

BROKEN LEATHER

Jonathan Starke

1985

Izzy had a cloud of blood in his eye. I could see it forming during the middle rounds of a nontitle match at a casino in southern Missouri. He got cut right across his eyelid in the opening seconds of the fifth, broke a seam in his skin that trickled blood down. I was in his corner, slapping my palms hard on the canvas.

“You’re fighting with one eye now,” I said. I could see it all under the heavy ring lights, looking right through the ropes. We were down there fighting a young kid from Tepito named Santiago Medina. Twenty-two, about the same age as Izzy. Medina was thick for a middleweight. His arms and legs were stunted, and he had a rangy midsection. He wasn’t made to be a boxer like Izzy was.

“You’re dropping your left. Keep up the left. Keep it up!”

Izzy was tired and wasn’t defending. His cardio was weakened by a bug he’d caught a few days before the fight. Once the cut was open, Medina threw a flurry of well-timed jabs that moved Izzy off balance and over to the ropes. Medina was throwing four- and five-punch combinations, looking like the sharper fighter. Medina threw an overhand right that broke open the cut above the eye, and Izzy went against the ropes and grabbed for Medina. Each man rested his head on the other’s shoulder. Blood from Izzy’s eye ran down Medina’s back in a wavy line. When the ref stepped in to break up the clinch, Medina snuck an illegal elbow to the bleeding eye. The bell rang, and Izzy came back to the corner. I took his mouthpiece out and fed water to him. Arnie, my cut man, went to work on the eye, pressing the skin above with cotton swabs and sweeping his hand over the gash with salve.

“Can’t see out of this eye,” Izzy said.

I stood over Arnie’s shoulder, weighing the damage. There was a lot of scar tissue around that eye.

“It’s deep. It’s too open,” Arnie said.

“Can you close it?” I asked.

“Eh.” Arnie held Izzy’s head back and looked real close.

“Call it?” I asked.

“I’d say so,” Arnie said.

“Don’t call it, Ship,” Izzy said.

“You want to be blind, Iz? That what you want?”

“We’re gonna finish.”

“You couldn’t fight with one eye fresh.”

“Don’t call it.”

The eighth was about to start. Arnie went through the ropes and jumped down from the ring.

“Christ,” I said. I hit Izzy on one of his sweaty arms. I put his mouthpiece in and gave it a hard push with my palm to keep it tight to the teeth. “Get your gloves up, for fucksake. Protect yourself.”

Izzy nodded. He smiled real big.

“You’ve got one, maybe two rounds left. You don’t knock him out, I’m calling it. You only use that jab some. I want to see power shots. Show me two hooks to the head and heavy straights. You hit that, he fears your head shots, then you go to the liver.”

Izzy stood, and I took the stool. I touched him again on his arm. I jumped from the ring, and as my feet hit the floor, the bell sounded for the sixth.

1987

On a face-numbing morning in February, a few days after my sixty-fourth birthday, I found out Izzy had killed himself. I don’t know who I expected to tell me or how I really expected to hear it, but there it was, right in the sports section of the *Kansas City Star*. “Pro Boxer Hangs Self.” The article didn’t mention why he did it. Didn’t talk about how he went around for the last two years able to see out of only one eye, unable to box right after his bout with Medina. Should have said, “Half-Blind Boxer Kills Self, Trainer at Fault.” That’s how I saw it. The article could have said anything. It wouldn’t have mattered.

Izzy won that fight against Medina. It went to the final rounds, put the decision on the judges’ scorecards. I always hate a fight

going that far, because there's no telling what they saw or thought they saw in the ring. I remember telling him in the tenth, "Come on, Iz, you have to rock this guy. Break his will. Leave it all out there." We say things like that, "leave it all out there," and then someone does and loses everything. I should have called the fight in the sixth. That's what you're there for—some sense behind the violence. A boxer could die at any time out on that canvas. My man didn't die in the ring, though. That's why the press didn't think of mentioning the fight with Medina. They didn't see him the week after like I did.

1985

"Fuckin' Mary," I said when I saw his face. He'd come out of the locker room with his gym bag over his shoulder, his hands all taped up.

"What?" he said.

"Your fuckin' eye."

"I'm fine, Ship," he said. He'd called me that since he was a boy. In one of our first workouts he called me Captain, and I told him I wasn't just the captain, I was the whole fucking ship.

Izzy tossed his bag onto the floor. I grabbed his face with both hands like I was going to kiss him, pulled the bottom of his bad eyelid down with my thumb. His skin was purple and puffed all around.

