Rubin Carter - how much can a man lose?
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Research Preface

Rubin ‘Hurricane’ Carter was born on the 6th May 1937, in Clifton, New Jersey. In 1966, at the height of his boxing career, Carter was wrongly convicted, twice, of a triple murder and imprisoned for nearly two decades. During the mid-1970s, his case became a cause célèbre for a number of civil rights leaders, politicians, and entertainers. The most famous of these being Muhammad Ali and then Bob Dylan, who wrote the song ‘Hurricane’ in honour of Carter in 1975. He was ultimately exonerated in 1985, after a United States district court judge declared the convictions to be based on racial prejudice.

Carter grew up in Paterson, New Jersey and certainly had a troubled life. He was arrested and sent to the Jamesburg State Home for Boys at age 12 after he attacked a man with a Boy Scout knife. He claimed the man was a paedophile who had been attempting to molest one of his friends.

Carter escaped before his six-year term was up and in 1954 joined the Army, where he served in a segregated corps which is where he developed a love for boxing and took up the sport with some considerable success. In his first ever boxing match he knocked out the All Army heavyweight champion Nelson Glenn. Then still within the US Army but serving in Britain he won two [Army based] European light-welterweight championships and in 1956 returned to Paterson with the intention of becoming a professional boxer (Biography.com, 2010). Hirsch (2000: 73) describes Carter as a powerful boxer with speed and skill, “Carter bobbed, feinted, ducked, then lashed out
with his first punch of the fight – a whizzing left hook that caught Glenn flush on his chin, spilling him to the canvas”. Soon after his return to Paterson, the police arrested Carter and forced him to serve the remaining 10 months of his sentence in a state reformatory. Carter was again arrested in 1957, this time for purse snatching; he spent four years in Trenton State, a maximum-security prison, for that crime.

After his release, he channelled his considerable anger towards his situation and the plight of Paterson’s African-American community, into his boxing—he turned pro in 1961 and began a startling four-fight winning streak, including two knockouts. For his lightning-fast fists, Carter soon earned the nickname "Hurricane" and became one of the top contenders for the world middleweight crown. In December 1963, in a non-title bout, he beat then-welterweight world champion Emile Griffith in a first round KO. Although he lost his one shot at the title, in a 15-round split decision to reigning champion Joey Giardello in December 1964, he was widely regarded as a good bet to win his next title bout.

As one of the most famous citizens of Paterson, Carter made no friends with the police, especially during the summer of 1964, when he was quoted in The Saturday Evening Post as expressing anger towards the preoccupations of the police towards the black neighbourhoods. His flamboyant lifestyle (Carter frequented the city’s nightclubs and bars) and juvenile record rankled with the police, as did the vehement statements he had allegedly made advocating violence in the pursuit of racial justice.

Carter was training for his next shot at the world middleweight title (against champion Dick Tiger) in October 1966 when he was arrested on June 17th for the triple murder of three patrons at the Lafayette Bar & Grill in Paterson. Carter and John Artis had been arrested on the night of the crime because they fitted an eyewitness description of the killers ("two Negroes in a white car"), but they had been cleared by a grand jury when the one surviving victim failed to identify them as the gunmen. Now, the state produced two more eyewitnesses, Alfred Bello and Arthur D. Bradley, who had made positive identifications. During the trial that followed, the prosecution produced little to no evidence linking Carter and Artis to the crime, a shaky motive (racially-motivated retaliation for the murder of a black tavern owner by a white man in Paterson hours before), and the only two eyewitnesses were petty criminals involved in a burglary (who were later revealed to have received money and reduced sentences in exchange
for their testimony). Nevertheless, on June 29, 1967, Carter and Artis were convicted of triple murder and sentenced to three life prison terms.

Carter and his supporters continued to fight the conviction, accusing the Paterson police of a racist conspiracy against Carter. The most famous of these supporters was Lesra Martin, a teenager from a Brooklyn ghetto and a group of Canadians who were helping Lesra with his studies. The subsequent trials were rife with inaccuracies as Leslie Maitland (1976) wrote in the New York Times,

Alfred P. Bello who identified Rubin (Hurricane) Carter and John Artis as the gunmen in a triple murder here during the two men's first trial nine years ago, then recanted and then renounced his recantation depicted himself on the stand today as a man who had lied consistently to almost everyone involved in this long and complicated legal battle.

