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4,500 words

# The Ref

a short story by

Frank Diamond

Donny Lewis awakes each morning and mutters a disappointed "Oh, man!" first thing because he's still alive. Says it before his morning prayers. Maybe it *is* a prayer. Maybe "man" is *The Man*.

"Won't be long," Donny consoles himself, as he drags his body out of bed, pushing his carcass into a sitting position and lifting his legs over the side and onto the floor. He pauses before standing with a grunt and balances himself to avoid falling back into bed. He stretches as much as he can, groans.

"Stupid," he says about the shenanigans of his early years that produced such a wreck: the broken bones, concussions, slashes, near-death experiences. Over what? Had he not realized that he'd eventually pay a price? He probably thought — if he gave it any thought — that he'd die before the bill came due. He

thought that he'd be talking to the angels by now in the year 2024.

He'd been a boxer and then worked construction all his life. He bar-brawled until he got help and quit the booze, but not before absorbing even more punishment. In his 40s, Donny would joke that he's like a 70-year-old man, hurting in places he didn't even know he had. He's 76, now, and still discovering new places.

He so wishes he could talk to Lisa. Lisa could reach him. Lisa could teach him. She knew him. She made him. She formed the Donny Lewis that many have come to love out of the heap of a snarling drunk who hated himself and everybody else.

On this day, especially — this horrible anniversary — Lisa would have guided him through what she called "the hauntings." That's what she does.

*Did.*

But Lisa — his one and only Lisa — died eight months ago. She knew how much this day tortured him. Lisa would quote the poet. "The secret anniversaries of the heart." This secret anniversary will be particularly hard. Lisa's not here to help him through. Maybe just the memory of his wife will be enough? "Who knows?"

They met in the early 1970s, dated for a while but they both right away knew that that stage only delayed the inevitable, and so they got married in 1973. With her petite frame, a tendency to blush easily, and schoolmarmish glasses, she looked demur until she laughed her laugh. She'd been much pursued, but Donny caught her. At night, when she took her glasses off and let her blonde locks fall to her shoulders his pulse raced, and continued racing even as those locks over the years became gray. So, yes her looks and personality, but also her insightful intelligence never let him forget how much he'd lucked out.

Though Donny towered over her, people quickly realized who captained this ship. He'd do anything for her.

Now, their four adult children live in four different states; the closest, the daughter, across the river in New Jersey. Donny maybe sees her every two months and his sons call occasionally.

Donny gets it. They've got lives, kids, careers — their own dramas. They're busy.

"How you holding up, Dad?" one son asked recently.

"I'm in hell."

That boy quickly disengaged "got to go, Dad" and Donny decided never to be that honest again. People don't want honest. People want easy. Lisa would not want him to burden the children with his grief. They could do nothing for him.

How’s he holding up?

Mostly, Donny reads. Television doesn’t interest him. Hundreds of channels and dozens of streaming services — it’s too much and too little at the same time. He dives into novels and biographies. Teaches himself philosophy, theology, history, law, anthropology, psychology, political science — you name it. He’s exploring the Western cannon, at the moment reading a book about St. Augustine’s “Confessions.” Interesting shit.

Lisa liked cooking programs and home repair shows, but she’d been the one to encourage Donny’s autodidacticism and often the two would sit on opposite ends of the couch reading while flames danced in the fireplace.

He’d made a good living as a union iron worker. Not great, but how many working men can raise a family on a single salary these days? He built the skyscrapers, walked fearlessly along girders 20, 30, 40 stories high. He worked overtime: double time and a half. Triple time and a half on holidays.

He been there for the kids, as much as possible. He went to their games. He biked with them. Shot baskets. Pretended to sip tea at tea parties. The dad things.

Lisa did the heavy lifting in raising them. She didn’t go back to work until they were grown. She disciplined them and she’s the one they warred with as teens. She’s the one who refereed skirmishes. She healed them, nurtured them, nudged them

gently out of the nest. She's the one that they ran to with their problems, even as adults.

When they called, Lisa could chat with them for a while, at least 15 minutes, but usually longer and as much as they wanted. That's her way, not just with her children but with everybody.

On this anniversary, the conversation would inevitably include Lisa saying something like: "It wasn't your fault, Donny. When will you ever forgive yourself?"

"But it *was* my fault."

