

Imaginary Advice, Episode 62

CLASSIC BOXING NARRATIVE

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They finally set the day: I would fight Kris Martel on June 2nd.

[mysterious piano music begins]

Martel was immediately posting about the fight online, talking about how he was going to wipe the floor with me, which always struck me as a weird idiom. If Martel was trying to come across as high-status, I don't know why he'd want people to imagine him mopping.

I didn't respond to Martel's goading. I'd already mapped out my own campaign of psychological warfare, and it certainly didn't involve trading schoolyard insults on boxing message boards.

No. I'd come up with a strategy of psychological domination unlike anything anyone had ever seen in boxing before.

Worse than when Barry Livingstone paid hackers to dox Michael Bennington. More elaborate than Garth Nigh-war buying every seat in Jax Stadium so that his fight against Bo Tangorian was in complete silence. More fiendish *even* than Amar Janya getting plastic surgery to look like Colin Rawsfelt's dad.

No, my method of psychological domination would be more horrific than all of those put together. More impressive, it would be completely invisible. Apart from Martel himself no one else would even know the psychological attack had happened. It was genius.

I was going to go back in time, probably thirteen, fourteen years...

And I was going to scare the shit out of Martel when he was still a kid.

Then, when we finally faced off on June 2nd for the Luggies IBT Supermiddleweight Title all I'd have to do is remind Martel of that childhood trauma and watch his tiny mind unravel right there in the ring.

[piano music continues]

He would look at my face, then remember the face of that horrible man who scared the life out of him back when he was 8 years old...and then he would look at my face again...the pieces slowly falling into place...

To discover, seconds before the bell that your opponent had time travel capability? [scoff-chuckles] Martel would shit his nuts.

As far as Martel knew, I could have been messing with him his entire life. I could have manipulated every moment of his existence to get him into the ring with me.

In fact, as far as Martel knew, I could be groundhogging the whole fight. I could be on my fiftieth, my hundredth time through the same bout, perfecting every millisecond of my game dominating every possible outcome.

Not that I would actually be bothered to do that...I mean, the fight itself, I was only gonna fight that one time and I was gonna fight it fair, too. I wouldn't use time travel to cheat. Cos that's the thing: you don't need to.

[sounds of a crowd]

Boxing is 99% getting into your opponent's head. Once your opponent knows you own a time machine, uh, yeah, that's pretty much all the leverage you need.

[sci-fi synth]

[IMAGINARY ADVICE]

[film noir jazz]

I bought the machine after making out in my last bout with Bill "Factory" LaMoy. That eighth-round knock-out netted me a tidy sum. That plus my sponsorship deal, plus my uncle's inheritance...

Obviously, it was black market. Me and my agent had to go to this hotel down in Cornwall to collect it. It looked like a silver sleeping bag with a vacuum attached to it.

The kid who sold it to us was pretty chill about the do's and don'ts.

"Do whatever you want with it" said the kid. "Have a laugh, go crazy..."

“What about...changing things?” said my agent.

[sighs] “Yeah...” said the kid. “None of that really matters. If you make it so, you know, Russia were the first guys on the moon, or you make it so Bob Dylan was never born...”

For everyone else, that new reality is just gonna feel like “that’s the way it’s always been.” We’re not gonna miss Bob Dylan. We never heard of Bob Dylan! Cos he never existed. *You* are gonna be the only one who remembers how things were before.

So, what does it matter?”

My agent finished counting out the money.

“Not a Dylan fan, huh?”

“Meh,” said the kid. “I just won’t miss what never existed.”

“OK,” I said “But, what if I definitely make a mistake. Like, if I un-invented ice-cream or hit Walt Disney with my car?”

The kid was so calm it was beautiful. He’d have made a good boxer. He had that mind-over-matter type thing.

“Well,” he said, “you get back from your journey and you don’t like the new future you’ve made...you can just go straight back and undo it, right? Benefits of having a time machine. Reality is plastic. Nothing is forever anymore.”

“Well,” I said. “When you put it like that...I guess time travel isn’t such a big deal after all.”

The kid stopped packing the machine into its flight-case.

“The only thing you gotta watch out for” he said, “is that you don’t mess with the timeline *so much* that time travel itself no longer gets invented. Cos then, all time travel machines vanish, right? So that’s the one change that can’t be undone. But don’t worry—we’ve got a hack for that.”