Lewis Steel was one of the lawyers representing Carter who went to print years later about the racism case – prompted by a feature film about Carter's life, The Hurricane in 1997. He points out that,

During years of appeals through the New Jersey state court system in the late 1970s and 1980s, not one of the more than 20 state court judges who reviewed the case was willing to confront the racism behind the unproven accusation that Carter and Artis murdered three randomly chosen whites to avenge an earlier killing of a black man by a white man. Nor were the state court judges willing to expose the police for their racist acts (Steel, 2000: 4).

Lewis M. Steel was a Civil Rights attorney practicing in New York City. He was part of the Carter-Artis defence team from 1975 to 1988. Steel was the lead attorney for John Artis.

Finally, in 1985, Carter was freed when an appellate judge ruled that he had not received a fair trial. This time, prosecutors chose not to try Carter a third time and he has been free ever since. There have been many objections to the freeing of Carter. John Artis had already been on parole, but even to this day Carter has not been found innocent and no new suspects have been named. There are many conspiracy websites on the internet that still try and prove Carter's guilt, such as; Top ten myths about Rubin Carter and the Lafayette Grill murders.

In 1997, a movie about Carter's life, The Hurricane, was made starring Denzel Washington as Carter. The movie has become almost as controversial as the man himself, beginning with its opening scene where
Carter's loss to Giardello is portrayed as a racist robbery, some people have criticized it for taking liberties with the true facts of Ruben Carter's life.

References


Feature Film:
TOMMY PICKED HIMSELF UP OFF THE FLOOR and wiped the trail of blood away from his face. This was the second time this week that he had been met after school by the group of older boys. The first time they had just called him names but this time the biggest of the group had punched him and kicked him while the others cheered him on. Tommy had no idea why they were doing this but thought it must be because he was new at school, some sort of initiation ritual. As he walked down the street towards his new home he wished he was still in New York City and not stuck here in the backwaters of Paterson, New Jersey.

Tommy had been forced to come and live with his Grandfather after his parents were killed in a car crash. He had only been here a week when he was forced to enrol in John F. Kennedy High School. Tommy had lots of friends back in New York but he felt like an outsider - he was an outsider to Paterson and his new school. When Tommy reached the front porch of his Grandfather’s house, which would not feel like his home for some time, he checked his reflection in the window to make sure there was no sign of blood and the fight and he walked inside.

His Grandfather, as usual, was asleep in front of the TV with yet another baseball game winding to a close. Tommy had only met his Grandfather for the first time the previous week at his parent’s funeral and had taken an instant dislike to the old man. Tommy was used to a much more liberal life with his Mom and Dad but as soon as he got ‘home’ he was made to sweep up leaves, clean the garage and several other jobs he never had to do in New York.

“Hey I was watching that” bellowed the old man as Tommy turned over the TV station.
“Sorry Grandpa, I thought you were asleep” Tommy replied.

“Well I wasn’t, and anyway don’t you have chores to do?”

Tommy got up and walked through to the back yard where a fresh pile of leaves had fallen. As he stood there rake in hand he began to cry, he had done a lot of that in the past ten days but he remembered the words his Grandfather had said on the day of the funeral, “It’s no use crying over it”.

Then there was a shout from inside the house, ‘those leaves aren’t going to sweep themselves boy, get on with it and then fix us some tea, I’m starvin’”. You never know, Tommy dreamt, maybe they will?

The next day, when the bell rang to signal the end of the school day Tommy’s stomach was in knots. Please don’t let them be there again he thought. But sure enough the same four boys were stood just outside the school gates waiting. Tommy managed to block the first blow but the second caught him square in the gut knocking the wind out of him and dropping him to his knees. Just as Tommy caught his breath the boot of the biggest boy smashed into his face. For the second time in two days Tommy felt the sensation of blood on his face. This however was much different, where the previous day he felt a sting and trickle like a rain drop on his cheek this was like a stream. “Hey, you’ve got blood on my boot you little prick” shouted the boy “Wipe it off”. Tommy went to clean the boot but as he did the boy stamped on his hand.

Tommy cried out in pain and then shrieked “Why are you doing this to me?”

“Go ask your Grandfather” the boy replied as he walked off down the street laughing “and tell him De Simone says hi”

Tommy was still crying when he reached the house, there was no point in trying to cover up the fight, the blood was still coming out of his nose and his lip was swollen and bruised. As he walked through the door his Grandfather shot out of his chair and raced across the room. He moved surprisingly well for a man of his age.