On a few anniversaries she resurrected the story of her cousin who lost control of her car one rainy twilight and crashed into a van, killing the driver. How inconsolably guilty that cousin felt. But also, how the cousin eventually — it took years, but eventually — reconciled herself to the simple fact that accidents happen. She hadn't done anything wrong.

"But I *did* do something wrong," Donny would insist. "Or I didn't do something right that I should have done."

Lisa would sigh. Yet again, it would be a long day.

"Let's go," she'd say, and they drove to the spot together.

This year, Donny will make that trip alone.

He's drinking coffee and eating toast with ~~seramble~~ [scrambled] eggs when the cell buzzes. It's his daughter. Donny doesn't answer. He learned to avoid talking to somebody when he's about to eat because hunger makes him end the conversation

in a perfunctory — some might say rude — manner. He'd say, "OK. I'm done talking now," and click off.

He calls his daughter back after he's finished and while drinking his second cup of tea.

"Hi Dad. What've you been up to?"

What the hell does she think he's been up to? He's not on a cruise or doing Pilates. He's not looking for venture capital for a startup. He's certainly not dating. Is that what she suspects? Do people expect him to find another soulmate? Really? As if. Nobody has a clue, apparently not even family, who should know better.

"Nothing much, really," Donny responds evenly.

Maybe she'll visit, bring one of the grandkids. It would mean changing the day's ritual. If it's a long visit, it might even mean ending the ritual, perhaps for good. Maybe it's time.

But, no, this turns out to be her reminding him about the twins' birthday party.

"They want to see their Pop-Pop!" she exclaims as if they're still tots, instead of teens who can now take him or leave him.

"Be careful on the roads, ~~if you do errands,~~ [if you go out]" she says.

A February wind drove a dusting that freeze-burned the streets overnight, coating the hard corners and hidden crevices

of the city. It's cold out. A record-breaker, the coldest day in several years. Was it cold last year on this anniversary? He can't remember. He'd been too concerned about Lisa's sudden weight loss.

He remote-starts his truck from inside the house, puts the heat and defroster on. Gives it a few minutes before heading out. He holds a bag of rock salt and sprinkles it ahead of his steps as if he's feeding chickens. Retraces the path, reaches into the house, grabs a bag, heads back out to the truck.

He stops at the supermarket, buys flowers in a glass vase. Roses. They probably won't last two days.

He's got four-wheel drive, and the street crews treated the main highways, the ones he'll transverse: I-95 to the Walt Whitman Bridge, onto the Atlantic City Expressway, and finally south on the Garden State Parkway.

"Ocean City here I come," Donny says.

It's exactly 10 a.m. when he sets out, an hour after rush hour ends. What had been the usual early morning stop-and-go between the Bridge Street and the Route 676 exits now flows slowly — 40 miles an hour — then jumps back to 65 miles an hour which, of course, isn't fast enough for some knuckleheads who streak by Donny at what could be anywhere from 80 to 100 miles an hour. Flashing lights up ahead make everybody slow, and Donny likes to think that the woman the trooper pulled over had been speeding,

so score one for law-abiders. Though, actually, Donny follows the five-miles-an-hour rule, an unwritten agreement that cops will overlook someone going that fast over the speed limit.

As he crosses the Walt Whitman Bridge, a snow squall blitzes the windshield just as he's trying to merge into the lefthand lane. Tension runs from shoulder blade to shoulder blade and radiates in the back of his neck as he navigates by instinct.

Oh, how he hates this day, this particular secret anniversary of the heart. It's not as if the memory assaults him with increased vehemence. Donny's had worse days, as far as that goes. The difference is that on those random days, Donny can more easily push aside the flashes of intense remorse. This day comes with the obligation to resist that reflex. For the sake of Franco "The Flamethrower" Fernandez he must dwell in those moments.

When he first got sober, he still wanted to be a part of the fight game. He'd been a trainer for a while, then a manager. But he didn't like becoming a surrogate father for young men, some of whom were either coming out of, or going into, jail. Not all, or even most. But too many.

Most boxers lead messy lives. Most of them die in poverty because hitting and being hit had been the only skills they'd acquired. Donny helped. Helped with loans. Helped them get jobs.

Helped them stay out of jail. Helped them detox. Helped them find shelter.

It became too much.

Too many calls in the middle of the night. Too many predicaments. Too many psyches feeding off his kindness. But it was the ones he couldn't help that made him realize that he needed more distance than being a trainer or manager provided.

So, he became a referee. He became that person in the arena the closest to the action without actually having to fight.