The kid asked me to get out my phone and download an audiobook: The autobiographical best-seller “What is Time?” by Dr. Phil Reynolds.

The cover image was a young man who looked like he'd been posing giving a thumbs-up for an awkward length of time. Under the image it said, "The Inventor of Time Travel Tells All."

"Actually, I'd been meaning to read this," I said.

"Look at the length of the audiobook," said the kid "Six hours. Thirty-two minutes. Ten seconds. 63210.

Whenever you make a trip just keep one eye on the length of that book, yeah? If you notice that book getting longer or shorter, then you know that whatever you're doing in the past somehow in some way...is messing with the basics of time travel, right?

So, if you see that happening, stop whatever you're doing and come back. Maybe drop me a courtesy call to let me know, OK?"

This was the only moment I saw any vulnerability in the kid.

"I'm in that book too," he said. [clears throat] "Chapter 12."

After the kid left, my agent pocketed the biscuits from the nightstand.

"Promise me," he said, "you won't erase Bob Dylan."

"Who's Bob Dylan?" I said.

"Very funny," he said.

[mysterious synth looping]

Two weeks passed. Not that measuring things in time was as easy for me as it used to be for me.

I tested the machine a couple of times just to get a feel for it. [sound of space-time ripping] I did a quick zap back to the previous evening and followed myself to a bar. [quiet conversation sounds] I kept my distance and made sure not to interact. Maybe people thought I was identical twins or something. I left the bar early and zapped myself back to tomorrow, [sound of space-time ripping] so I'd have my own bed to sleep in.

I also wanted to go back to 2016 to eat a steak sandwich at Roland's Cafe at Kings Cross. [sound of space-time ripping] But when I got there I didn't have the right currency and my bank card didn't work. So instead I just wandered

around the streets and had a good laugh at the clothes. [honking, gentle street sounds]

The machine packs away pretty small so I could carry it with me in a bag. I thought about doing a pass of my brother's house, but I didn't in the end. It was too far on foot anyway.

Without access to money, the past felt...hostile. I was back there, but at the same time, I wasn't. I was still locked out, somehow.

I started to get this feeling, like an itch in my brain: this voice saying, [ominous synth growl; sound of voice is corrupted:] You're Not Supposed To Be Here. You're Not Supposed To Be Here.

[clears throat]

Being a boxer though, you need to learn how to put your walls up. It's the only way you can get into the ring in the first place. You've got to learn how to turn down the voices.

Boxers confront reality every time we fight. We force our reality onto our opponents. We travel in a bubble of our own meaning. Really, if anyone has the constitution for time travel, it's boxers.

I recited the names and results of my last twelve fights until the outside world felt no longer important to me.

[buzzing subsides; quiet music begins]

Then I went back to Roland's Café, ate a steak sandwich, and walked out without paying.

By the time anyone had even noticed a customer had run on the bill [sound of space-time ripping] I was back in the year 2028.

[curious music]

I paid a P.I. to do some research on Martel. She came back with a stack of school documents, teacher evaluations, report cards.

Based on the information in the file I decided that I would travel back to May 23rd, 2014 and confront Martel just after his 8th birthday.

Martel grew up in Liverpool. It made sense to do the bulk of the travel before the time-jump. I drove to the city, rented a hotel room, making sure the hotel

still existed back in 2014. Then laid the sleeping bag out on the floor and set the date. [time machine beeps as he enters the date]

I got into the bag, pulled it over my head [sound of space-time ripping]—

[music stops suddenly]

The room was decorated differently back in 2014, though the basic fixtures and fittings were the same. The TV set was about half the size. [TV chattering in background]

Thankfully there was no one using the room. I was half-expecting to dash out the door.

Instead I stayed and watched some 2014 British TV...some kind of game show about the price of antiques.

“Uhh, I think that’s gonna make between ten and twenty pounds, really...”

[anticipatory music begins]

I took the biscuits off the nightstand, packed up the machine into my bag, and slipped out of the hotel. There was about a 40-minute walk from the hotel to Martel’s school. A quick hike from the edge of town into the suburbs.

As I walked, I pulled out my phone and checked the audiobook: Six hours, thirty-two minutes, ten seconds. Just as it should be.

I put in my headphones.

