed toward more serious crimes. It was time to take some action, the judge said. The boy needed a more regulated life. Annabelle agreed. Ten-year-old Floyd left the courtroom certain he was bound for prison.

Patterson had good reason to assume he was going to jail. Where else could he have been headed? Government-funded social services were all but unknown to Bed-Stuy denizens. The service providers that were prevalent had affiliations with churches and benevolent groups, and most chose not to deal with troubled African American youths. But one alternative existed, one Annabelle Patterson learned about from the courts. It sounded unreal: a facility in upstate New York where boys could find plenty of open spaces, woods, fresh air, and, most important, teachers dedicated to inner-city kids who battled internal demons. But the Wiltwyck School for Boys was real, and that was Floyd's destination as he departed Brooklyn in September 1945, riding in a car driven by a school counselor named Clarence Cooper.

Cooper attempted conversation during the ninety-mile drive to Esopus, the small town near Wiltwyck, but Patterson kept his eyes closed and his lips locked, fuming to himself and angry at his mother. Cooper tried to reassure Floyd, telling him that he was traveling to a place that would help him. But Patterson would have none of it. He gave every indication that he planned to fight whatever awaited him to the very end.

With his eyes clamped shut in the car — eventually he fell asleep — Patterson missed the startling changes in landscape as Clarence Cooper drove from Brooklyn up to Poughkeepsie, then across the bridge to Esopus. Had he been looking, Floyd would have taken in things he'd never seen before: mountains, forests, rivers, open fields, pastured horses. When the car finally came to a stop and he opened his eyes, Floyd saw four stone buildings trimmed with wood painted white. Behind them wooded hills stretched into the distance. As he stepped out of the car, he was impressed by what he didn't see: bars, barbedwire-crowned fences, guards with guns. He did see a lot of other boys, mostly his age, mostly black. The kids seemed to be

dressed better than he — he was still in his outsized hand-me-downs — but from the very beginning he felt like he could relate to them.

“One thing really astounded me,” he said years later, reflecting on life at the school. “I found it didn’t make any difference that I was colored, the way it did in Brooklyn where white boys called me names. There were about thirty white boys, and forty to fifty Negro boys at Wiltwyck, and they all got along. I never heard one remark about the color of a boy’s skin, or his religion.”[9] Other Wiltwyck boys had different memories, but the school’s equitable treatment of residents probably served to minimize racial tensions.

As he settled in, Patterson learned that the standard form of corporal punishment common in public schools of the time was discouraged at Wiltwyck — although some staffmembers were known to beat unruly students, and plenty of ten-year-old thugs were on campus to challenge the staff’s authority. Each residential cottage had a counselor and a trained social worker. A public school administered by the New York City Board of Education functioned on the grounds, and all the boys were required to attend. But the classroom atmosphere was far different from what was typical at a city school. The class size was smaller, allowing the teachers to devote more time to each of their students. The teachers themselves had made a conscious decision to work with emotionally troubled children, so they did not consider boys like Floyd to be a disruption or something to be endured. They had chosen to work with kids like him.

Many of the teachers had remarkable backgrounds. Art instructor Edith Kramer had learned painting from masters in Vienna, where she had been born and reared. She befriended a number of the early psychoanalysts in Vienna and underwent therapy herself. In Prague in the late 1930s, she taught art for children of Jewish and Communist refugees fleeing Nazi persecution. There, she helped

pioneer the idea of art therapy for traumatized children. She eventually fled Hitler-controlled Europe herself and wound up at Wiltwyck, where she employed on the street kids from New York techniques she'd first used with refugees in Prague.

Miss Vivian Costen did not boast an exotic pedigree along the lines of Kramer's. But she became one of the most important people in Floyd's life. Almost nothing exists in public records about Costen. She was African American and had never married. Census records indicate she may have been born in North Carolina in 1901 and lived in Connecticut before her Wiltwyck days. According to Patterson, she died sometime during the mid-1950s. Other than that, she's unknown. But there is one thing about which there is no mystery: her influence on Patterson lasted a lifetime.

