

## The Dive

By Joseph Grant

For all of his young adult life, anyone who ever met Diego Santiago told him he held the promise. Some guys he knew from the neighborhood used their heads and got degrees, while some used their street smarts to just get along and their gang ties to get ahead. Diego used his fists. He was lightning quick, like his old man who had been a boxer before him and as a result of that promising lineage, he followed in his father's gloves to become undisputed champ in the East Los Angeles middleweight division.

Diego sparred at all of the legendary gyms along Broadway and East Los Angeles and even had a few amateur bouts in the old Olympic before they closed it down. He joined the ranks of the immortals who had fought there, Ken Norton, Joe Frazier, Danny Lopez, Ernie Lopez, Mando Muniz, Enrique Bolanos, Manuel Ortiz, Bert Colima, Henry Armstrong, Speedy Dado and Oscar De La Hoya to name a few. Diego had even been there for one of his father's fights to actually see the legendary tuxedoed ring announcer, Jimmy Lennon, preside over the evening's bout. Lennon, although Irish, was a fan favorite among the Mexicans for his excellent pronunciations of Hispanic names that had left lesser announcers hitting the verbal canvas. The admiration ran both sides of the rope regarding the audience and the beloved announcer who prided himself on giving respect due to each local fighter. But as Diego rested on the table in the locker room after his latest triumphant bout, he wasn't feeling so promising. His girlfriend's brother and his punk friends had come along to watch him fight. Normally there was nothing wrong with such a scenario, except that his girlfriend's brother had a very important message for him.

"Yo, wazzup?" Luis said in an over-glorification of his accent and lurching street swagger. He rolled in, ignoring everyone else in the room and before Diego could even answer, continued on with the real reason for his visit. "La Familia, they says they wants you to take a

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dive when you go up against Munoz, homes." Luis nodded confidently, licked his lips and wrung his hands.

"And I say...*get the hell outta here!*" Diego's manager, the renowned Pappy O'Brien dropped the bandage scissors and shrilled into the sweaty locker room. "We've got no time for your middle school bullshit!"

"Step off, hombre viejo." Luis patted his torso in gangsta fashion. He and his friends drew closer and puffed out their chests.

"You little shits don't scare me." Pappy said and stood. He had been sitting at the champ's side until then but could take no more. He rose head and shoulders above his young adversaries. "I fought real men in my day, like Jack O'Laughlin, Nate Gunderson, Billy Young, Lucius Mathers and Brock Quarry. I sparred with Graziano, Frazier, Ali, Lyle and Marciano. Those were real men. Not like you little punks."

"Ancient history." One of the thugs snickered.

"Yeah, we ain't in'nerested in your resume." Luis stepped forward. "Homeboy here needs to take a drop in the fourth round with Munoz and if that ain't-"

Was all the skinny cholo got out before Pappy slammed the kid into the wall, startling others in the locker room. "And I said get the hell outta here!"

Luis recovered, brushed his wife-beater off and pushed away his shocked friends trying to help him to his feet. "Get off!"

"Come on, guys!" Diego stood and outstretched his arms between the two. "Knock it off! Luis, you gotta go, man."

"You got it, homes." Luis said, taking Diego's posture as his last chance and walked out of the locker room with his two buddies following behind. Outside in the hall Diego could hear them cursing and knocking over things that sounded like garbage cans. He shook his head as Pappy continued to remove the stained athletic tape from his hands.

"Buncha little punks." Pappy griped as he labored.

"He's just lost."

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"I don't care." Pappy exclaimed. "I don't give a rat's ass if he ever gets found, neither."

"C'mon, he's a good kid. Marisol's mother threw him outta the house when he got Graciela knocked up."

"Not my problem, kid."

"C'mon, Luis just needs to find his way, Pappy." Diego said. "Like me when I met you." He smiled.

"That kid ain't nothing like you, D." Pappy snarled. "You got something. He got nothing. You don't just come in here like you own the joint. Who does he think he is, trying to come in here like he's Pancho Villa?"

"Ouch." Diego chuckled at the characterization.

"Well, you know what I mean. You're different. You're not like those punks out on the street."