[beep] “With the amount of conflicting beliefs and opinions in this country at the moment, I’m surprised people continue to agree on what time it is. Even *billionaires* set their watches to the same time as me. I’m surprised gangsters and murderers subscribe to the same time and number package that I do. Makes them seem a bit wet and conscientious. Even if you’re robbing a bank you’ve got to say what time you’re gonna meet—comfortable with committing crime but not individual or powerful enough in spirit to commit to their own autonomy and set their watches to a different time. They’ll take the law into their own hands, but the wrist of a criminal is firmly gripped by the hands of time, just like everyone else’s.

[music builds]

People say there's just not enough hours in the day—why don't we change it? Put some more in, if we need it so badly. What are we, scared?"

[music falls back again]

It helped to listen to Dr. Reynolds. It was like having my coach's voice in my ear. Someone who could help keep me focused, who could remind me of my purpose.

It didn't matter if it was 2028 or 2014. The game was the same. The only difference was today, I was scaring an 8-year-old kid, not beating the tar out of his 22-year-old counterpart. But in all other respects, the game was the same.

[playground sounds]

By the time I reached Martel's school, it was just past lunch. I did a quick case of the playground but there was no sign of my opponent.

I backed off to a nearby park and waited to make my move.

[eerie music begins]

In about six hours' time, Martel would be performing onstage in his school play. Not only did I know exactly where he was going to be, but I had opportunity to humiliate him in front of an entire room full of people.

When I triggered the same memory in Martel 14 years later in the Luggies IBT Supermiddleweight Title-match Martel would immediately be taken back to the horrified faces of his parents and a room full of scornful laughter.

All I had to do was sit in the audience at the play and wait until 8-year-old Kris Martel appeared and delivered his first line of dialogue. Then I would stand up, push my way onto the stage yelling "Kris Martel, please accept this most humble gift." [imagined crowd chattering in confusion]

And then I would look Martel right in the eyes, crouch down, unfasten my trousers and empty my bowels onto the stage before him. [shocked crowd exclaiming]

I've had a lot of smart ideas over the course of my life. You don't get to be as rich as me without knowing the difference between a good idea and a bad one. You also don't get to be as rich as me by living life in half-measures. When the chips are down, you have to be prepared to go all the way.

[mysterious piano music returns]

Going back in time to defecate on the stage of a school play in order to psychologically scar a child who would eventually become my boxing opponent? The psychic damage of my attack would ripple through his entire life!

Once we faced off in the ring as men, all I would have to do is lean in and say [whispering:] “Kris Martel, please accept this most humble gift.”

And boom. Martel would be shook in a way that no boxer had even been shook before!

He may be younger than me. He may have a stronger left hook. But there was no way he was keeping up his 100% knockout record once he knew what I was capable of.

I felt a knot growing in my stomach.

I decided to take a light run around the edge of the park and recited my work-out mantra. “Invincible,” I rasped. “Invincible.” “Invincible.” [panting] Then I punched a tree a couple of times. [grunting]

I *never* got nervous before a fight. Not ever. I couldn’t understand why this was any different. Shitting on a stage of a kid’s play was a cake-walk compared to stepping into the ring with Iron Doug Sherman. Or going twelve rounds with Carl Iceberg Wilson.

“Come on!” I encouraged myself.

So why was my hand shaking? [buzzing begins]

I punched the tree a couple of times more.

“Believe in yourself!”

It wasn’t enough. I needed more. I needed to show 2014 [voice distorts] who the fuck I was.

[phone keys dialling] Next thing I knew, I was in a phone box calling 999.

[in the background:] “...service...can you tell me what happened?”

“Uh, please, I need help.”

I called an ambulance...and sent it to a random address in the city.

[Rocky theme song erupts]

Boom! Fuck you, 2014. I just changed history! Stuck my fist in the timeline and smashed it like a ledge.

That ambulance was meant to be somewhere else right now. Maybe that means someone dies, maybe that means someone lives. Maybe there was a relative that was meant to move house, maybe that relative no longer moves house. Maybe there was a sibling who was meant to fall in love, maybe they no longer fall in love. Maybe there was a child that was meant to be born... no longer gets born!

Boom. And I didn't even break a sweat.

[Rocky theme song stops abruptly]

[suddenly subdued:] Talk about a heavy hitter.

[calm music, street sounds]

By the time I walked back to the school it was dark on every street. The school looked so different in the darkness. Lanterns led the way across the playground, as perfumed parents walked arm in arm, into the warm glow of the lobby.

“Welcome,” said a young woman with a blonde bob.