He got the nickname "Quick Hook" because some of the grumblers and mumblers in losers' corners complained that he called fights too early. Their stallions still packed some giddyap, they'd argue; still had a chance. "How could you stop this fight, ref?"

Some trainers did thank Donny afterward for ending fights because that meant that they didn't have to throw in the towel and incur the wrath of their studs who wanted to keep going, who'd convinced themselves — bloodied and dazed as they were — that they could win with just one skillfully place hook or jab. With just a tiny bit of luck.

As he travels down the Atlantic City Expressway, Donny keeps glancing in the rearview as if worried about something gaining on him.

"I'm not on a schedule," he reminds himself.

The contest had been at one of the casinos in Atlantic City. Franco “The Flamethrower” Fernandez versus Emmett “The Will” Williams.

Big fight. Big men. Heavyweights. One of the most anticipated matchups of 1988. The winner gets a shot at the title. An even match, too. Both with nearly identical records.

*Ding!*

Williams charged Fernandez, getting to him before Fernandez had even taken three steps out of his corner. Williams bobbed and weaved in his unorthodox manner. Fernandez must have viewed hours of tape, but nonetheless Williams’s style confused him. He recovered by the middle of the round, ducking under Williams’s piston-like left jabs, and managing to pound Williams’s body. Still, Donny scored that round for Williams.

The second round began slower, with the fighters circling each other, trying to find an opening. Then a jab here, another there, some dancing, mighty hooks that glance off, or miss altogether. Then, toward the end Williams unleashed two furious flurries that stunned Fernandez. Round: Williams.

Donny motioned to the ringside physician to examine Fernandez. He would learn later that this was the first heavyweight fight that doctor had ever handled — he’d been a last-minute replacement.

Other docs, in their blazers and tieless dress shirts, looked like businessmen who'd scored good seats. This character sported a bowtie, and suspenders. Thin, so thin that after he climbed through the ropes, he strode across the ring straight legged, as if he lacked knees.

"Faster!" Donny thought. Fifty-second breaks separated rounds.

Doc talked to Fernandez's trainer and then spoke to the boxer. Donny twirled his hand in the hurry-up gesture. Doc flashed Donny a thumbs-up just in time.

*Ding!*

The third round involved a lot of clinching, and Donny had to detangle them four times before Williams let loose with a barrage that felled Fernandez. He sprung up and Donny gave him the eight-count. Blood from a cut above Fernandez's eyebrow trickled down the side of his face.

"Son, are you OK?" Donny asked, looking for signs of concussion.

"I'm good, ref. I'm a slow starter."

Donny knew that. Fernandez gained reputation and rank by coming on strong in the middle rounds and continuing to do so for the remainder of fights, turning what for most fighters would be a mid-match burst that might last for two rounds into a tireless sprint to the end. His record was 25 and 1 with 16 KOs.

Nonetheless Donny went over to Fernandez's corner between rounds.

"I don't like the trend here," he told Fernandez's trainer.

"It's how he does," the trainer said.

"Slow starter," Donny said. "Right. I know. I am still warning that I don't like what I'm seeing and I'm going to stop it if it continues."

"This is how he always does, Quick Hook," the cutman said over his shoulder as he worked on the wound above Fernandez's eye.

"Say again?"

"We hear you, ref."

"I'll get him this round, ref," Fernandez promised. "Getting stronger."

He seemed alert.

"OK," Donny said. "But I'll stop it quick if I need to. Your life's worth more than a boxing match, son."

*Ding!*

Fernandez did in fact look more poised; looked as if his feared second wind had kicked in.

But it hadn't.

Franco "The Flamethrower" Fernandez would be included on that short list of boxers who actually died in the ring. Most of the unlucky ones expired in ambulances or emergency departments.

Some clung to life for days, even weeks before they eventually succumbed. Cause of death? They died playing a sport in which some adults in the arena — adults like Donny, the doctor, the men in Fernandez's corner — had forgotten that their main job involved preventing young warriors from getting seriously injured.

In the fourth round, Williams landed a blow that sent Fernandez staggering against the ropes. Donny should have called it then.

"Why didn't I?"

The branches of the large pine trees lining the Atlantic City Expressway bow under the weight of a frosted coating but, luckily, the road has been salted. Still, he plows on with caution because you never know when you'll hit black ice. Donny glances in the rearview at a car coming up too fast. It rides his tail for a minute, switches lanes, then shoots into the future.