"I'm a good one, huh?"

"Aw, knock it off." Pappy blurted. "I'm in no mood for games. You know what I mean."

Diego smiled, closed his eyes and shrugged. He knew Pappy was old school and he was a little late in coming to try to change that generation. Back in the day, Pappy's generation would say something inappropriate and not have a care in the world and if someone was offended, to hell with them. When times began to change and it started to matter, it was always pushed off as a joke, but racism was no laughing matter to Diego. He had fought his share of fights in the schoolyard over someone saying something disparaging about him or his family. Racism was still as common as it ever was but it hid in dark corners now, put on suits instead of sheets and wasn't touted into the light as much as it once had been. He knew in the end that Pappy didn't mean it. It was the way of his generation as much as it was just Pappy being Pappy.

"You don't come in here into my business and act like no boss." Pappy spat. "I'm the boss. You're the boss. Them? They ain't the boss. They're the boss of nothing."

Diego nodded as Pappy continued to cut away at the bandages.

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"You really had Gutierrez up against the ropes in the 6th." Pappy smiled. "Kinda reminded me of the old days. You know why you're a good fighter, kid?"

"Why?"

"Cos you listen to me." His smile grew. "Every great fighter needs an even greater corner man. There, let's have the other meat hook." He said as he unraveled the last of the tape on Diego's right.

Diego handed him his southpaw. "So, you really think I can beat Munoz?"

"Cut yer tongue out!" Pappy bristled. "You'll not only beat him, you'll beat him bad."

"You think so?"

"I know so, D. And you wanna know why I know so? Cos they know it. That's why they sent those punks in here like that."

"Okay."

"It's one of the oldest tricks in the book. They know you're gonna wallop the shit outta their guy so they send some hired hooligans our way to shake up the joint but they didn't figure on account of you knowing their guy. Seen it all before, kid."

"But how they know Luis?"

"He's got a record, right?"

"Yeah."

"Well, one of their guys probably knows him from the joint. Like I said, oldest trick in the book. You don't walk through these tunnels and not know a thing or two about how the fight game works."

"I guess. But you shouldna done that."

"Done what?"

"Thrown him into the lockers. Marisol is going to give me hell for that."

"He disrespected the joint. He got what he deserved." Pappy grouched. "That kid has always been a little pain in the ass. Remember when we used to take him to Magic Mountain and he'd be crying cos he was too scared to go on the rides but we didn't have anyone to watch

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him so he had to go on? Or when we'd all go to Chavez Ravine to see the Dodgers and he'd cry on the ride home cos he didn't get a foul ball? Same kid, hasn't changed."

Diego laughed. "Should seen the looks on their faces when you stood up."

"Well, I may be old but I can still smack them into next week. They didn't call me Pappy 'Pack Mule' O'Brien for nothin'."

"That's right. They said you could take a punch like a pack mule and still be standin' to the last round."

"Damn straight." Pappy nodded. "Coulda been champ, too, if they hadn't suspended me and taken away my titles on account of the State Athletic Commission."

"Well, you can't take bets from the Mob, Pappy."

"Now he tells me." Pappy threw up his hands in mock disgust. "Tell me somethin' I don't know."

"You musta knew it was wrong back then."

"Let me tell ya somethin', kid. Back in those days, the Mob ran boxing. You didn't spit in the ring without the say-so of some capo. Now they act like it's all cleaned up. It ain't. The Mob just went inside, into the front door of the office, instead of doing business in the alley or through the back door. That's why I threw those bums out. I don't want the same thing happened to me, happen to you."

"Thanks, Pappy."

"There, kid. All done." Pappy said and mussed the fighter's hair. "You're a good kid. Remind me of my Derek." He said before his eyes trailed off.

"Derek is in a much better place."

"I know, kid, I know." Pappy started to become sentimental. "You're good to go, kid. Hit the showers. I'll catch you tomorrow."

