

Pocketful of Mumbles

by [Paul Illidge](#) (December 2023)



Stag at Sharkey's— George Bellows, 1909

I dubbed him 'Boxo' the moment I spotted him a little before noon one sunny October day on Bloor Street West in front of the *Harvey's Hamburgers* across from Varsity football stadium. In second year university at the time, I was on my way to a noon hour English class at Victoria College.

It was hard to say what age Boxo was from his lined and weathered face. With the grey stubble on his cheeks and chin, the burgundy wool toque pulled down almost to his ears, he could have been anywhere from forty to sixty. His worn brown,

herringbone tweed overcoat a couple of sizes too big for him fell below his knees to his skinny calves, bare with his pants being three sizes too small, blue, red and yellow Argyle socks bunched at his ankles in soiled desert boots that were at least a size too big and had one brown and one black shoelace.

What fascinated me most of all was the well-used but still in reasonable condition pair of eight-ounce *EVERLAST* boxing gloves on Boxo's hands, the same kind I knew Muhammad Ali wore when he fought Toronto's George Chuvalo at Maple Leaf Gardens back in 1966. He held the gloves up at chest-level and, with his head tilted forward slightly, punched, jabbed, left- and right-hooked the air, alternating the speed and intensity of his punches like he was in the ring and knew exactly what he was doing as he shuffled along Bloor Street ahead of me—his arms still working while we waited for the light to change, Boxo with his eyes closed, punching away. By the time we'd crossed the street I knew there was no way I'd be attending my twelve o'clock lecture.

Where had he come from? Where was he going? Was he homeless? The obscurity of the situation left me with no choice. I felt compelled to follow him ... along Bloor heading east on the north side of the street. His routine unchanging, head tilted down, eyes almost closed from the looks of it, he shuffled along bobbing and weaving more vigorously now, feinting, ducking, dodging invisible punches, every so often launching a rapid flurry of blows against an imaginary opponent. I stood near him at every traffic light. He didn't notice me; I don't think he could have he was so busy punching.

Past Yonge Street, Church Street, Jarvis and Sherbourne, we headed across the Bloor Street viaduct, the two of us an odd tandem moving slowly along, he caught in some deep delusion, and I following him—stalking we'd say these days—watching him in bewildered curiosity to find out what was up: Who was this character? for that is how I thought of him. A character in a story once removed from reality, into which I had

inadvertently drifted and in which I was now taking part.

We crossed Broadview, Boxo setting off along Danforth Avenue toward Pape. A few blocks further on, he stopped suddenly, rubbed his nose with the tip of his right glove, leaned his head back and gazed up at the sky. Or appeared to gaze. I had remained about ten feet behind him. With his back to me I couldn't see whether he opened his eyes or not. After about thirty seconds, from the movement of his shoulders I could tell he took a long deep breath and exhaled, after which he touched the tips of his *Everlasts* together twice and off he went again.

As we reached Coxwell Avenue, reality hit: What was I thinking? An hour and a half had passed. I really had become a stalker! Enough was enough. I had a lecture at three that I couldn't miss.

I left him on Danforth, watching him as he shuffled off, wondering if I would ever encounter him again; disappointed in one way that I hadn't given in to curiosity and spoken to him, yet proud of myself at the same time that I hadn't, and had respected the man's private odyssey to who knows where. Whether I saw him again or not didn't really matter at that point. I knew I'd just had one of the oddest, most intriguing experiences of my life. I ran into the subway station hoping to make my class.

But see him again I did. Four more times over the next two months I encountered Boxo, twice going east as he had before, twice heading west, again on the north side of the street, past St. George, Spadina, Bathurst, our routines the same as before, he pressing indefatigably on while I followed indefatigably ten feet or so behind. It grew late each time. I had commitments to keep, school work to do. I realized that as much as I was enthralled with the man and his mysteries, the Boxo obsession was getting out of hand. I watched him battle on as far as the Bloor Street West subway station, scooted

inside and went home.

Then in early December, coming out of the Bob Miller Book Room on Bloor beside the Park Plaza hotel where I'd bought a textbook for one of my courses, there was Boxo. I hurried to catch up and at the Avenue Road light stood closer to him than I ever had, resolved this time not to abandon him, to follow him wherever he was bound, as if I was Sancho Panza to his mad Don Quixote—

Half way across the Bloor Street viaduct he stopped suddenly, frozen to the spot, his arms up in front of him fixed in mid-punch, his body motionless, his breath steaming. There were no safety barriers in those days above the concrete railing: was he going to jump?

