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CARLO ROTELLA

The Two Jameses

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I got to know Boxing James, who used to manage fighters and promote fights, because he called me at home one day out of the blue to discuss a book I'd written about boxing. Our conversation led to a several-times-daily email correspondence, which eventually expanded to include a number of other fight people and boxing aficionados. When he's in town, we have dinner. Ascetic, musical, bookish, committed to the avant-garde credo that a true artist in any form revolutionizes the very language he employs to say whatever he has to say, Boxing James makes for an unlikely recovering gangster. But anybody who does business in the fight world has to be a gangster at least some of the time. He has also worked in music, loan sharking, and "the skin business," as he calls pornography and prostitution. He says he's done with all that now. As far as I can tell, he has become

a post-lowlife bodhisattva. Remarried to his first wife and profoundly in debt, he eats one meal a day, spends rigorous hours at the piano (he played jazz before he became a manager of heavy metal bands), and has given up exploiting other people's weaknesses for profit.

James tells a story about a heavyweight prospect, a young Dominican who seemed to have it all: he was physically gifted, well schooled as a boxer, good-looking, personable, and fluent in English. James, who managed him, thought he might just have the next big thing on his hands—the first Hispanic heavyweight champion of the world. After the prospect won his professional debut, James took a tape of the fight to Al Braverman, who was Don King's director of boxing, a kingpin who could make things happen for a rising star. The prospect had won easily, but they had watched no more than a minute or so of the tape before Braverman remarked, "Got a little muttski in him, doesn't he?"

It came as news to James that his golden prospect was a quitter, a coward—by the unforgiving standards of boxing, that is, since by any normal standard he was uncommonly brave. We've all got at least a little muttski in us, but fighters can't afford to be like everybody else. Braverman told James, "Don't worry, we'll build a wall around the kid," meaning that they would handpick his opponents and try to put off the day when they had to put him in against a fighter shrewd enough to find his soft spot.

Six years and seventeen fights after Braverman pronounced on him, that day came. James's fighter was matched against another contender in a bout that would determine which of them continued on to a shot at a heavyweight title. The other

contender's sharp-eyed trainer saw what Braverman had seen. Before the opening bell, the trainer looked James's fighter in the eye, pointed to his own chest while shaking his head, and said, "No heart. You got no heart." Everybody in the ring knew he was right. James's fighter, the more talented of the two, was finished before the bell rang to open the first round.

Spend enough time around fight people and you acquire their habit of sensing weakness in others. It radiates from some people like a skunk's musk, from others like the faintest indefinable odor. James has cultivated his faculty for sensing it for so many years that now he can't turn the faculty off. James, who left home early and never did get much of any other sort of education, at least in the formal sense, regrets that he can't stop perceiving desperation in others, especially the desperation brought on by money trouble.

He works on cultivating a more humane perspective, though. There's a street in the neighborhood where his wife works that's lined with iffy businesses and menacing hangers-out. Even once he was out of the lowlife, James would drive down that street and see only business opportunities. He says it took years for him to see *people* on that street—poor people, people in trouble. He can still see their desperation, but now that he sees the people, too, he's less tempted to strike instinctively into the openings it creates.

Corresponding with Boxing James and our circle of mutual boxing acquaintances can sometimes get me in trouble. A

while ago, a fellow academic was giving me a hard time, threatening me with an ugly public squabble. I sent him an email inviting him to either do as he threatened or give it up; you didn't even have to be a fight person to sense the weakness coming off of him in waves, like an aura. Re-reading my email to him, I can see now that James and company were in my head. "We can do this or not do this" is the tip-off line. The guy's return message ran to well over a thousand words, most of them devoted to a detailed analysis of my ethical and intellectual distress, but he might have saved himself the effort and just written, "We're not going to do this," because we didn't.

The fact of his weakness was not, all by itself, reason to exploit it. But there it was, like a slow opponent's left glove held several inches too low, so I counterpunched into the hole. Next time I'll think first; after all, I still have to work with him. Boxing James, who knows about these things, gave me a useful piece of advice about how to fix the situation so it would be less of a bother. He counseled me to throw the guy a bone by contriving to reveal a minor soft spot of my own to him—an invented one, of course, since you don't want to be giving anybody an edge over you if you don't have to—which would ease the tension by appearing to even the ledger of vulnerability between us.