By the time Diego toweled off and changed, Pappy was already long gone in his sky blue Cadillac. He thought about Pappy's son and how they had been about the same age but no matter what Pappy did to raise his kid right, the boy could not stay out of trouble, whether it

was stealing, drugs or accumulating gambling debts with the wrong people. His end was inevitable but still came as a shock to Pappy who, in typical paternal manner, turned a blind eye to him and loaned him money he knew he would never get back. A bullet through the back of the skull sent a simple message. It was an execution-style slaying and one that literally sent home the point that he had pissed off some very clearly dangerous people. It was also why Pappy stayed in the game. After his son's funeral he had been visited by the gang members his son had owed money to and was given a shakedown then and there. While many people of Pappy's generation had retired and were enjoying their last years, not exactly golden, Pappy was busy scraping together enough money to pay off his son's debts on a monthly basis. Unlike a collection agency, gang payment due didn't stop just because of death.

Diego had no clue about any of this. He just figured Pappy loved boxing so much that he kept at it and it kept him alive and motivated. Pappy did not want to involve his prodigy in his personal mess. It was embarrassing enough and he wanted to keep the kid's mind clear for the ring. The Munoz fight was going to be a big and well publicized match.

Throughout East Los Angeles there were hundreds of signs on telephone poles and billboards along the busier streets touting the fight as the pay-per-view event of the summer. Diego liked to train at different gyms to keep his perspective fresh. At every gym, there were always different hangers-on and flatterers in the corner and some of these were bookies or independent businessmen, as they liked to call themselves. They were there to test their odd-making observations and to see who the best fighter was. They would show up surreptitiously at Munoz' camp, as well. Everyone knew they were there and they were always part of the environment and nobody got hurt, save for the guy went champ to chump with one knockout.

Pappy noticed his boxer's friends had returned. "Hey, Diego! Gotta talk to youse, homie." Luis shouted out before Pappy had the security at the gym escort them out. "You know what you gotta do!" Diego shouted from the open door. "Youse do what youse gotta do, homes!"

Diego tried not to let the little punk mess with his mind. He had to keep his mind on beating Munoz, not taking a fall. As he sparred with the hefty Pablo Rosa, one of the great infighting partners of the sport, he began to ponder why Luis wanted him to get the message in the worst way.

Perhaps Luis was in trouble again and owed some of the gang chiefs' money and was planning to bet everything he had on Diego to take a hit. The truth was slightly more complicated. Luis made a huge mistake with his homies in thinking they could cut Mexico out of the drug trade and lied about how much they made from the sale of some of Mexican Mob's high grade cocaine to some businessmen in Vegas. Word got back to the godfather of the Mob to eradicate Luis and his small posse. When faced with paying up or lying down for good, Luis begged for his life and promised a huge payoff for fixing the Santiago v. Munoz card, saying he had an inside connection. This explained why Luis was so adamant about meeting up with Diego.

It also explained why Luis desperately tried to speak with Diego at his parent's house and how upon sight of Luis, Luis' own father came out with a baseball bat and chased his no-good bastard of a son out of the neighborhood, along with the barrio bums he called friends. As Diego slugged away at Pablo in the ring, he thought long and hard about agreeing to the idea.

But when Pappy disappeared days before the fight, kidnapped right out of his beloved powder blue Cadillac and was found beaten but alive, Diego decided not to consent to Luis' demands. Word filtered back that Luis would abduct his own sister as well as Marisol and Diego's infant daughter. Then, when nothing came of that, threatened Diego's non-existent parents and when the threat finally made it to Diego himself, Diego laughed it off. It was a last, frantic bluff of a desperate punk. They didn't call him "Killer Santiago" for nothing.

The billboards also called him by his other name in the ring, "Los Nino Milagros" for the fact that he had survived a car crash that killed his mother and crippled his father not long after his father won the middleweight title. He was eleven years old at the time and got out of the car unscathed. The name of "The Miracle Boy" also served him truthfully in the ring, as he never

lost a fight, except for a TKO and even that was because of a ringside judge who later admitted to being paid off. So, even when he lost, he won, the papers said.

Tension ran high in the community as Diego hopped up and down and shadowboxed as they made their way through the tunnel and into the arena under the glare of camera lights. Munoz had already gone down into the crowd, played the latest rap song that he had recorded and stood each side of the ropes, performed to the audience, making a charade of boxing and himself.