He held the stationary pose for almost ten minutes before he thawed, so to speak, and resumed his routine.

At Main Street he turned right, went up over the railway bridge and headed south past Ted Reeve Arena to Kingston Road, down Southwood Drive, left on Wineva to Queen Street, crossing to the south side then turning east past Glen Manor park. He slowed as he came to the light at Beech Avenue. There being no traffic at the intersection, he crossed against the red light and continued at his slower pace past the Garden Gate restaurant, known locally as the *GOOF*. As a result of the large coffee I'd had with my breakfast I needed to find a bathroom. I knew the *GOOF*, having grown up nearby. After a glance at Boxo, still moving at his slower pace, I darted inside, raced downstairs and had one of the fastest pees of my life.

I flew out the door to the street, turned fast and gazed along Queen Street, my heart sinking. There was no sign of Boxo in either direction. On a chance, I ran east, glancing frantically up and down the side streets as I sped along. It had only been three or four minutes, he couldn't have gone

far.

A streetcar was in the loop at Neville Park Boulevard. The car was empty, its doors closed, the driver in his seat sipping a takeout coffee.

Would Boxo have gone down to the beach? I wondered, but before answering set off down Neville Park to the lake. No sign of him west toward the boardwalk at Silverbirch Avenue, I ran the other direction to where the beach ends, waves lapping gently against the retaining wall that fronts the waterworks filtration plant. But there was no sign of Boxo. He'd given me the slip ...

Some years later I was teaching at a Toronto high school, living in the Beach, several blocks from Lake Ontario. On the last Sunday of the month, after breakfast at the *GOOF*, I walked down Willow Avenue for a stroll by the lake with my takeout coffee. There were more people about than I thought there would be, but it had been a relatively mild winter. The ice along the shore had been gone for two weeks. Spring had arrived, and with it the joggers, pet-walkers, strollers and cyclists.

I turned left and went the other direction along the boardwalk past Balmy Beach Canoe Club to Silverbirch Avenue where the boardwalk ends but the beach continues. I headed across the sand toward the waterworks plant, somewhere I hadn't been since the day ten years earlier when Boxo disappeared.

At the foot of Neville Park Boulevard, where the beach ended, where the water was usually halfway up the waterworks retaining wall at that time of year, it had receded about thirty feet, maybe more. I had never seen or heard of the water level being so low. Yet there I was making my way across a wide strip of sand beneath the ten-foot high retaining wall, articles of flotsam strewn about here and there that the water had left behind: driftwood, plastic and glass bottles, sun-

bleached children's toys, a hairless, armless doll, a faded orange baseball cap, a white toilet seat, a blue plastic toy boat, the bottom half of a broken canoe paddle, candy wrappers, soft drink cans, a folding aluminum lawn chair bent badly in two places with half its nylon webbing missing, a weathered wooden produce crate lying on its side, beside it a beaten-up tan desert boot with no laces, its worn crepe sole half torn off.

Walking over, I picked up the desert boot, stood the lawn chair upright and turned the weathered wooden produce crate over with my foot to see white painted letters down one side:

B

O

X

O

Overcome with the obscure serendipity of the discovery, I picked up the produce crate, took it home with me and kept it over the years as a memento to Boxo, in the back of mind wondering if, by some strange quirk of fate, I might one day run into the man again.

I never did unfortunately, however on Good Friday eleven years later, April Fool's Day as it turned out, after breakfast at the *GOOF* I strolled down Neville Park Boulevard to the lake and discovered that the water level had receded that year thirty feet or more from the filtration plant retaining wall,

leaving a stretch of beach just like the one I came upon the day I had last seen Boxo. In less than a minute, I knew what I had to do.

With the help of three friends, my Super 8 film camera, some borrowed pairs of boxing gloves, used clothing and desert boots retrieved from a Goodwill bin, plus the weathered wooden produce crate with 'BOXO' printed in white paint down the side, I would make a short film about one of the most memorable characters I'd ever encountered:

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Paul Illidge's most recent book is the true crime financial thriller *RSKY BZNS* (New English Review Press, 2022), a "fascinating story" (Frank Abagnale, Jr., author of *Catch Me if You Can*), a "gripping and intricate read" (Conrad Black). His book *THE BLEAKS* (ECW Press), was a *Globe & Mail* Best Book of 2014. Books in his *Shakespeare Novels* series *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *Othello*, *Twelfth Night*, *Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Macbeth*, *Romeo and Juliet*, are all available internationally at www.kobobooks.com

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