Working with just seven or eight boys at a time in the classroom, Costen patiently attempted to bring them out of their shells and convince them that they could learn. One day she asked a question of the class, but Floyd's lack of confidence kept him from responding. When Costen announced the answer and Floyd discovered he had been right, he leaped from his chair and darted out of the classroom, furious with himself for not speaking up. When Costen caught up with him in the hallway and saw the tears streaming down his cheeks, she told Floyd she knew he'd known the answer. She said she wanted him to overcome his fear of speaking out, that he was no different from any other boy his age.

From that point onward, Patterson began to risk speaking out in class. He was often wrong with his answers at the beginning, but newly engaged with his studies, he started to catch on. Soon, as a reward, Costen invited him to spend a weekend at her house — a candy-sweetened honor she gave to the boy who had done the best academic work for the week. She also bought Floyd clothes and other small gifts.

Patterson soon proved himself to be among the bright lights at Wiltwyck. As such, he developed key friendships with two prominent adults. Ernst Papanek, who later became the school director, was a well-known man of the world who'd once been a member of the Vienna city council and the executive committee of the Socialist Youth International as well as a groundbreaking psychiatrist. He was best known for the work he'd done to protect Jewish children from Nazi persecution during World War II. After the war, he moved to the United States, where he became associated with the Children's Aid Society and the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee. His work brought him to Wiltwyck, where he met Patterson. The two stayed in touch for the remainder of Papanek's life, with Papanek, an unlikely fight fan, writing Patterson letters supporting his pro boxing career.

Floyd also befriended Eleanor Roosevelt, the president's widow. Wiltwyck, located just across the Hudson River from her Val-Kill home, existed only because of her ability to raise money for it. Justine Wise Polier, the first woman to serve as a judge in New York City and Roosevelt's friend, had convinced the Episcopalian Mission Society to create the Wiltwyck School for Boys at Esopus in 1936. Wiltwyck began accepting "disturbed" boys referred from New York City, with the city paying the private school for its services. Most of the students were like Floyd Patterson — poor and black, with criminal records and symptoms of mental illness. The school had its share of failures, and violence was fairly common among the students. Sometimes the staffreacted in kind when confronting offenders. But it also had its successes, boys whose lives were turned around by the Wiltwyck experience. However, the school soon became more than the Mission Society could support and would have closed had Mrs. Roosevelt not intervened.

Beyond addressing the school's funding issues, Roosevelt also gave her time. She strolled the campus wearing a fox

stole, pausing to engage the boys in conversation. Her Independence Day picnic at Val-Kill was the highlight of each school year. “We would hop, skip, and jump for lollipops and hotdogs and ice cream,” Cliff Arnesen, a Wiltwyck alumnus, said. “Then she would read Winnie-the-Pooh stories to us. It was really nice. All the kids would gather around after the hotdogs and ice cream and she would read those stories in that high-pitched voice.”[10] She also read from Rudyard Kipling’s *Just So Stories.* And, when it was time to serve the holiday meal, she made a point of personally taking part in buttering the rolls served to the boys. When Wiltwyck’s director told her she didn’t need to go to such lengths, she said, “When the King and Queen were here we had buttered rolls for them. Why should the children of Wiltwyck be given anything less?”[11] Floyd caught Roosevelt’s eye, and he was among the students invited to spend two Christmases at the Roosevelt Hyde Park estate. Those visits began a friendship that lasted until her death in 1962.

The Wiltwyck experience eroded Patterson’s cynicism and transformed him into something of a juvenile egalitarian. It also taught him that he was a natural when it came to smashing his fist into another kid’s face.

Three or four times a year, Walter Johnson, Wiltwyck’s executive director, staged boxing bouts for the boys, coaching them himself beforehand. With prodding from his mother during one of her Wiltwyck visits, Patterson agreed to give ring fighting a try. The first kid he boxed was bigger and had boxing experience, so Patterson doubted he could beat him — until the first round was under way. Floyd discovered that he could easily dominate his foe. He flattened the other kid’s nose, and with that, Floyd had his first boxing victory. He showed little style in winning. In fact, he looked flat-out clumsy, leaping into the air to launch punches, throwing haymakers that missed the mark by feet,

not inches. The boys in the audience howled at his missteps, but at the same time, they rooted for him and gave him a rousing ovation when he won. It was the first time he had ever heard a crowd cheer for him, and he loved it. He fought two more bouts while at Wiltwyck and, as the audience favorite, won them both.

