

*** *“Boys and girls, be ambitious. Be ambitious not for money, not for selfish aggrandizement, not for the evanescent thing which men and women call fame. Be ambitious for the attainment of all that a man or woman can be.” — William S. Clark*
(*grammatically edited version because a literacy quote shouldn't communicate the idea of capability to only half of the people that are going to read it*)

CATFIGHT
By Josie Raniga

The finish line is nearing. I'm so close I can taste it. Only a little more to go, and then I'll be done. Pumping my legs faster and faster with each stride, I know it's not long before I reach the end. My arms are swinging faster than before, and I can't feel it due to the pain, but I know there is a smile on my face.

But then I hear the crowd erupt into cheers, which can only mean one thing. I know I shouldn't, but I use my peripheral vision to see how close he is. I almost falter when I realise he's only a few strides behind. His legs move quicker than mine, his strides: longer, his breathing: more controlled. And so the distance between us starts to close off.

I know I won't have a chance to win for much longer if I stay focused on him though, so I refocus my line of vision to what's ahead: the finish line. It takes reminding myself of what's waiting at the end to keep going – a proud father. He doesn't usually come to my meets, running the boxing gym comes first, but today was the exception; it was my first ever mixed relay, and I am on the last leg. Remembering what I came here to do; to prove, was enough to get my rhythm back.

It works, I keep my lead, but only for a moment. The noise from the crowd snaps me back to the reality that my feet are hitting the ground too hard, my breathing is too shallow, and my whole body is starting to ache. Students, teachers, parents – they all chant *his* name. And

soon I can't block it out anymore. At this point, it seems like the oxygen I'm taking in slips back out before I can use it.

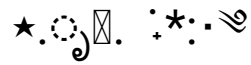
Why, I ask myself, can't you just breathe. Why, I ask myself, couldn't you have done one more lap in training. How, I ask myself, could you have thought that you had a chance.

The crowd booms as he passes me in the last 50 metres. My body doesn't want to give up, but my mind is the one in control, and I start to slow down. There isn't a point anymore, he is reaching the finish line, no more than 20 metres away.

But suddenly he begins to slow down too, jogging pace. With only 10 metres to go, he turns around and looks back at me. Seeing the smirk on his face, I realise then that he thinks he's giving me a chance because he knows I never had one to begin with. As he crosses the finish line there isn't much I can do except keep my head down and blink back tears that I know will sting as I make my way, slowly, to the end.

If the end to the race wasn't humiliating enough, the look on my father's face after I finish only makes it worse. I don't see him immediately, but as I walk out to the parking lot, I see my father leaning against the boot of his truck, a cigarette lit in hand. He doesn't say anything when he notices me approaching, but instead drops the cigarette on the ground, puts it out with his boot, goes to hop into the driver's seat, and turns the ignition on.

I start to feel my face flush with warmth, not from the humiliation, but now from anger.



“One, two. Good, now again”

“One, two. Faster next time”

“One, two. Better, again”

“One, two— What are you doing?”.

Down on my knees, I strain my neck to look up at my father. I’m struggling to breathe, but I reply anyway. “Give me a minute, I need a break”.

He doesn’t wait, though, and instead slaps the boxing pads attached to his hands together. “Championship is only 2 weeks away, Mia, now’s not the time to slow down”.

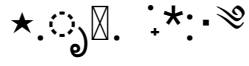
“I’m *not*”, I reason. “We’ve been at this for nearly two hours, how many more sets do we need to do?”, my question comes out in a bratty tone that I immediately regret using.

“Get up, now”, my father demands. I listen, staggering to stand up as quickly as I can.

“You will do as many sets as it takes for you to learn your combos”, is all he says in reply.

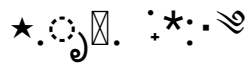
I don’t have the chance to protest before he puts up his hands.

“Go again, from the top”.



Sweat and blood wash off my face. I watch as it all slips down into the drain, never to be seen again. Putting my hands to my face, I wince at the feeling of new bruises forming over old ones. The small cut above my right eyebrow that doesn't ever get a chance to heal has opened up again. *I need to put more ointment on that*, I think to myself, but then groan remembering I just ran out.