“Thank you,” I said. “What a lovely school my child goes to.”

The school hall had a capacity of around 60 seated. I hadn't boxed for a crowd this small since I was a teenager.

I took a seat in the front row centre. My feet were practically on stage already.

I could feel the timeline changing around me, the world adapting to my touch. I was a saboteur loose in the factory—and the fun had barely begun.

The school hall clearly doubled as the gymnasium. They probably had matts and frames and stuff locked in a storage cupboard. I wonder if they taught

the young ones to box. Maybe Martel was already throwing punches, even at 8. Maybe he'd try to crack me when I got onstage.

"I'd like to see him try", I said out loud to myself.

"Sorry?" said the parent next to me.

But the house lights were already fading. A smoke machine began to whirl in the wings.

[quiet steps] Two eight-year-olds in top hats stepped onto the stage into a low bank of fog.

[echoing in auditorium:] "Well my brother, it seems like another cold night in London," said one child.

"It is that," said the other. "Come Sylvester," he continued, "we should be celebrating your new fortune. After all, one doesn't become engaged to the Countess of Chester every day!"

[parent coughing]

"I am indeed blessed," said Sylvester, "And I shall not forget you, Gerald. I shall ensure that you and Gwendoline are cared for. I know her health has waned since you lost your job at the patent office."

"No more talk of strife," said Gerald.

From the front row I could see that his moustache was drawn on with an eyebrow pencil.

"Let us go to my gentlemen's club," said Gerald, "and raise a glass of sherry to Queen Victoria. I feel the year 1882 is going to be simply marvellous."

[heavy switch flipped] The stage went dark.

[sudden thundering evil music]

Terrifying music burst forth from the PA as the play changed scenes. We were now looking into the elegant smoking room of a Victorian gentlemen's club, slightly older kids in black leotards clicked the walls into position, then scampered from the stage, hissing like demons. (It was a nice touch.)

In the gentlemen's club we met several more characters. Bertie, a gambling addict with a nervous twitch, Dr. Klaus, a professor of Egyptology and the soft-spoken octogenarian Sir Benedict—all three played by 8-year-old girls.

There was no sign yet of Martel. I dug my keys into my leg to keep me focused. As soon as that nasty bastard appeared, I would be ready for him.

[evil, dramatic music continues]

The plot advanced at a clip.

Sylvester, the soon-to-be new Earl of Chester, drunkenly agreed to a trip to the new circus show at the West Kensington Olympia.

Cue another terrifying set-change. [hellish music; hissing] As well as the appearance onstage of several pieces of circus apparatus, including a magician's vanishing box.

The friends from the gentlemen's club take their seats for the circus show. Dr Klaus noted the unusual pictograms that adorn the circus, reminiscent of Apep, the snake of chaos.

When a volunteer was needed from the audience for a magic trick, [heavy light flicking on] the spotlight lands on Sylvester's seat.

Sylvester climbed into the vanishing box, but rather than being disappeared by the magician, the box opens to reveal [music thunders to a crescendo] Sylvester's corpse, covered in gooey almost-luminescent blood.

I could feel every parent in the school hall clutching the arm of their loved one.

At that moment, a young boy slowly entered from the back of the stage, [footsteps] displaying the most elaborately drawn-on moustache the play had seen yet.

Instantly I knew it was Martel.

My opponent was making his ring-walk.

[voice echoing in school hall:] "My name is...Detective Thelonius Dubois...of Scotland Yard," said Martel, his voice like a ploughed field after a storm.

Martel raised his cane to the body lying before him.

“A man has been murdered. A trick...has turned foul. Clearly, within this circus, tonight there is more than one magician.”

Martel looked out across the audience.

[calmly:] “No-one leaves...until the murderer...is in the hands of the police.”

[in a whisper:] I knew that this was my moment. [eerie buzzing] It was time... for a performance of absolute power. [ominous chord building]

If I was going to take control, if I was going to destroy Martel *it had to happen now...*

now...

now!

[with calm swagger:] “From the stands,” said Martel, “I have been watching. And I have been listening. You might not have noticed old Thelonious Dubois...but he has noticed you. He has seen the games you have played.”

[ominous chord]

Somehow, I felt as if Martel was...expecting me. As if he was willing me to do it. After all, if I stood now wouldn't I be confessing to the murder?

Uhh, except there was no murder—what am I saying? You can't murder someone that doesn't exist.