Patterson left Wiltwyck at age twelve feeling like a winner for the first time in his life. During his two years at the school, he'd learned to read and write. He'd overcome his paralyzing shyness. He could look people in the eye and hold a conversation. The fits of screaming at night had disappeared. He never again sleepwalked. He would come to understand his experience at the school as fostering in him the belief that ghetto-formed nihilism can be overcome, that hope exists for even the most downtrodden, that black people and white people can live and work together. Now, he was ready to go back to New York City to finish his public school education. More important, he wanted to get back into the ring. "My mind," he would later recall, "was already taken up with boxing."[12]

2

Taken Up with Boxing

In the mid-1940s many young black men and boys found their minds taken up with boxing. It was the one major sport that was integrated to any significant degree. Big-league baseball boasted not a single black player. Top-flight college football programs were almost without exception white. Black players turned up in the National Football League only sporadically — a situation that would not change until 1946, when the Los Angeles Rams signed African Americans Woody Strode and Kenny Washington, a move that prompted other teams to add black players to their rosters as well. Professional basketball would not integrate until 1950.

But blacks had been making their mark on boxing for decades. The most lauded athlete in the world immediately after World War II was heavyweight champ Joe Louis, from Detroit. Louis was the first African American to become a national hero, a status he acquired by hammering the German Max Schmeling in 1938's "Battle of the Century" fight. His private life was one thing, but his public persona was that of a clean-living, hard-working, respectable black man, and he inspired countless other young black men to pursue success inside the ring, not the least of whom were Frank, Billy, and Floyd Patterson. They started at the most

basic of makeshift boxing gyms. Brooklyn's Carlton Avenue YMCA had virtually no training equipment except sparring gloves and a solitary speedbag hanging in a corner.

It was all asses and elbows out there on the basketball court of the Carlton Avenue Y, where pairs of kids faced off and threw punches at each other, all of them going at it simultaneously. The boxing matches Floyd participated in at Wiltwyck had been wild exhibitions between untrained boys. But here he began to learn how to keep his hands up, how to feint jabs, and how to slip punches thrown at him as he sparred round after round. It was akin to figuring out how to swim by being thrown into a deep lake, but it worked for Floyd and his brothers. Frank Lavelle, the trainer in charge of Carlton Avenue's boxing program, took notice of the Patterson boys. They seemed to have potential.

Lavelle, whose day job was at the US Custom House at the port of New York, was not unlike other white trainers in big cities across the country. Boxing had been integrated as far back as the late 1800s, except for championship bouts — white promoters ensured that only white boxers competed in those. But that changed in 1902 when Joe Gans won the world lightweight title. While Gans's victory did not immediately create complete integration of championship-level boxing, it opened the door. More and more blacks appeared in the prizefighting ring as the twentieth century progressed, most taking up the sport as a way to escape poverty. After the war, as African American fighters were becoming more and more dominant in the professional fight ranks, men like Lavelle prospected for future pro talent in gyms catering to blacks in poor neighborhoods. If he could find a fighter capable of eventually winning some pro fights, Lavelle stood to make some money. As much as a third of a fighter's purse went to his manager and trainer. Lavelle didn't necessarily have to find a potential champion. In those days before television became pervasive, pro boxing matches took place in auditoriums around the city every

week, so there was plenty of demand for boxers, a few of whom earned a living from the ring without ever contending for a championship. Their managers and trainers made out well enough too. After a couple of years of working with the Pattersons at the Y, Lavelle decided it was time to take Frank and Billy to the next step. Floyd tagged along.

That next step was the Gramercy Gym, which was situated across the river in Manhattan. It occupied a rundown space upstairs at 116 East Fourteenth Street. The neighborhood was familiar to Floyd. After leaving Wiltwyck, he began attending classes at the Cyrus W. Field School, a vocational elementary/junior high school better known as PS 614. It was one of two “600 schools” for “maladjusted” students that had recently opened in New York, and it was located on East Fourth Avenue, not too far from the Gramercy. With their emphasis on teaching trades, the schools catered to students who stood little chance for academic advancement. Floyd excelled at PS 614, just as he had at Wiltwyck. But the Gramercy offered him the chance to learn skills that would prove far more valuable than any training he received at school. The boxing gym was also far more demanding.