I have been a competitive boxer since freshman year, and I can say without a doubt that showers are the only real reward to winning a fight. The feeling of warm, pressurised water hitting me in the face, compared to a hard glove, is something I will never take for granted. I spend twenty more minutes standing still in the shower, trying to let my body recover until the water turns cold. Then I go to school, bruises and all.



“You know what Mia, you should really consider some other career path outside of boxing”, Taylor says to me as he takes a seat at the lunch table. His tray hits the table hard as he drops it down onto the surface, making milk splash up out of his carton, and landing on Emma's shirt.

“Aw shoot, sorry Em ”, he apologizes, ”Let me go get you a napkin.” I watch him stand back up again and walk to the other side of the cafeteria, where the napkins are kept.

“He’s so clumsy sometimes, I swear”, Emma remarks as she examines the forming milk stain on her top. “Speaking of careers,’ she continues,” I seriously hope he never considers being a surgeon or something..that, you know, requires steady hands”, Emma says with an exaggerative glance down to her top and then up at me again. I can tell she is wanting to say more about Taylor’s clumsiness, but before the words can leave her mouth, he comes back, clenching a handful of napkins.

“Here you go, Ma’lady”, Taylor says with a bow, his hand extended, offering a crinkled napkin. With a scoff, Emma takes the napkin from his hand and begins patting at the mess on her shirt. Satisfied with himself, Taylor plops back down at the table. My eyes stay on him as he picks up his sandwich.

“What did you mean by that”, my question comes out quickly, stopping Taylor and Emma from before they can take their next bite. Taylor raises an eyebrow.

”Uh, ma’lady?, dunno like-”

“No, what you said before that”, I cut in. The look of confusion on Taylor’s face only turns into an even more puzzled one. “You said I should do something else other than boxing? Why do you say that?”.

His brow furrows, and he proceeds to take a bite out of his sandwich. I watch as the juice from his tomato sandwich escapes from the corner of his mouth, and drips down his chin, just missing his tray, and onto the table. He seems to chew at the speed of a sloth. At least he doesn’t talk with his mouth open, I think. Eventually he swallows, and clears his throat.

“I mean, like, it’s not like it’s going anywhere, right?,” he says, his focus still on the sandwich.

“Taylor! He’s just kidding Mia”, Emma says, shooting him an intense side eye. Now I’m the one with an eyebrow raised.

“What?”, I say immediately, which he mistakes as me urging him to keep going.

“I mean,” he clears his throat once more. “ It’s not like you’re going to be super successful, like how many females do you know in the boxing industry? I can’t name a single one”, he laughs to himself and goes to take another bite of his sandwich. Surprised at what I’m hearing, I blink.

“Wow..Thanks for believing in me, Taylor”.

To that, he jumps back in his seat with his eyes widened, and throws his hands up in the air in surrender.

“Woah, no, not like that, Mia”, he begins to defend himself. “I’m just tryna be..realistic, ya know?” He retorts.

Emma looks back and forth between us, and her eyes settle on me as she waits for my reply. But I don’t have anything to say. Seriously, what is anyone *supposed* to say after they’ve been told that it’s unrealistic to think their lifelong commitment is going to end up being a waste.

My wordlessness lets him continue:

“Look, you said you won all these championships, or titles of whatever..”

He pauses to suck a piece of his lunch out of his teeth with his tongue, then continues;

“What happens after that? I don’t think many people are into girl’s boxing”. The more he speaks, the more compelled I become to stop listening and change the subject. He obviously has no idea what he’s talking about. Rolling my eyes, I meet Emma’s gaze – the expression on her face tells me she is keeping quiet just to not provoke any more nonsense out of him.

“Shoot”, Taylor says. My gaze returns to him and I see that has somehow gotten his sandwich juice all over his own shirt now.

“Hold on, I’ll be back”, Taylor declares, and with that I watch as he gets up and leaves once more for the napkin station.

Suddenly the cafeteria chatter starts to fill my ears, to the point where it sounds like a hundred bees are buzzing around my head. At the same time, a lump has formed in my throat, and I can feel my eyes wetting.

“Mia, are you okay?” Emma asks with a worried look on her face. I want to tell her that I am, but the lump in my throat stops me. Trying to swallow it only makes the hot tears start to roll down my face.

“I’m okay–”. I stop myself. No, *I’m not*.