[heart starts beating over ominous chord]

Martel was gathering the suspects centre stage.

“Many had motive,” said Martel, “but only one person here was ruthless enough to put such a diabolical plan into action.”

[chord stops; heart keeps beating in the silence]

I had stood up. My shadow stretched across the stage, a column of darkness.

Next thing I knew, I was staggering through the corridors of the school.

Then I was in the playground. Then I was sitting on the low wall of a rose-lined street, my head in my hands.

[angelic choir singing music of despair]

Before long, I heard the sounds of footsteps: parents walking home, their child, still in costume, by their side, all of them silhouetted in the amber streetlight. [footsteps, happy chattering voices]

I looked to see if Kris Martel was among them, but there were far too many, their faces in almost shadow.

It was then that I realised that I'd lost my bag with the time machine in it.

[choir, ominous chord play]

I thought perhaps I'd left it beneath my seat in the play. I walked back to the school, but the gates were already locked. I checked the length of the audiobook. It was longer than before: seven hours, twenty-nine minutes, forty-two seconds. 72942.

I decided to check the park I'd been waiting in earlier. There was nothing on the bench where I'd been sitting, nor by the tree I'd been punching. I looked across the road to the phone-box I'd used earlier. [evil buzzing building and building]

I decided to take a stroll and see where it took me. The air was warm, children's voices carried on the breeze. [choir and buzzing continue]

If I had irreparably changed the future no one would know but me anyway. No one could grieve that which had never happened.

The audiobook was now one hundred and sixty-seven hours long. 1675276. I checked the recording. [beep]

“We're the only ones who are worried about what time it is. The wind doesn't know what day it is. It probably thinks it's its birthday today. Take its cake outside and watch it blow out the candles.”

[recording, garbled] I scrubbed forward a few chapters. [beep]

“Nothing ripens a banana as quickly as a rucksack.”

[garbled fast-forwarding] Dr. Reynolds was still theorizing on time, but he seemed slightly different now.

[beep] “I wish my days weren’t numbered, but then I couldn’t know when my mum’s birthday is. I’d have to guess. ‘Is it your birthday today, mum?’ ‘I don’t know.’ ‘Well, shall we celebrate the fact that you’re alive today?’ ‘...Yeah, alright.’” [fast-forwarding]

[beep] “If it was just me living here on Earth—I’m glad it isn’t, but if it was—I don’t know if I would bother with time. I wouldn’t need to know. Time is for when there is more than one person. Like now. We all need to know when this is gonna f—”

I looked down at my phone. The audiobook had disappeared completely.

The moon above me was full and yellow, like a doubloon. There was a beautiful smell in the air, like honeysuckle. I realised I’d walked into a graveyard.

“Funny,” I thought to myself. “I never did find out who the murderer was.”

[synth music]

[Imaginary Advice]

So, that is the end of another episode of Imaginary Advice.

I’d just like to say a *huge* thank you to everyone who has supported the show through Patreon. The only reason this show can be made is because of your support. So, thank you, thank you.

If you don’t currently support the show but fancy kicking in a small monthly donation to help me keep the lights on, you can get the full information at patreon.com/rossgsutherland.

The voice of Dr. Phil Reynolds was the poet Rob Auton. In fact, all of his sections were taken from Rob’s latest one-man show *The Time Show*, which will be touring the UK shortly. You can go to robauton.co.uk for the latest on Rob’s live work. He’s a phenomenal writer, poet, comedian, artist. I’m really pleased that I got to work with him on this episode.

The way it came about was I recorded Rob reading those extracts in the corner of a pub during the Edinburgh Fringe this past August. At the time I didn’t know exactly what I was going to do with it, I didn’t know how it was going to get incorporated into an episode, and sadly, cos it’s the Fringe and

there's a lot of noise around, um, my recording just wasn't particularly good. So, I came up with the audiobook idea as a way to include the recording whilst still having a license to filter the fuck out of it. And I thought I was being quite original until I sat down and started watching season 3 of the TV show Legion a couple of days ago, which literally contains a time-traveller who listens to an audiobook about time travel. So...super original concept from me there. However, Legion doesn't contain a boxer going back in time to shit on the stage of a school play, though, so...still feel like I'm putting my stamp on it. Anyway, thanks again to the incomparable Rob Auton.

My name is Ross Sutherland. I'll be back soon with more Imaginary Advice. Thanks for listening.