"Why didn't I stop that fight?" he asks again. It's a question that's dogged him for 36 years — exactly 36 years today.

When Williams landed that blow, Fernandez didn't stagger but needed to regroup. He clinched Williams and the two wriggled. When Donny separated them, Fernandez one-twoed Williams's torso, but Williams responded with a quick jab to the jaw. The

tape showed that that punch traveled all of six inches and didn't look to be a powerful blow. The tape lied.

A bone shattered — *pop!* — and Fernandez hit the canvas as if he'd been dropped out of an airplane. His eyes rolled back, but then refocused only to stare blankly ceilingward.

Franco "The Flamethrower" Fernandez died in that moment.

Donny knew even as he waved his arms to call the fight. He signaled Fernandez's corner and called the doc up. They got Fernandez — "Fernandez's body," Donny already called it — out of there on a gurney, with the physician grimly shaking his head as he ministered on the run.

The memory loops Donny's mind like a Sims game with alternative endings, most of them relatively happy ones compared to actual events. In these iterations, the young man lives.

In the weeks to follow, Donny held it together. Lisa kept saying how proud he made her. He held it together despite the grief. Held it together even when the Fernandez family thanked him for trying to stop the fight. Held it together when the physician admitted that he — not Donny — was to blame for not doing a thorough enough evaluation of Fernandez. Held it together at Fernandez's funeral.

This thing would haunt him forever, he understood, but memories shadow a lot of people to their graves and yet they still

manage to function. His friends who'd fought in Nam. They functioned despite the horrible stuff they'd witnessed. All of them contradicted the stereotypical portrayal of the crazed veteran who goes on a shooting rampage.

The ones who saw action Donny knew will never forget, no doubt. Nonetheless, they'd settled into normal lives with the normal ups and downs, living like most people. (Donny wanted to enlist but he flunked the physical because too many broken bones hadn't healed right.)

He made changes, though, the main one being stepping away from the fight game altogether. He not only stopped ref-ing, he stopped following it. He couldn't even watch a bout on TV.

"That's understandable," Lisa said.

She told him the story about Augustine before he'd converted to Christianity and became St. Augustine. Augustine hung out with other young philosophers, who believed in Manichaeism; that good and evil were equal in power in their struggle for the cosmos.

They cocooned themselves in smug superiority, smirking and sneering at everybody else who failed to understand what they understood.

A young man named Alypius joined this crowd though he differed in one way: He refused to attend the gladiator games, repelled by the savagery.

His friends cajoled and browbeat Alypius to experience at least one contest, if just to reaffirm his condemnation. How could he truly reject something he's never seen?

So, Alypius reluctantly accompanied his friends. At first, he holds his hands over his eyes. Something about the explosions of crowd noise all about him makes him peek through his fingers. That's all it takes. He becomes addicted to the games, cries out for blood. He's forever changed. He always attends the gladiator contests and rot sets in. The nobler aspects of Alypius's intellect and character decay. Darkness takes him.

After the Fernandez tragedy, Donny Lewis upped his AA meetings from one to three times a week. He kept busy. The kids were still little. He couldn't afford to go to pieces.

So, Donny Lewis held it together. Until he didn't.

A writer for a national sports magazine contacted him. He wanted Donny's input for an article about the challenges that referees face and since the Fernandez affair — that's what he called it, the "affair" — occurred only a couple of months ago….

Donny said, "I'm sorry, but I can't talk about that buddy."

"I understand completely, Don," the guy said. First-name basis just like that, except he used a version of Donny's name that Donny detests. "But some of the refs I reached out to; they found it cathartic to talk. Their stories will do some good in terms of improving safety guidelines."

Long pause, but not because Donny considered doing the interview. He kept trying to summon Lisa's voice telling him that it wasn't his fault. But memory delivers only jumbled echoes. It reminds him of how he regained consciousness in the ring after being knocked out, how sounds and sights emerge from a fog.

He called Lisa after sloughing off the reporter, but she'd been making her rounds. Then he called his sponsor, but only got the answering machine.

He'd been tempted often, and almost always managed to pull away from relapsing. This time should be no different. Looking back in later years he would decide that this overconfidence caused the plunge.

He should have driven to the pub, even though he could walk it in 20 minutes. If he'd driven, he most likely would have just cruised on by. Wind through city streets until he found himself home and connected with someone he'd tried to reach earlier.

But he drove.

When he entered, the bar's smell, lighting, and ambient noise fueled by laughter and talk took Donny immediately back to all the other bars he'd been in and the damn good times he'd had.