To stop me from embarrassing myself any more, I stand up, clutching my lunch tray, and start to walk in the direction of the cafeteria entrance. The sooner I get to the bathrooms, the sooner I can cry in peace. I don’t even know why I’m crying. *Realistic*. That’s what Taylor had been trying to be – realistic. But how could he be so insensitive? Doesn’t he know how hard I work, everyday, for something he deems unrealistic. Blinking profusely at this point, I don’t stop when I hear Emma call my name.

“ Mia! Come back”.

Surely everyone in the cafeteria was looking my way now, meaning that if I turned around they would see what a hot mess my face was becoming from the crying I was trying so hard to suppress – so I don't turn around. I continue to make my way across the hall, when I feel a hand grab me by the arm. I react immediately, almost dropping my lunch tray as I whip around to see who has stopped me, and it's *him*.

“Yo, Mia, where are you going? You're acting like I said something bad”, he asks.

“Maybe you did, Taylor. Do you even realise what you're talking about?” I ask, hopeful.

“What? Man, all I said was boxing isn't a good idea for a girl, plus it's so *aggressive*. I'm just looking out for you Mia”, he tries to reason. *You're actually such an idiot*, I decide to myself internally.

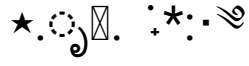
“Oh, so what else did you have in mind? A baker? Or what?”, I say, maybe a little too loud.

“Dude, you gotta calm down”, he says.

“What?”.

“Calm. Down. Mia”.

That's the last thing Taylor says before I throw my lunch tray and all its contents, right on Taylor's face.



Tick.

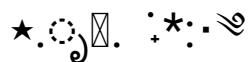
Tick.

Tick.

I watch the long hand of the analogue clock on the wall tick away for 10 minutes. 10 minutes is how long I've been sitting in the waiting room outside the principal's office. It is also, probably, going to be the same amount of time that I'll be spending on the punching bag this afternoon. Even more if my father takes any longer to get here. Maybe he's purposely trying to take a long time to get here. Seeing as he is the one in charge of how many minutes I spend on the punching bag each training session, it makes perfect sense. I mean, he is my trainer, so it's not like I can make any sort of excuse to get out of it. Gosh, how much longer—

“Sorry I'm late, traffic was bad on 55th”, my thoughts are interrupted by the boom of my father's voice as he enters the waiting room. I look to my right, and I see him at the school receptionist's desk signing in. I can't make out what he says next to the receptionist, but then she looks around and points directly at me.

He looks my way and points to his watch once he sees me. “Let's go”, he mouths, enunciating each syllable. With that he thanks the receptionist, turns around, and then walks out faster than he walked in, leaving me scrambling for my backpack and jacket.



In the car, I don't say a word until he does.

“What. Were. You. Thinking”, he breaks the silence. It's not a question, rather an insult. I know he's not looking for a response, and so I don't.

“Assaulting *a boy*? At school? Come on Mia, I didn't raise you to be like that. You're lucky I saved you from detention”, he says next. I stay quiet, my head down.

“Look Em, I need to know you're not going to do it again..I'm not asking for an apology, or why you did it, just say it's not going to happen again”, His focus stays on the road, but his tone is different – more stern. I don't say what he wants me to though, I don't say anything at all.

“Em”, he is starting to sound angrier with each word he says.

Leaving my father unanswered, I look down at my arm where Taylor had grabbed me. It wasn't a harsh red, the spot where he put his hands on me, but more like the colour of a new bruise before it turned purple. Not wanting to look at it any longer, I cover it with my hand and look out the window. I was used to bruises, from training, but this one felt different. I would've never let someone do that in the ring, they wouldn't have ever been able to. *A girl* wouldn't have been able to.

Taylor doesn't know what he's talking about. He doesn't know how to box. He doesn't know how to swing, or pivot, or duck.

All he would have to do is land one though.

What, no, what am I thinking? I'm the one with medals, I'm the one that trains everyday, I'm the one that wants this. But Taylor had made it sound like what I wanted was a waste of

time. Perhaps he was right, who did like to watch women fight? But that was a problem I'd only have to deal with *if*, somehow, I managed to become a professional fighter.

"I don't want to fight anymore", I say, breaking my silence.

At first he doesn't say anything. I watch for any sign of reaction, but his eyes stay steady on the road.

I start again, "Dad, I don't want to--".

