

Anexo I. "There was a book"

He leaned forward, his breath the smell of whiskey drunk straight from the bottle. His mouth never all the way closed. His blue eyes never more than half open. His one hand held a coiled loop of rope, the old hemp kind, blond as his hair. Yellow as his cowboy hat. The cowboy kind of rope, and he shook the rope in my face as he talked. Behind him, an open door showed a flight of stairs that went down into the dark.

He was young with a flat stomach, wearing a white T-shirt and brown cowboy boots with thick heels. His hair, blond under the straw cowboy hat. A belt with a big metal buckle holding up blue jeans. His skinny white arms, tanned smooth as the pointed toe on each cowboy boot.

His eyes veined with a forest of little red lines, he says to grab hold of the rope and grip it –tight. And pulling the rope, he starts down, his cowboy heels hammer a step, then another step, another hard wooden knock into the dark basement. There, in the dark, dragging me, his breath the whiskey smell, the same as the cotton ball in a doctor's office, the cold touch of rubbing alcohol the moment before an injection.

There, another step into the dark, the cowboy says, "The first rule of the Haunted Tunnel Tour is you don't talk about the Haunted Tunnel Tour."

And I stop. The rope still a loose sagging smile between us.

"And the second rule of the Haunted Tunnel Tour," the cowboy, his whiskey smell says, "is you don't talk about the Haunted Tunnel Tour. . . ."

The rope, the feeling of braided fibers, is twisted hard and greasy smooth in my hand. And still stopped, pulling back on the rope, I tell him: Hey . . .

From the dark, the cowboy says, "Hey, what?"

I say, I wrote that book.

The rope between us going tighter, tighter, tight.

And the rope stops the cowboy. From the dark, he says, "Wrote what?"

Fight Club, I tell him.

And there, the cowboy takes a step back up. The knock of his boots on a step, closer. He tilts his hat back for a better look and pushes his eyes at me, blinking fast, his breath boilermaker strong, breathalyzer strong, he says:

"There was *a book*?"

Yes.

Before there was a movie . . .

Before 4-H clubs in Virginia were busted for running fight clubs . . .

Before Donatella Versace sewed razor blades into men's clothing and called it the "fight club look." Before Gucci fashion models walked the runway, shirtless with black eyes, bruised and bloodied and bandaged. Before houses like Dolce and Gabbana launched their new men's look –satiny 1970's shirts in photomural patterns, camouflage-print pants and tight, low-slung leather pants– in Milan's dirty concrete basements . . .

Before young men started scarring kisses into their hands with lye or Superglue . . .

Before young men around the world took legal action to change their names to "Tyler Durden" . . .

Before the band Limp Bizkit bannered their Web site with "Dr. Tyler Durden recommends a healthy dose of Limp Bizkit . . ."

Before you could walk into Office Depot, shopping for plain, matte white labels, and there on the Avery Dennison package (product item 8293) was a sample label, printed: "Tyler Durden 420 Paper St. Wilmington, DE 19886" . . .

Before nightclub fist fighting in Brazil, where some nights young men would fight to their deaths . . .

Before *The Weekly Standard* announced "The Crisis of Manliness" . . .

Before Susan Faludi's book, *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Man* . . .

Before the students of Brigham Young University fought for their right to beat one another on Monday nights, insisting there was nothing in Mormon law that prohibited their "Provo Fight Club" . . .

Before the son of Utah governor Mike Leavitt was charged with disturbing the peace and trespassing for running a fight club in a Mormon church . . .

Before *The Onion* newspaper ran an exposé on "The Quilting Society," where old ladies would meet in a church basement, lusting for "bare-knuckled, hand stitching action," where "the first rule of the quilting society is you don't talk about the quilting . . ."

Before *Saturday Night Live* featured "Fight-Like-A-Girl Club" . . .

Before magazine and newspaper editors started calling, asking where to find a typical club in their area, so they could send an undercover reporter to write a feature story, assuring me they wouldn't screw up the secret nature of any club chapter . . .

Before magazine and newspaper editors started calling to cuss me out, swearing at me because I insisted the whole idea of fight clubs was just an invention. Just my imagination . . .

Before national political cartoons featured "Congressional Fight Club" . . .

Before the University of Pennsylvania hosted conferences where academics dissected *Fight Club* with everything from Freud to Soft Sculpture to Interpretative Dance . . .

Before a zillion "Fuck Club" porn sites . . .