The men screamed for Diego as the women tried to touch him from each side of the aisle as the middleweight made his way out. Pappy walked next to Diego and their teams as he waded through a phalanx of security and LAPD on each side of him. "I'm glad you're here, Pappy." Diego yelled into the old man's ear who asked what he had said and then once it was repeated, he nodded.

"Gonna take more than a few thugs to keep me down." The old man grinned. "They forget I fought here many times before they were born."

Diego nodded, smiled, punched his gloves together and stepped up and bowed his way into the ring under the ropes. Munoz was still egging on the crowd as Diego shuffled his feet and threw a flurry of rights and lefts. He stopped as he cracked his neck from side to side with a fluid circular motion and his corner men took off his robe. They placed his mouth guard in and Diego returned to hopping up and down.

Munoz was already drenched in sweat from his pre-fight performance. He was finally corralled to the center of the ring as the announcer was eager to go over the usual rules of breaking clutches when he told them, a clean fight, no below the belt and once the 10 count starts, the boxer is to go over to a neutral corner. "Is that understood, gentlemen?"

The fighters touched gloves as the ring slowly cleared. The combatants went over to their respective corners to await the round bell. Diego crossed himself while Munoz played again to the fans. He was mouthing: "Fourth round, baby, fourth round." The crowd murmured

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nervously in their seats as the bell pealed, Munoz turned around and the fighters made their way toward the other.

Munoz circled his opponent as if to search him out but Diego literally didn't pull any punches. He gave him a quick combination rights and lefts to the body and tagged him on the chin. Munoz seemed a little dazed by this and gave him a few quick shots, mostly ducked by Diego. The round continued about the same until the bell rang, sending the fighters to their corners.

"This guy's a bum!" Diego spat into the bucket. "He'll be lucky if I let him last three rounds."

"Keep hitting him, kid. Watch his left hook. I saw him working out on tv last night. He's got a pretty good left." Pappy said as he wiped Diego's nearly sweat-free face and then leaned into him and said into his ear: "Watch what ya say, kid...remember, they got us guys wired for live tv."

Diego nodded and went back out. Munoz charged at him, having been coached by his various corner men. He made an awkward lunge at Diego and sent a right over his shoulder as the crowd booed. Diego bobbed and weaved out of the way and came up and nailed him with a left which sent Munoz backwards. The crowd erupted and Diego gave him a few hard shots to the body and cross-counterped at his opponent until the guy was unsteady against the ropes. Munoz countered with a solid, but ineffective hits to the head and then hugged at Diego. The referee came bounding over on the heels of his well-shined shoes.

"Break, fellas, break!"

Diego moved away and felt bad, figuring Munoz wouldn't last long on his own two feet but something he did pissed Diego off and he no longer felt any empathy towards him. As they broke, Munoz pushed at Diego. Diego could not believe him. The crowd erupted as Munoz strode triumphantly away. The ref pointed his finger.

"You do that again and I'm gonna cut you a whole point. I want a clean fight and I mean it." He said and made a motion with his hands for the fighters to come together.

Diego closed ranks on Munoz and gave him a flurry of perfect combinations to the body and then finishing it off by a left uppercut to Munoz's jaw. Munoz possessed little finesse in the ring, trying to avoid his much better opponent, while throwing half-uppercuts and jabbing at him. At best, Munoz was a brawler whereas Diego was more of a pressure fighter, getting in close with non-stop action. The second round ended. Diego shook his head.

"He's not even good enough to be my sparring partner!" He muttered as he sat down, not even breaking much of a sweat. Pappy didn't know what to do with him. In his 48-year career as a trainer, he felt his presence as almost unnecessary. Pappy shrugged at his second standing next to him. Pappy gave Diego some water and dabbed at him with a towel.

*This is the guy they want me to take a dive for?* Diego wondered to himself as he waited for the third round. *What a joke.*

Contrary to Diego's corner, Munoz's men were quite busy. Diego had opened up a small cut over Munoz's eye and as his cutman dabbed at it with petroleum jelly, greasing the wound over and instructing him that he had to do more than jab and to stay the hell away from Diego's brutal uppercuts.