"I know, Mia", he cuts me off, his eyes glued to the road. As we turn the corner, I realize that we are almost at the gym – I'm losing the time I have to talk to him about it.

"Okay, but did you actually listen to what I just said?," I start again. "I don't want to do it anymore". My father sighs.

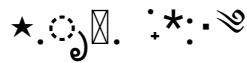
"I know Mia", he says once more. I blink.

"Dad, I'm telling you that I want to quit boxing, that means no more training, no more competitions, no more— just no more *everything*", I'm starting to sound desperate for him to acknowledge what I'm saying.

"Do you just not care? Dad? You don't care that I want to throw the last 5 years down the drain?"

At this point we are pulling into the gym parking lot, and my father still doesn't say a word. As we pull into an empty spot, he doesn't look my way when he says it, but finally he says,

"Your choice, not mine". With that he gets out of the car and walks to the gym.



My father's words ring through my mind over and over. It's been hours since we left the gym, where all I did was sit behind the front desk, signing clients in, and then out. No warm up stretches to get done, no punch drills to power through, no combos to learn. Nothing. I did nothing, and my father had let me. When it came the time to go home, I had looked at my father's face to see if he was serious about letting me quit. Like always, I could tell nothing from the look on his face.

Now, we are eating at the dinner table, and things have only gotten worse. The silence is louder than before as we eat. I can't take it anymore.

"Dad, about what I said earlier—"

"And what did I say in response?", he interjects.

Your choice, not mine. I shake my head.

"No, no I need more than that—"

He slams his fist down on the table, making the dishes clank with each other. For a moment, I am scared.

“You quit. It’s as simple as that, you’re giving up”, he says.

A puzzled look forms on my face. He thinks that I’m just giving up? This is not what was happening.

“What, no? I’m not just *giving up*”, I don’t even know where he got that idea from.

“What else could it be, Mia? This is just like the time you quit track because a boy beat you”.

I’m taken aback as I’m forced to remember that humiliating race. *How sad I had been, how disappointed my father had been.*

“But this time is so much more than just a boy, dad”, I try to reason, but my father doesn’t want to hear it.

“Mia, you know that’s not true—”,

I don’t wait for my father to finish before I stand up abruptly to leave. When I reach the front door, I grab my running shoes and begin to put them on. I’m still in my gym clothes from P.E., so I can get out of the house quicker. Slamming the door when I leave, I begin to run immediately.

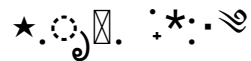
For as long as I can remember, where I can run; I can calm down. There isn’t a ring to confine me, or a person telling me to throw one more punch.

The air is cold and thin, and my nose starts to sting. I run through my neighborhood, and into the next one. My pace increases, and so does my breathing. The houses start to blur as I pass them, but I don’t stop. My steps start to become heavy. The sound of them slapping the pavement tells me I need to stop, but I don’t. I can’t stop. I won’t let myself. Stopping would mean giving in, into the fact that I’m stuck. My calves are burning, and my mouth is dried out. The loose

ponytail I had my hair in has come undone, and covers my face partially. So much so that I don't see him as he comes up behind me.

A man not dressed for running; he's wearing jeans and a green hoodie, suddenly appears behind me to my side. I don't think much of it though, perhaps he was running off steam, just as I was doing. But soon he matches the next corner I take, and the next, and the next.

Looking back to see if he was still near, I almost shriek when I see his eyes are glued to me – he's following me. The realisation kick starts my fight or flight. I know how to fight, but he was too big. So I begin to speed up. I cut at every corner I see, trying to shake him off. I can tell he is beginning to tire, as he starts to slow down. He continues to try for as long as possible to keep up, but I push harder. Within a matter of minutes, I lost sight of him. Without stopping, I sprint the whole way home, adrenaline pumping through my veins.



It's been over two weeks since the day I quit. Nearly two weeks since he let me. Two weeks since the last time I've stepped into the gym, into the ring. Almost two weeks since I last had my knuckles strapped and put on a pair of gloves. And two weeks since the night I had to outrun a man for my own survival. I still haven't told my father.

In those two weeks, I haven't spoken to Taylor once. Emma says he thinks I'm a "crazy person", or something like that. I tell myself it's fine.

A part of me regrets throwing my tray at him, but the rest of me wishes I had done more. I don't know which is worse. I try not to think about it.