James can be dispassionately clear-minded about transactions like this because he treats human imperfection as a purely tactical matter. True fight people do not regard the fact of weakness, whether it proceeds from a glass chin or insufficiently mastered fear or some other source, as a good or a bad thing. It's simply part of human architecture, there to be perceived and then exploited. For fight people,

human weakness is like market weakness: not a moral category, but merely an occasion for technique.

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I call Boxing James by that name to distinguish him from Business James, the other scholar of weakness in my life. (By the way, although they do have the same first name, it's not James.) If Boxing James is an artist who used to be a gangster, Business James is a political philosopher who exploits market weakness for a living.
I couldn't tell you exactly what he does, but it involves finding underpriced companies and using money collected from a crew of impossibly rich investors (I picture them as near-miss finalists for the role of a James Bond villain) to make offers the companies' owners can't refuse, then managing those companies and buying up other companies to combine with them until they're profitable, then selling them and renting a fleet of dump trucks to deliver the money to the bank.

Business James, an old friend I first got to know in college, is a Howard Dean man and a big donor to the Democrats who spends much of his time making beautiful financial music with Texas Republicans in the oil business. He's a Darwinian pessimist committed to the premises of the welfare state, a moneyman who reads, a reading man who happens to make money. He makes a running joke of tracking the leading indicators of imminent apocalpyse, everything from rising sea levels to the behavior of some older pro-Bush business associates whose secret bearishness on America has reached the point where they're quietly moving significant elements of their fortunes offshore. He jokes about his own

doomsaying, but he's also not kidding. He owns high ground up north, far enough from Boston (where we both live) to afford his family pleasant weekends away from the city, but not so far away that he can't get them there quickly in an emergency.

Business James spends his days brooding on the imminent unraveling of life as we know it while he does the business equivalent of shoving serried towers of chips into the pot and surveying the blanched faces around the poker table. So he tends to think in terms of weakness and strength (or maybe it's the other way around: he found the right job for a person who thinks that way), and he tends to scare the people with whom he and his wife socialize—the hypereducated, rich, dutifully liberal progressives of greater Boston.

You could make the mistake of thinking that Business James hates these people, who are of course his people. After all, he calls them the Irrelevant Class, complaining that they have all the credentials and pretensions of a ruling class but none of the will, the strength to stand up to those who really run the country—like the oilmen with whom he makes money. But you'd be wrong. He doesn't hate his people. He wants them to wake up, sense the danger, and rediscover their strength in time to fight back against the gathering forces of doom. When he terrorizes them at dinner parties with half-ironic talk of melting ice caps and dissolving social order, it reminds me of the climactic scene of *Blade Runner,* in which the superhuman replicant Roy pursues Harrison Ford through an abandoned building, apparently trying to kill him but really trying to show him what it means to live.

Nothing drives Business James crazier than the quality of education at the school his young children attend. Not that it's a bad school. It is in fact a lovely school, staffed by decent, committed educators. It's exclusive and widely admired and expensive, and parents in his—our—social circle angle vigorously to send their children to it. But James believes that the school's educational philosophy, enthusiastically supported by the parents, emphasizes gentle sensitivity to the exclusion of efficacy. "The end of an age is coming up fast in the rearview mirror," he wrote to me recently, "and they can see it, but they're utterly baffled." In their uncomprehending bafflement, they continue to value above all else the tantric soul-smoothing function of a post-'60s finishing school that turns out sweetly vague, tolerant, well-intentioned, unambitious, underequipped copies of their parents. "They're slow-running deer," he wrote, "with targets painted on their foreheads." They're going to get slaughtered, in any contest for power and resources, by the righteously selfish children of the oilmen, the upwardly mobile children of the immigrant strivers James employs as analysts at his capital fund, the children of all those people out there who know that gentleness without strength amounts to abject weakness.

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On a cool, drizzly, slate gray October afternoon, I took my kids to this school's annual fair, where we ran into James and his kids. The fair, a fund-raiser, was as well attended and competently organized as you would expect from a community of lawyers, doctors, professors, architects, editors, money handlers, and other professionals with good connections and good taste.

