

Champion of the World

Maya Angelou

“Champion of the World” is the nineteenth chapter in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*; the title is a phrase taken from the chapter. Remembering her own childhood, the writer tells us how she and her older brother, Bailey, grew up in a town in Arkansas. The center of their lives was Grandmother and Uncle Willie’s store, a gathering place for the black community. On the night when this story takes place, Joe Louis, the “Brown Bomber” and the hero of his people, defends his heavyweight boxing title against a white contender. Angelou’s telling of the event both entertains us and explains what it was like to be African American in a certain time and place.

The last inch of space was filled, yet people continued to wedge themselves along the walls of the Store. Uncle Willie had turned the radio up to its last notch so that youngsters on the porch wouldn’t miss a word. Women sat on kitchen chairs, dining-room chairs, stools, and upturned wooden boxes. Small children and babies perched on every lap available and men leaned on the shelves or on each other.

The apprehensive mood was shot through with shafts of gaiety, as a black sky is streaked with lightning.

“I ain’t worried ‘bout this fight. Joe’s gonna whip that cracker like it’s open season.”

“He gone whip him till that white boy call him Momma.”

At last the talking finished and the string-along songs about razor blades were over and the fight began.

“A quick jab to the head.” In the Store the crowd grunted. “A left to the head and a right and another left.” One of the listeners cackled like a hen and was quieted.

“They’re in a clinch, Louis is trying to fight his way out.”

Some bitter comedian on the porch said, “That white man don’t mind hugging that n_____ now, I betcha.”

“The referee is moving in to break them up, but Louis finally pushed the contender away and it’s an uppercut to the chin. The contender is hanging on, now he’s backing away. Louis catches him with a short left to the jaw.”

A tide of murmuring assent poured out the door and into the yard.

“Another left and another left. Louis is saving that mighty right . . .” The mutter in the store had grown into a baby roar and it was pierced by the clang of a bell and the announcer’s “That’s the bell for round three, ladies and gentlemen.”

As I pushed my way into the Store I wondered if the announcer gave any thought to the fact that he was addressing as “ladies and gentlemen” all the Negroes around the world who sat sweating and praying, glued to their “Master’s voice.”¹

There were only a few calls for RC Colas, Dr Peppers, and Hires root beer. The real festivities would begin after the fight. Then even the old Christian ladies who taught their children and tried themselves to practice turning the other cheek would buy soft drinks, and if the Brown Bomber’s victory was a particularly bloody one they would order peanut patties and Baby Ruths also.

Bailey and I laid the coins on top of the cash register. Uncle Willie didn’t allow us to ring up sales during a fight. It was too noisy and might shake up the atmosphere. When the gong rang for the next round we pushed through the near-sacred quiet to the herd of children outside.

“He’s got Louis against the ropes and now it’s a left to the body and a right to the ribs. Another right to the body, it looks like it was low . . . Yes, ladies and gentlemen, the referee is signaling but the contender keeps raining the blows on Louis. It’s another to the body, and it looks like Louis is going down.”

My race groaned. It was our people falling. It was another lynching, yet another Black man hanging on a tree. One more woman ambushed and raped. A Black boy whipped and maimed. It was hounds on the trail of a man running through slimy swamps. It was a white woman slapping her maid for being forgetful.

The men in the Store stood away from the walls and at attention. Women greedily clutched the babes on their laps while on the porch the shufflings and smiles, flirtings and pinchings of a few minutes before were gone. This might be the end of the world. If Joe lost we were back in slavery and beyond help. It would all be true; the accusations that we were lower types of human beings. Only a little higher than apes. True that we were stupid and ugly and lazy and dirty and unlucky and worst of all, that God himself hated us and ordained us to be hewers of wood and drawers of water, forever and ever, world without end.

We didn’t breathe. We didn’t hope. We waited.

“He’s off the ropes, ladies and gentlemen. He’s moving towards the corner of the ring.” There was no time to be relieved. The worst might still happen.

¹ “His master’s voice,” accompanied by a picture of a little dog listening to a phonograph, was a familiar advertising slogan. (The picture still spears on some RCA recordings.)

“And now it looks like Joe is mad. He’s caught Carnera with a left hook to the head and a right to the head. It’s a left jab to the body and another left to the head. There’s a left cross and a right to the head. The contender’s right eye is bleeding and he can’t seem to keep his block up. Louis is penetrating every block. The referee is moving in, but Louis sends a left to the body and it’s an uppercut to the chin and the contender is dropping. He’s on the canvas, ladies and gentlemen.”

Babies slid to the floor as women stood up and men leaned toward the radio.

“Here’s the referee. He’s counting. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven . . . Is the contender trying to get up again?”

All the men in the store shouted, “NO.”

“—eight, nine, ten.” There were a few sounds from the audience, but they seemed to be holding themselves in against tremendous pressure.

“The fight is all over, ladies and gentlemen. Let’s get the microphone over to the referee . . . Here he is. He’s got the Brown Bomber’s hand, he’s holding it up . . . Here he is . . .”

Then the voice, husky and familiar, came to wash over us—“The winnah, and still heavyweight champeen of the world . . . Joe Louis.”

Champion of the world. A Black boy. Some Black mother’s son. He was the strongest man in the world. People drank Coca-Colas like ambrosia and ate candy bars like Christmas. Some of the men went behind the Store and poured white lightning in their soft-drink bottles, and a few of the bigger boys followed them. Those who were not chased away came back blowing their breath in front of themselves like proud smokers.

It would take an hour or more before the people would leave the Store and head for home. Those who lived too far had made arrangements to stay in town. It wouldn’t be fit for a Black man and his family to be caught on a lonely country road on a night when Joe Louis had proved that we were the strongest people in the world.