Before a zillion restaurants reviews headlined: "Bite Club" . . .

Before Rumble Boys, Inc. started labeling their men's grooming products, hair mousse and gel, with Tyler Durden quotes . . .

Before you could walk through airports and hear bogus public address announcements paging "Tyler Durden . . . Would Tyler Durden please pick up the white courtesy phone . . ."

Before you could find graffiti in Los Angeles, spray painted tags that claim: "Tyler Durden Lives" . . .

Before people in Texas started wearing T-shirts printed with: "Save Marla Singer" . . .

Before a variety of illegal *Fight Club* stage plays . . .

Before my refrigerator was covered with photographs sent to me by strangers: grinning, bruised faces and people grappling in backyard boxing rings . . .

Before the book in dozens of languages: *Club de Combate* and *De Vechtclub* and *Borilacki Klub* and *Klub Golih Pesti* and *Kovos Klubas* . . .

Before all that . . .

There was just a short story. It was just an experiment to kill a slow afternoon at work. Instead of walking a character from scene to scene in a story, there had to be some way to just –cut, cut, cut. To jump. From scene to scene. Without losing the reader. To show every aspect of a story, but only the kernel of each aspect. The core moment. Then another core moment. Then, another.

There had to be some kind of chorus. Something bland that wouldn't hold the reader's attention, but would act to signal a jump to a new angle or aspect of the story. A bland kind of buffer that would be the touchstone or landmark a reader would need to not feel lost. A kind of neutral sorbet, like something served between courses in a fancy dinner. A signal, like buffer music in radio broadcasts, to announce the next topic. The next jump.

A kind of glue or mortar that would hold together a mosaic of different moments and details. Giving them all a continuity and yet showcasing each moment by not ramming it up against the next moment.

Think of the movie *Citizen Kane*, and how the faceless, nameless newsreel reporters create the framework for telling the story from a lot of different sources.

That's what I wanted to do. That one, boring afternoon at work.

So for that chorus –that "transitional device" – I wrote eight rules. The whole idea of a fight club wasn't important. It was arbitrary. But the eight rules have to apply to something so *why not a club where you could ask someone to fight?* The way you'd ask for a dance at a disco. Or challenge someone to a game of pool or darts. The *fighting* wasn't the important part of the story. What I needed were the *rules*. Those bland landmarks that would allow me to describe this club from the past, the present, up close or far away, the beginning and evolution, to cram together a lot of details and moments –all within seven pages– and NOT lose the reader.

At the time, I had a lingering black eye, a souvenir from a fist fight during my summer vacation. Nobody I worked with had ever asked about it, and I figured that you could do anything in your private life if it let you so bruised that no one would want to know the details.

At the same time, I'd seen a Bill Moyer television program about how street gangs were really young men raised without fathers, just trying to help one another become men. They issued orders and challenges. Imposed rules and discipline. Rewarded action. All the things a coach or drill sergeant would do.

At the same time, the bookstores were full of books like *The Joy Luck Club* and *The Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood* and *How to Make an American Quilt*. These were

all novels that presented a social model for women to be together. To sit together and tell their stories. To share their lives. But there was no novel that presented a new social model for men to share their lives.

It would have to give men the structure and roles and rules of a game –or a task– but not too touchy-feely. It would have to model a new way to gather and be together. It could've been "Barn-Raising Club" or "Golf Club" and it would've probably sold a lot more books. Something nonthreatening.

But that one slow afternoon, I wrote a seven-pages short story called *Fight Club*. It was the first real story I ever sold. An anthology called *The Pursuit of Happiness*, published by Blue Heron Press, bought it for fifty bucks. In the first edition the publishers, Dennis and Linni Stovall, printed every copy with the wrong title on the spine, and the cost of reprinting bankrupted their small press. Today, they've sold every copy. Those printed and misprinted. Mostly to people looking for that original short story that has since become chapter six of the book, *Fight Club*.

It was only seven pages because my writing teacher. Tom Spanbauer, had joked that seven pages was the perfect length for a short story.

To make the short story into a book, I added every story my friends could tell. Every party I attended gave me more material. There's the story about Mike splicing porno into family movies. There's the story about Geoff pissing in soup as a banquet waiter. Once, a friend worried these stories might prompt people to copycat, and I insisted that we were just blue-collar nobodies living in Oregon with public school educations. There was nothing we could imagine that a million people weren't already doing.