"Iz, it's awful bloodied."

"I saw it. I know." Izzy pushed my hands away.

"You been icing it?"

"Here and there. Doesn't bother, really."

Izzy was tough, but I knew this wasn't one he could just walk off. "Cold meats? Frozen bags of peas?"

Izzy laughed real deep. "Regular old ice in a rag," he said.

"Thatta boy," I said. "But it looks pretty bad still."

"Let's work," he said and bent down and unzipped his bag. He pulled out his gloves, once a soft red but now creased and faded, the leather coming apart.

"Let's see some shadow work first."

"I did my shadowboxing in the locker room."

"Do some more for me," I said. Izzy let out a puff and walked

over to the mirror. I followed and stood a few feet behind him and to the side. "One-two-one," I called out.

Hiss-hiss-hiss. Jab-cross-jab.

I loved to hear that sound, the rhythm. Just man and breath and body.

"One-two. One-two-five-four."

Hiss-hiss. Hiss-hiss-hiss-hiss. Jab-cross. Jab-cross-uppercut-hook.

"Let's see some headwork."

Izzy bobbed left and right, ducked his head under and weaved back in fluid motions like he was underwater.

When I felt satisfied, I sat on the ring apron and helped him put his gloves on. I saw the blood twister in his eye, looked at it real close. It swept all the way across the pure white of his eyeball. He probably couldn't see fully out of that eye.

"Need that tighter?"

"You want to lose circulation?" I pulled a little harder on the strings inside the wrist of his glove. I had it propped against my thigh. "Better?"

Izzy nodded and rolled his shoulders back.

I had him hit the heavy bag for twenty minutes. I sat in a steel folding chair and watched as he swung the bag away from his body and bobbed to one side and then the other, avoiding the bag as if it were a vicious opponent coming at him. His footwork was on-point. His punches landed stiff. He was snapping at the end of his jabs, throwing counterpunches at an unseen opponent, occasionally clinching the bag, then letting it go and offering a quick hook to the height of its hard, leather face.

I walked behind the bag and held it for him. I leaned my body into it, my cheek against the leather.

"One-two-two," I said. The proper punches followed. The impact shook my body. "One-one-one." Same result. "One-one-four-one," I said and shifted the bag a little and threw some feints at him with the arm on the same side as his bad eye. He didn't seem to notice. Probably relying on his instincts. The things his feet and hands and heart told him that his eyes couldn't. I stopped moving the bag and put my hand up.

"Come here," I said.

Izzy came over, and I covered his good eye with my hand.

“What do you see?”

“You standing there.”

I cocked my free arm back, the first time I’d ever held up a fist in front of a defenseless Izzy.

“What am I doing?”

“Nothing.”

“What am I doing?”

“Doing nothing.”

I took my hand away from his good eye but kept the fist up. Izzy saw me then and put his arm to the side of his head to block the possible punch. He cradled his arm there against his ear. Such a smooth and natural reaction, beautiful, born of all I’d taught him. He really was half-blind.

“It’s done.” I could barely say it.

“Can’t be.”

“Jesus, Izzy.”

“What’s wrong, Ship?”

“Jesus.”

1987

The papers just said he hanged himself. There weren’t many details. He was cremated without a wake. Nobody but the coroner and the man who burned him up got to see Izzy for the last time. I could have used that. I needed something more. I’d seen his blood, wiped it away from his face with my hands. I’m sure we’d mixed blood a time or two. I’m sure he had some of me in him, and I’ve got some of him in me.

I called down to the gym Izzy’d been working out at for the two years after we parted. Iron Mitts. It was nothing like Gabe’s, where we used to train with simple torn-and-taped bags, rusty barbells, squeaky boards under the canvas. Iron Mitts had glossy speed and heavy bags. Shiny silver dumbbells like nobody did any work in there. The paper said that’s where he had killed himself, and I wanted to know more about it. Jason Nabato ran the place and told me over the phone that Izzy came into the gym to lift weights and hit the bags late at night. Nabato had given him a key so he could do workouts after-hours. He told me Izzy probably

came in around one or two in the morning that night. He put in a long workout. His gloves were full of sweat, and they found his torn knuckle tape in the garbage.

Nabato said he came in to open the gym at dawn and found Izzy hanging from a weight cable. He'd put a pin in the weight stack at the 220-pound mark, wrapped the cable that was threaded through the pulley around his neck, and jumped off a bench. It's hard to think of him swinging there in that cold gym, just rocking back and forth with the ring only ten feet away.