School moves slowly, but the afternoons spent doing nothing move slower. I walk home from school, and when I get home my dad is at the gym training other people.

But today is different though. Unlike the past two weeks, when I walk out of school, I see him. My dad is leaning against the truck, his arms crossed in front of him. He doesn't see me at first, but it's like he can sense me because he starts to look around. Eventually he does. "Let's go", he mouths. I seriously hate it when he does that. He gets into the truck and starts the engine. I take a deep breath before heading towards the truck.

"Where are we going?", I ask after I fasten my seatbelt in the passenger seat. He doesn't say anything, only backs out of the school parking lot and drives.

It isn't long before we pull into the gym parking lot. Once we park, my dad jumps out and heads into the gym. I don't know if he expects me to follow him, but I do. The place hasn't changed a single bit in two weeks, which makes me feel comfortable for some reason I don't know. As I pass the front desk, I look at the framed photos of me on my dad's desk. With each step I take, the photos get older. In some of them I'm pictured wearing my medals, smiling as big as possible. As I move down the line, I see the time I lost my first tooth, when I rode a bike for the first time, and many more moments I can't remember having even happened.

The very last photo makes me stop, as it has many times before. It's the oldest, and most visibly damaged. Even so, it sits in the prettiest frame – its borders are coated in plastic pink and purple gems; little 7 year old me's art project.

In the picture, my father is holding me in his lap, I can't be older than three. I'm holding a boxing glove, seemingly trying to put it over my head. But that's not what catches my attention.

My eyes settle on my father's smile. He has the biggest smile on his face, his eyes are all squinty. And ever so slightly, the gap in between his two front teeth shine through. It makes a soft smile appear on my face. But then I remember what he would have been looking at – my mother behind the camera. It warms my heart to think about how happy she had made him, but pains me to realise I haven't seen him smile like that in.. *I can't even remember how long*. I have always wondered if the photo I'm holding in my hands is the last time my father smiled so big.

But today a new thought appears in my mind; I have never been able to make him as happy as my mother had. Before I can let myself go down that train of thought, I put down the frame and look up at the ceiling, taking a deep breath before looking around for my father. It occurs to me that I haven't heard him make a noise since we entered.

So, I call out for my dad. Instead of a verbal response, I hear a huge crash come from the storage room.

"In here", I hear my dad call out as I approach the storage room. I walk in and see him on the floor. I must look confused, because he starts to explain, "I was trying to look for the training pads, the new guy must've moved them around in here, heh". I only roll my eyes in response before reaching down to pull him up. He bends down to pick something up.

"Aghh, I knew they were in here", he says in a satisfied tone. He walks past quickly and out the door.

“Alright let’s go, that’s all I needed to grab”, he says, leaving the storage room in disarray. I bend down to pick up some equipment that fell off the shelves.

“Leave it, Mia”, my dad calls out. I let out a sigh and stand back up.

I almost walk past it on the way out, but it still manages to catch my eye.

OPEN NIGHT FIGHT, ANYONE AND EVERYONE IS WELCOME – SIGN UP HERE

Written in bold with black marker on a blank piece of paper, are the words ‘OPEN NIGHT FIGHT, ANYONE AND EVERYONE IS WELCOME – SIGN UP HERE’. Right below is a sign up sheet with the same title. For some reason, I walk towards it. There are handfuls of names listed, all of them seemingly belonging to a man. The photograph on my dad’s desk flashes in my mind for a split second. I shake my head and start to walk away, when a deeper part of me stops me.

“Mia, Let’s go!” My dad’s voice booms from outside.

“Coming, I need to use the toilet, wait!”, I say.

Standing before the sign up list, every emotion possible courses through me.

I think back to Taylor’s words, how sure he had sounded that all of this would be worthless. I feel anger. I think back to the night I ran until I tasted blood in my throat. I feel pain.

I think back to the image of my father smiling wider than I had ever seen before. I feel.. Desire.

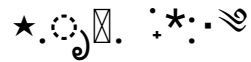
Desire to make him proud.

Desire to prove him wrong.

Desire to outrun him.

I don't think twice before going back and writing my name in thick strokes.

MIA CORTEZ



Three weeks have passed since I signed up for fight night, which is only a week away. I haven't told my dad, but maybe it's better he doesn't know. He also doesn't know I've been training. I wait to leave home once I know he's finished at the gym, and use the spare key under the mailbox to let myself in.