What's the harm of bellying up and just buying a Coke?

So begins another tortuous relapse. Donny had heard many stories about Rock Bottom Lane. Members in his AA group lost

their jobs, their homes, their families, some, eventually even their lives. Donny Lewis nearly went the same way, until Lisa threw him out of the house eight years before, in 1980.

He discovered then just how much she means to him; that banishment amounted to a kind of almost spiritual deprivation. Her kind essence, borne of her own struggles, eventually pried him loose from alcohol's grip. It was work, though. He relapsed three times before he stopped for good. Lisa let him back in.

Lisa saved his life in 1980 and again in 1988.

But now it's 2024 and Lisa's no more.

She can't save him.

And, of course, a substance abuser should never say that he stopped "for good." Addiction's an opponent who stays in its corner, always waiting.

*Ding!*

As he crosses the Stainton Memorial Bridge into Ocean City, the beauty of the view on this clean, crisp February morning dazzles him as always. Lisa would gasp during this part of the ride, and Donny loved hearing her exclaim. She'd remark on the bright pastels of the boating slips, restaurants, and waterfront homes lining the banks of Great Egg Harbor Bay.

"Smell that salt air," she'd say. "Look at the sparks on the water. Like diamonds on the bay. Isn't it just so beautiful, Donny?"

He registered the beauty through her eyes. Her joy became his joy.

Now, Donny makes a right onto Central Avenue and drives to the end of the island to the lifeguard station on 58th Street. He parks on the street. In season, finding an empty spot could be a project. This artic tundra of a day ensured that there'd be no witnesses to the ritual.

He grabs the bag and vase of roses, steps out. The wind hits him square on, so much so that he needs to tilt forward while walking up the path on the side of the lifeguard station. Turning a corner, he stops at a group of benches facing the dunes and the ocean. He looks out toward the shoreline where waves push foam upon the beach. Some tardy seagulls caw as they migrate toward warmer climes.

The benches bear memorial plaques. One reads:

In loving remembrance of
Franco (The Flamethrower) Fernandez.
October 5, 1968 — February 12, 1988
Our champion
Taken from us too soon
"Now cracks a noble heart
Good night, sweet prince
And flights of angels sing thee
To thy rest."

Donny and Lisa paid the city $600 back in 2008 to have the plaque installed. Up until then, they'd visit the young man's grave each year, but they'd learned that Fernandez had been a lifeguard one summer and loved the experience. And turning this

anniversary into a daylong pilgrimage somehow seemed apropos. After honoring Fernandez, they'd get lunch before heading home.

Donny sighs, crosses himself, says a prayer. Places the roses on the bench. Then he grabs one of the cans of beer from the twelve-pack, opens it, pours the Corona Extra over the plaque.

Usually, he and Lisa would bring a six-pack and leave the remaining five cans on one of the other benches (there were four altogether); a present for some random passerby or perhaps a member of the city's maintenance crew. They never knew the fate of the extra cans and it didn't matter.

That's not the plan today. Donny sits on a bench and opens another, takes a big chug. Then he gives the fifth of vodka he'd brought a good tilt as well. He holds the bottle at arm's length the way he would take a selfie.

"You win," he says.

The sound of the waves comes to him like distant applause. He's shivering by the time he downs the third beer. His gloved fingers sting, his feet ache, his teeth chatter. By the end of the fourth beer and vodka, however, the shivering slows considerably, and he doesn't feel the cold as much.

Soon, Donny doesn't feel the cold at all, and he knows what that means. He can barely move but manages to drink more vodka. The ocean sounds as if it's leapfrogged time and erased the

dunes and laps close by; as if he sits on the shore on a beach chair with the tide coming in.

Did somebody just jostle him? He can't tell.

"Mr. Lewis?"

"Let me sleep."

"I'm calling an ambulance, ref."

*Ref?*

Donny manages to open his eyes and bring into focus a large black man blocking out the sky.

"It's me, ref. Emmet Williams. I've been coming to this bench all these years, too. Paying my own respects."

"I'm tired."

"Stay awake. I hear the siren."

"Emmet Williams?"

"Your wife called me about a month before she died. Asked me to look out for you on this visit. She told me when you'd probably get here. You're early."

Donny hears the ambulance's siren wail louder, then shut off. That was fast. He feels them lift him onto the gurney. Well, well, well: He'll get to live another day after all.

"Oh, man!"