Years later, In London, a young man pulled me aside before a book event. He was a waiter at a five-star restaurant –one of only two five-star restaurants in the city– and he

loved how I'd depicted waiters spoiling food. Long before they'd read my book, he and the other servers had messed with the food they served celebrities.

When I asked him to name one celebrity, he shook his head. No, he couldn't risk telling.

When I refused to sing his book, he waved me closer and whispered:

"Margaret Thatcher has eaten my cum."

He held up one hand, his fingers spread, and said:

"At least five times . . ."

In the workshop where I started to write fiction, you had to read your work in public. Most times, you read in a bar or coffee-house where you'd be competing with the roar of the espresso machine. Or the football game on television. Music and drunk people talking. Against all this noise and distraction, only the most shocking, most physical, dark and funny stories got heard. Our test audience would never sit still for "Barn-Raising Club."

Really, what I was writing was just *The Great Gatsby*, updated a little. It was "apostolic" fiction—where a surviving apostle tells the story of his hero. There are two men and a woman. And one man, the hero, is shot to death.

It was a classic, ancient romance but updated to compete with the espresso machine and ESPN.

It took me three months to write the first draft, and the book sold to W. W. Norton in three days. For an advance so small I never told anyone. Not *anybody*. It was six thousand dollars. Other authors now tell me this is called "kiss-off money." It's an advance so low the author is supposed to feel insulted and walk away. This lets the publisher off the hook without offending any staff members who wanted to acquire the book.

Still, it was six thousand dollars. That would pay my rent for a year. So I took it. And in August 1996, there was a hardcover book. And a three-city tour –Seattle, Portland, and San Francisco– where no more than three people showed up at any reading. The book sales didn't even cover what I drank out of the hotel mini-bars.

One reviewer called the book science fiction. Another called it a satire on the *Iron John* men's movement. Another called it a satire of corporate white-collar culture. Some called it horror. No one called it a romance.

In Berkley, a radio interviewer asked me: "Having written this book, what can you tell us about the status of the American woman in the world, today?"

In Los Angeles, a college professor on National Public Radio said the book was a failure because it didn't address the issue of racism.

On a plane back to Portland, an airline flight attendant leaned close and asked me to tell him the truth. His theory was the book wasn't really about fighting at all. He insisted it was really about gay men watching one another fuck in public steambaths.

I told him, yeah, what the hell. And he gave me free drinks for the rest of the flight.

Other reviewers hated it. Oh, they called it "too dark." "Too violent." "Too strident and shrill and dogmatic." They would've loved "Barn-Rising Club".

Still, it won the 1997 Pacific Northwest Booksellers Award, and the 1997 Oregon Book Award for best novel. A year later, at the KGB literary bar in lower Manhattan, a woman introduced herself to me. She was the lead judge for the Oregon award and said she had to fight tooth and nail to convince the other judges. God bless her.

A year later, in the same bar, another woman introduced herself to me, saying she'd be designing the computer-animated penguin for the *Fight Club* movie.

Then, there was Brad Pitt and Edward Norton and Helena Bonham Carter.

Since then, thousands of people have written, most of them saying "thank you." For writing something that got their son to start reading again. Or their husband. Or their students. Other peoples wrote letters, a little angry, saying how they'd invented the whole idea of fight clubs. In military boot camps. Or in Depression-era labor camps. They'd get drunk and ask one another: "Hit me. As hard as you can. . . ."

There have always been fight clubs, they say. There will always be fight clubs.

Waiters will always pee in the soup. People will always fall in love.

Now, seven books later, men still ask where to find the fight club in their area.

And woman still ask if there's a club where they can fight one another.

Now, this is the first rule of fight club: *There is nothing a blue-collar nobody in Oregon with a public school education can imagine that a million-billion people haven't already done . . .*

In the mountains of Bolivia –one place the book has yet to be published, thousands of miles from the drunk cowboy and his Haunted Tunnel Tour– every year, the poorest people gather in high Andes villages to celebrate the festival of "Tinku."

There, the *campesino* men beat the crap out of one another. Drunk and bloody, they pound one another with just their bare fists, chanting, "We are men. We are men. We are men . . ."

The men fight the men. Sometimes, the women fight one another. They fight the way they have for centuries. In their world, with little income or wealth, few possessions, and no education or opportunity, it's a festival they look forward to all year long.

Then, when they're exhausted, the men and woman go to church.

And they get married.

Being tired isn't the same as being rich, but most times it's close enough.