“What the hell happened to you?” he shouted at Tommy “Are you alright, who did this to you?” Tommy had never seen the look of anger that he now saw in his Grandfather’s eyes, he had changed from the old guy sitting by the fire to an angry and determined man. It seemed to have taken years off him and Tommy struggled to recognise him. Tommy told his Grandfather
what had happened during his first week at school. How the same boys had been waiting for him the past three days.

“Why didn’t you tell me? We could have done something about this”, questioned his Grandfather.

“What could ‘we’ have done?” Tommy sobbed “This never happened in New York, people never hit me and laughed about it”.

“Why did they do this? What did you do to them? Who were they?” asked the old man, now with a fire burning behind his eyes.

“I don’t know” replied Tommy “I don’t know their names, they are just older boys from the school”. But then he remembered what the biggest of them had said. “Grandpa” he said sheepishly, “who’s De Simone?”

“De Simone” roared his Grandfather “how do you know that name?”

Tommy was scared by just how angry his Grandfather was now. He stood there fists clenched and physically shaking with an anger that Tommy had never seen in his life.

“One of the boys said it”, he replied “he said tell your Grandfather De Simone says hi” whatever that is supposed to mean?

A second later his Grandfather grabbed Tommy by the wrist and dragged him to his feet, then led Tommy out of the house and towards the garage.

“Get in” his Grandfather said.

“Why?” replied Tommy

“Because” said his Grandfather “We’re going to sort this once and for all”

The car screamed down the road and through the centre of Paterson. Tommy had never been driven at such speed and winced every time his Grandfather threw the car into a corner or overtook another vehicle. Then suddenly the car screeched to a halt and his Grandfather jumped out and ran up to a house. He then banged furiously on the door.

“De Simone, get out here you piece of crap” the old man yelled, “Get your ass out here right now, how dare you bring my Grandson into this?”
All of a sudden the door opened and a man who looked in his early forties appeared. Tommy looked on in amazement. This was all so new to him, the fight, the car ride and now his Grandfather racing up to a huge house to be met by some guy in smart suit. As soon as the door was fully open his Grandfather punched the man. Fast and hard. This, however, was not the punch of an old man but that of someone skilled and used to fighting. His Grandfather moved so quick that the man never saw the blow coming and was lifted clean off his feet and sent crashing to the ground.

“You stay away from my family and tell that no good son of yours to keep his hands to himself or I will be back round again,” his Grandfather roared at the fallen man, who was clutching his face and had a look of both shock and fear on his face.

His Grandfather walked back to the car got in and set off back down the street. Tommy did not know what to say, he could not believe what he had just seen. When they finally got home, a trip that took twice as long as the journey there, Tommy ran straight from the car and up into his room. He still could not believe what he had happened. As soon as he mentioned the name De Simone his Grandfather had changed into the Incredible Hulk, full of rage. Tommy was startled by a knock at the door.

“Can I come in” his Grandfather said.

“Yes” Tommy replied

When the door opened his Grandfather was carrying a tray with a mug of hot chocolate, a bag of ice and a big book placed precariously on it.

“That’s for you, and that’s for your face” his Grandfather said placing the drink on the bedside table and the ice bag in Tommy’s hand. “I suppose you want to know what that was all about?”

Tommy looked at his Grandfather and did not know what to say. His head was still spinning from the day’s events, not only his fight, if you could call it that, but the image of his Grandfather punching a man to the ground with astonishing efficiency and without hesitation.

“Well, here goes then” his Grandfather started “you know me as Grandpa but to the rest of the world, or at least people from these parts, I am Rubin ‘Hurricane’ Carter”. He opened the book and put it on Tommy’s lap. Tommy stared down at the pages of photographs that showed action shots
from boxing matches and press photographs of a menacing looking man with a shaved head and a goatee beard holding championship belts.

“Is this you?” asked Tommy.

“Yes” replied his Grandfather “I was the Middleweight champion, the best boxer in the world. Unfortunately that brought a lot of attention on me and some bad things happened”. He flipped the book through a few pages onto a startlingly different photograph, one of a man sat in a courtroom with his head in his hands. “This is also me, the man you saw earlier was Paul De Simone, and his father tried to frame me for murder. And from the sound of it you’ve had a run in with his no good son. I’m sorry you were dragged into this, it had nothing to do with you and that’s why your Mother moved you all away to New York, so you could start a life far away from all these problems”.

Rubin got up and started to walk towards the door, “I miss my Mom” Tommy said.

“So do I” Rubin replied. He walked over and kissed Tommy on the forehead, “so do I”.

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