Once I'm in, I spend the next two hours doing everything I know how to do. One of the first things I learned was to imagine the punching bag as my opponent. I don't know who they'll be, so I improvise and practice my combos on Taylor for two hours.

Tonight was no different, up until I locked the door before heading back home.

"Mia Cortez".

His voice comes out in a hushed whisper, but still manages to make my heart drop. I whip around and almost instinctively resume a fighting stance. I have to squint to see him, but it doesn't take long to realise my father is standing no more than two metres away from me right now.

“Dad? What are you doing here?”, I ask in an accusatory tone, which I realise almost immediately was not the right choice. He doesn’t say anything, except walks up to me, and opens the front door to the gym again. He motions for me to enter, and so I do.

“How long have you been coming here to train late, Mia?”, is the first thing he says as he pulls out a chair for me to sit in front of his desk. I don’t say anything, but that wasn’t the right choice either.

“I said, how long have you been sneaking out, Mia”, this time he yells.

I start to cry, I can’t fight it this time. He looks down and sighs, and grabs the photo with the pink and purple border at the very end of the desk. My father examines it for a minute, before carefully placing it back on his desk.

“I saw your name on the fight night sheet, Em”, my face drops as I realise he knew the whole time. I feel even more stupid realising he probably knew I was coming here to train, it was only a matter of time before he caught me. Still, I don’t say anything. *This was a mistake, I start to think.* It feels like an eternity is passing before he finally speaks again;

“Look, I’m not going to stop you, but that doesn’t mean I think it’s a good idea”.

I look up at once, thinking I didn’t hear that correctly. Surely, I must’ve heard that wrong.

There’s no way.

“You’re.. going to let me fight next week?” I ask. He doesn’t say no, instead he nods. I look back down.

“But you need to promise me something”, he starts, “ Only do it for you, this isn’t going to prove anything to me”.

I don’t understand what he means, but I don’t say that, instead I nod.

“I love you, Em. I always have”, with that he gets up and walks out.



“One, two. Good, now again”

“One, two. Faster next time”

“One, two. Better, again”

“One, two– What are you doing?”.

My vision goes in and out as I try to look up at my father in his eyes. Down on the ground, I have to rest my bruised knuckles on my knees to stop myself from completely falling over. I take a moment to catch my breath, my eyes stay closed, before I try to stand back up.

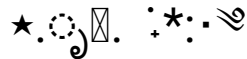
“I’m sorry, I lost balance”, I say as I try to shift my weight back onto my feet, but I immediately falter and my hands slam into the ground to break my fall. The impact sends a shock up my wrists and through my shoulders. In pain, I let out a deep groan.

“I- I’m sorry—”,

“You told me you were ready for this, Mia”, my father says, his tone unforgiving. I can’t meet his eyes, but I know he is looking at me with an expression of annoyance. Feeling like a waste of his time, I continue to apologize. But he doesn’t want to hear it.

“No, the fight is 1 week away, sorry isn’t going to cut it this time”, my father interjects.

His words sting, but I don’t show it, instead I use every ounce of strength that I have left in me to stand back up. Resuming my fighting stance, I tell him, “Go again”.



I’m standing in the locker room alone. I feel it. I feel the electricity in the air, all around me. I feel my legs, they’re getting continuously zapped, as though they are charging. My arms are light, but there’s weight in my fists. I feel my chest is tight, but I ignore it by squaring up. I keep my head down. I convince myself to not care if he’s here or not. His words replay in my head. *You don’t need to prove anything to me, or anyone else.* I take them in. At this moment, it makes sense now.

Tonight is fueled by the need to prove myself to others. Taylor. My father. But it shouldn’t have been. Tonight isn’t about them. It’s about me. I don’t need anyone’s permission to

try. No matter the outcome I'll know, this is my chance that I'm giving to myself. Before I walk out, I make myself a promise. From now on, I will do everything for me, not anyone else.

Walking out to the ring, I stop and scan. Then I see him. My father is facing me on the opposite side of the ring. He doesn't see me, but I can see an angry expression on his face. At the buzz of the crowd, he looks up. Our eyes meet.

"Let's go", he mouths.

To my surprise, a smile spreads across his face, and then onto mine. Then I hear my name over the speakers. That was my cue.