The third round came and Munoz seemed to listen to his men. He caught Diego off guard a few times and got in close enough to deliver some good counter tags but it came at a cost. Munoz took a savage beating while working those punches in and by the end of the third, his eye was almost swollen shut. He was bleeding again from the cut over the same eye and the ref nearly stopped the fight but they were able to get the blood flow under control.

An already weary Munoz met the fourth round. Diego pulled out all of the stops in this round. He smacked at his opponent, tagged his chin with a few quick rights and lefts and then pummeled his torso with excruciating body blows. Munoz was a very good out-fighter but no one would have known it by looking at him. He planted his feet and counter-punched much of the bout. As the inevitable hold came after a missed overhand right, a dazed Munoz rested his cheek against Diego's shoulder and muttered: "I thought you were going to take a dive, what's going on?"

The ref split them apart and Diego took the mandatory step back and then distributed rights and lefts to Munoz until he hit the canvas. Munoz never knew what hit him. He staggered to his feet at the count of eight and the ref pulled on his gloves to see if he was still cognizant. "Yeah, yeah." Munoz nodded and met Diego. Being the ultimate out-fighter, he sent a few tired jabs at the classic in-fighter Diego, mostly to the back of his head in the three or four additional clinches he got himself into and was warned by the ref yet again. Being Diego fought so closely, it went against his opponent's technique and as a result, Munoz was unable to get out of his semi-crouch and launch his renowned hard left. The crowd began to get restless.

"No rabbit punches." The referee snapped and made a gesture at the back of his head.

As they broke, Diego met him with a flood of one-two combos again to the face. As a boxing style, Diego had very close and fast slips, allowing him to avoid most of any opponent's punches. As he pounded a practically helpless Munoz again and again, the ref stepped in and pulled Munoz out of the bout, waving his hands in the air. The crowd erupted and some threw programs and cups into the ring.

A triumphant Team Diego made its way through the tunnels and into the locker room. Waiting there was Luis and his two friends as well as a few other menacing-looking cholos.

"I axed you real nice, homes." Luis said.

"Why don't you get the hell outta here!" Pappy shouted.

"Listen viejo-" Was as far as Luis got when Diego hit the kid with one direct punch he never saw coming, sending him sprawling to the locker-room floor. It felt good, Diego smiled. He'd been wanting to do that for years.

Even though Team Diego vastly outnumbered the thugs by almost two to one, it didn't stop some of them from trying to play tough guy, pulling guns and knives and mixing it up with Diego's sidemen. It didn't stop them from getting their asses kicked, either.

With the ruckus, security came and called members of the LA County Sheriff Department who had been on hand just in case there had been any trouble. Diego mused that

the fight is supposed to stay in the ring and not spread to the locker-room. *It wasn't a Raider's game for crissakes*, he smiled.

During the preliminary investigation, the underside of the Mexican Mob infiltrating the boxing world came into the District Attorney's scrutiny and as a result, a major corruption trial ensued and Diego Santiago was deemed a marked man. For a fighter who wanted nothing to do but box, it was a hell of a corner. As a famous fighter, knowing he could no longer box without payback and fearing for the safety of he and his family, they were offered relocation in the Witness Protection Program in part for his testimony at the trial.

"Might wind up a dead man, but I still got my honor." Diego reasoned for not taking the fall as he and his family transferred to a secure town under Federal jurisdiction. He opened up a gym and began to train young men to take his place in the ring. For Diego, it was a dream deferred for doing the right thing.

When some of the kid's fathers, also in the Witness Protection Program in town, assumed they recognized him and put together the fact of his owning the gym and training up-and-coming fighters, Diego could only respond that they were mistaken. "None of us is who we pretend to be." Diego he would remind them. In the end, taking the fall for his family was the only dive he would ever truly allow.

The End

**Joseph Grant bio:** As a Pushcart Prize nominee, Joseph Grant's short stories have been published in over 260 literary reviews. He also has two boxing novels published by Fight Card Productions. A collection of his short stories is being published in Europe this year.