Just getting from the street to the gym involved a test of will. The street entrance was a heavy, zinc-plated door on which had been painted “Gramacy Gym,” owing to a sign painter’s careless ways. Before boys could get to the sparring ring and heavy bags upstairs, they had to open that big door. Some never could screw up enough courage to do so, fleeing instead to the candy stand next door, never to consider boxing again. But some did continue. On the other side, past some garbage cans, were two flights of dimly lighted rickety wooden stairs that disappeared into darkness. Who knew what really waited at the top? Climbing the stairs took even more courage — it was almost as if you were climbing the steps of a gallows — and many boys

made it no farther than halfway up before they turned tail and hustled back to the candy stand. The boys who did make it all the way to the top encountered another door in the shadows. This last barricade dissuaded a few more. A square had been cut in the door and covered with chicken wire, and behind that square was a snarling German shepherd. That was enough to scare away even some tough kids. But those who braved the dog and pushed the door open entered a kind of dingy wonderland of sights, smells, and sounds guaranteed to entice most boys, a wonderland lorded over by a stocky, middle-aged man named Cus D'Amato. Floyd passed these tests of courage and entered the Gramercy Gym for the first time, trailing Frank Lavelle and his brothers.

The gym's size impressed Floyd. He thought it looked like the inside of a big barn. The odor of stale sweat clung to the walls — hardly pleasant, but oddly inviting, evidence of serious work getting done. The windows were closed tight — they were never opened — and the air felt hot against Floyd's skin. He let his eyes travel around the enormous room. Men sparred in the ring. A couple of boxers slugged away at the two heavy bags. The hypnotic *rat-tat-tat* of speedbags drowned out conversations. Across the way, fighters shadowboxed in front of cracked mirrors. Someone who'd finished his workout lay face-down on a table for a rubdown. There were some steel lockers, a few showers. Floyd took all this in and knew he belonged here, though he wasn't quite ready to tell that to the odd white-haired proprietor. "My old-time embarrassment kept me from it for a while," Patterson said. "It wasn't the fear of getting hurt. It was the fear of starting something new."[1] So he just watched his brothers go through their drills.[2]

Patterson was now fourteen, already closing in on six feet tall but weighing just 147 pounds, with rounded shoulders and long, straw-thin arms. But he had learned, at the Carlton branch YMCA and during scuffles at school, that he

could hit. After watching his older brothers work out a few times, he approached D'Amato and said he wanted to fight. D'Amato was definitely interested; Lavelle had already told Cus that Floyd might have the right stuff to become a pro. Cus asked him how old he was. Fearing he might be turned away for being too young, Floyd fibbed, telling Cus he was fifteen. D'Amato agreed to give him a shot at boxing and explained what the deal would be: he would allow Patterson to train at the Gramercy; provide him socks, trunks, T-shirts, a no-foul protector, and the other equipment he would need; and permit him to spar with the other Gramercy boys — all at no charge, with the understanding that D'Amato would be Patterson's manager, guide his career, and, if he turned pro, claim a percentage of his purses. None of this was written down, but Floyd accepted the offer, and the spindly Bed-Stuy kid became one of D'Amato's protégés. No relationship was more important in shaping Floyd's life.

During his heyday, in the 1950s and '60s, Constantine "Cus" D'Amato was a mysterious figure to sportswriters and boxing fans alike. No one doubted that he was a veteran of the rough-and-tumble boxing scene in New York, though he never fought professionally himself. But whence he came and why he wound up doing what he did seemed to be anyone's guess. Newspaper accounts of the time sometimes mentioned that he had no family and suggested his age was unknown. In fact, he did have family, and his birth date was available. He was born on January 17, 1908, to Italian immigrants living in a tenement in the Bronx's Clason Point section. His father was Damiano D'Amato, a one-time Italian folk wrestler who loved boxing. Damiano was a strong-willed man who had taught himself to read and write as an adult.[3] He passed on that willpower to his sons.

Cus's mother, Elizabeth, died of pneumonia not long after his fifth birthday. "I don't remember my mother," he once said, "and I was fortunate, because I was self-reliant at a