The Irrelevant Class was out in force. The mothers knew something about art and clothes, the fathers knew something about wine and music, and they all knew something about money—although not the way James did, since they didn't play for keeps the way he does. They all thought *Sideways* had been hilarious, and *so* well acted. They voted. They nodded grimly when reading Paul Krugman's column in the *New York Times.* They had owned the Buena Vista Social Club CD ever since it was featured on *All Things Considered;* their kids knew some of the lyrics, even though they're in Spanish. Educated, lean, and cultured, these people were not wholly deluded in admiring themselves and each other: slow-running deer with targets on their foreheads, pausing to check out their reflections in the water while hunters gather nearby.

At the pony ride, I had a small epiphany when my daughters took their turns astride the plodding little mounts. Yuan, the little one, compact and cheerful, looked like a two-year-old Sancho Panza as she was led around in a circle by the attendant. When Ling-li, the big one, a four-year-old built like a flexible blade, came around the circle and caught sight of me, she smiled—almost a smirk, really, the outward sign of an inward dawning of command, another thing she could do, another stone added to the rising cairn of her purpose and self-reliance. She was wearing a purple fleece jacket with the hood up, the drizzle having picked up as the afternoon deepened toward evening. Holding the pommel with both hands, she slouched familiarly in the saddle, swaying easily with the pony's motion. Smiling that ancient smile, she looked for all the world like a veteran of many campaigns passing through a village of harmless, well-intentioned souls,

making a mental note to come back sometime with her sister-in-arms and sack it.

Now, Ling-li is scared of all kinds of things: pirates, thunder, even the fake pop-up snakes in the school fair's ultra-mild haunted house. I have not yet found a kids' movie so innocuous that it won't freak her out at some point. Even the Muppets disturbed her at first. But she'll never back down from anything scary that's real—not a doctor with a needle, not a snarling dog, not five boys messing with her sister. She'll look over at the five boys and say, musingly, "I'm going to charge them," as if she weighed considerably more than thirty-three pounds and had sharp horns growing from her temples.

Maybe I'm wrong, but I don't worry about my kids ending up as slow-running deer. My wife and I—educated and liberal enough to qualify for the Irrelevant Class, but not rich enough, and not operating under the delusion that we matter—are not raising the girls in some special weakness-expunging way, but they seem to have come to us already inclined to self-assertion. Maybe they were born that way; more likely, a year in a kind-but-spartan orphanage gave each of them an early education in the exercise of strength. They lead pleasant middle-class lives that only rarely call upon them to use that strength, but very occasionally I give in to the thought that, should the science-fiction era of chaos that gun-show Christian survivalists call The Coming Times of Economic Collapse actually come to pass, I'm fairly confident my kids would do all right. In a Hobbesian free-for-all, they could get what they needed by taking it away from the children of the Irrelevant Class, their friends and

neighbors. Some people just have that inbuilt strength, and no amount of countertraining can entirely change them. Nor would I want to entirely change them if I could. If you strip the drama from Business James's worldview, you get something that looks a lot like mine.

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Over dinner, I told Boxing James about the school fair and Business James's impatience with the Irrelevant Class, and he said, "Have you ever thought of them as evolved, rather than weak?" I confessed that I had not. I mean, some of *them* think of themselves as evolved, but I'd always regarded that as a fairy-tale self-conception they pick up at Pilates or Princeton. Boxing James went on, "Look, they may not be able to protect themselves, but the fact is that nobody *is* going to come along and take their shit. It's not going to happen. They don't need to protect themselves because they're protected, they're insulated, and things don't change that fast or that much in this country. Maybe the way they are is a rational response to the life they have." Maybe it's false rigor to insist that they cultivate in themselves, as a class, a strength they won't ever be pressed to use. Maybe their gentleness constitutes a kind of triumph.

Business James, had he been there, would probably have argued in return that they should regard exercising meaningful influence over the political and cultural direction of their country as part of their shit, and that they better wake up to the fact that somebody already did come along and take it from them (while giving them tax breaks that further insulate them from noticing or caring). I spent Election Day 2004 going door to door with him through

suburban subdivisions in New Hampshire, getting out the vote for a candidate we both despised. It was another thing to hold against Bush: he obliged us to support Kerry. When we were done, we drove back down to Boston, listening to early projections on the radio. Most had the election too close to call, and we permitted ourselves to believe there might be a small chance that things would come out all right. We stopped by a party, thrown by friends of Business James's, for people who had worked for the campaign. The well-appointed house, a place of unimpeachable decorating decisions that communicated wealth and ease in the understated Boston manner, was filled with informed people of goodwill. They drank wine and exchanged cutting bons mots, radio-ready snatches of policy analysis, and rumors of promising electoral news from across the country. More than one of them expected that a Kerry administration would come calling about an appointment in Washington—a chance to make a difference, a nice new item for the CV. There was nothing wrong with these people or with the party, but when I walked in the door I knew all at once and for sure that Kerry was going to lose. Weakness pervaded the house like the plague in *The Masque of the Red Death.* Business James felt it, too. He swiftly drained a few drinks, then went to sleep on the thick rug in the den in front of the television. The Irrelevant Class buzzed ineffectually around him, waiting for Peter Jennings to bring it good news that never came.

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My wife and I have a running conversation about the difference between judging and accepting, between getting things done and digging beauty. You can see the world as a

set of opportunities to accomplish something, to exercise your will upon it, or you can see the world as a set of opportunities to appreciate how it works, how it is. Everybody strikes some kind of balance between these opposing principles, but most people don't strike it right down the middle. My wife, for instance, leans toward judging and accomplishing, while I lean toward accepting and appreciating. The two Jameses help me seek a balance between the beauty-digging toward which I naturally incline and the exercise of will
I accept as necessary to making a way in the world.

Business James woke up on the morning after Election Day 2004, and started planning how to perform a backbone implant on the Democrats in time for 2008; from time to time, he gives me updates on his progress. Rather than inspiring him, however, the Democrats' victory in the midterm elections of 2006 seems to have sent him into a funk, as do the presidential candidacies of Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama, which have inspired a false optimism in the Irrelevant Class about an imminent return to proper relevance. "I'm planning on eight years of McCain and a lot more damage," he says. "Then we'll see what we can do with what's left. Things have never been worse than they are now." He lies awake at night thinking about what currently inhabited parts of the world will be underwater and when.

Boxing James, like Business James, sees trouble coming. "I don't recall any time during my lifetime that the world was in as rough shape as it is presently," he recently wrote to me in an email. Were he still in the business of exploiting others' misfortune, Boxing James would be enjoying a boom that

shows no signs of letting up. "Things are now irrevocably fucked up enough that, Democrat or Republican government holding sway, there'd still be crack houses in Brockton or Santo Domingo where I could get some work done," and he could count on an inexhaustible supply of "poor women who needed to be hookers, poor suckers who wanted to be pop stars, and poor black guys fresh from prison who were willing to be opponents for my slightly better stable of fighters."

But, unlike Business James, Boxing James expects that the Coming Times aren't coming for anybody except the poor. Trouble won't touch the Irrelevant Class. "The protection and privilege provided to it remain virtually untouched by our political system," which means there's no reason for the Irrelevant Class to cultivate atavistic virtues like strength, toughness, or force of will. It doesn't matter how slow the deer run. "The jungle has changed a lot. We outsource shit now, including having people who are stronger, more intuitive, sharper, and meaner handling our business for us. Those qualities are now not much more than service-industry skills." The Irrelevant Class can therefore carry on refining its beauty-digging skills and shed any vestigial aptitude for the jungle. "The toughest aren't the ones who survive. Even the smartest aren't always the ones who survive. The new survivors mostly consist of those who are, for a multitude of reasons, the least attackable. And, to my mind, the least attackable are the most evolved."

One night I took a break from writing this essay and went to the fights at the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Hall in Dorchester. Most of the bouts were terrible mismatches, typically featuring a locally based Irish guy with

a winning record throwing thunderously amateurish punches at a black opponent with a good body and a bad record who had been recruited from out of state to lose. Sitting at ringside while the combatants heaved and strained before me, I told myself, as I always do, that this is what life looks like when you take off the cover and inspect the works. Fighters need all their resilience and potency, all their scary competence in locating vulnerability and striking into the gap, because they are the least protected, the most attackable, the weakest of the weak.

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CR Carlo Rotella has held Guggenheim, Howard, and Du Bois fellowships and received the Whiting Writers Award, the L. L. Winship/PEN New England Award, and The American Scholar prizes for Best Essay and Best Work by a Younger Writer, and his book *Cut Time* was

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