1985

"I can't do it anymore," I said over the phone to my cut man.

"Izzy was a great kid, a great fighter, but you can't just leave."

"Consider me gone, Arn," I said. "Nothing between you and me."

"You're taking it all personal. It's not your fault. So he goes around half-blind for the rest of his life. Worse things could have happened."

I rolled what he was saying around in my head.

"You're telling me this sport isn't personal?" I said.

"You have to see it as business, otherwise when your boy's in there you make decisions based on emotion. You didn't pull him from the fight. Okay. That was a calm decision. You thought he could finish Medina before it got to the cards or at least that he could handle the damage. You had your wits about you. There are other Izzys out there."

"You can say that. That's simple coming from you." I was twirling the phone cord with my index finger, wrapping it up tight and releasing it.

"Meaning what?" Arnie asked.

"I've been with him for eight years, practically raised him."

"All right, so what? What are you telling me?"

"I don't know, but you've got your things there at home that I don't."

"What?"

"People. Things."

"Shirley and the kids?"

I let the phone cord unwind one last time and just let it go. I dug my elbows into the counter. “Sure,” I said.

“What do they got to do with this?”

“You have other things. Course you don’t take it all personal in the ring.”

“My choice.”

“Fuck, Arn, you know I don’t have anything else.”

“Your choice.”

“It’s about more than just a choice.”

1987

In April, a delivery man came to my door with a small box and an envelope. The letter was from an attorney’s office. Izzy had left a note on the box, saying he wanted it to get to me after his death. I didn’t open it at first. I kept walking around my apartment and setting it down places. Putting it on the counter next to me when I made scrambled eggs in the morning. Laying it on the sink when I shaved. Placing it on top of the TV set next to my framed photos of Eddie Futch, Angelo Dundee, and Cus D’Amato. I’d try and watch some soaps or game shows while spooning cereal, but I’d end up staring at the box. A few days later, I decided to open it.

Izzy had taped around the box real good. He was used to taping things tight, all those years of wrapping his wrists and knuckles. Making sure it wove just right between his fingers and around his thumb. Always had to be so careful with that thumb sticking out, the lone finger set off the hand. And there I was with a box cutter trying to slice through all this damn tape.

Inside was a plastic bread bag. There were all these little pieces of paper inside—different shapes and sizes and colors. Torn legal paper, napkins, receipts, business cards. Any damn thing a man could write on.

The first one I pulled: *Ship ran me hard today. Said I need more protein. Go out and buy some ham and steak. He knows.*

1985

A few weeks after I cut Izzy loose, I retired from the whole mess. Izzy was the last title contender I was training, the one I

had focused most of my efforts on. I got together with him one morning at Morrison Park, the place where I'd watched him jog around the pond in a pair of old sweats for hours and hours. You total all that up and it's days and weeks even. I'd probably watched over Izzy more than I'd done anything else in my life.

"Ship," I heard over my shoulder as I sat on a bench staring at the pond. I turned. Izzy had his hands in the pockets of his faded jean jacket. He looked exhausted.

"Take a breather," I said.

"How you been?" Izzy asked, sitting down beside me.

"In the shitter." We both laughed. "You?"

"Doing okay. Be better if you came back."

I put my hands together, leaned forward and held them between my knees. "You know I can't do that. You shouldn't even be thinking about this as a career anymore, Iz."

"My life. Your life. What else we gonna do?"

I looked at him. He was sitting back against the bench with his hands in his pockets, looking out over the pond. The blood cloud was still heavy in his eye, floating in his vision of the world. I wondered what he could actually make out across the pond.

"You have to find something. Arnie's got connections to the warehouse on Tenth. His wife's brother knows the foreman. We could set you up with a position. I know it's just a strength job, but that's all we've got right now."

"I can do more than that."

"I know, Iz."

"Going to train with or without you, Ship. Rather be with."

"You know you can't fuckin' do that. You want to go blind permanently? How could you work then? Where's your money going to come from? I don't want that on me."

"Iron Mitts has a trainer that wants to work with me."

"Who, Albin?"

"Yeah."

"He doesn't know how bad your eye is."

"Just you and Arnie."

"Yeah."

"Nothing else I want to do. I don't know how you could leave so easy."

"Nothing's easy. Even what seems easy never is."

He was still leaning back against the bench. Stoic face. Eyes wide open. You could never tell how he felt, what he was thinking. He was always hidden behind this mask of calm. I'd turned him into some boxing machine that understood only one thing now.

"I'd like your blessing," Izzy said.

"What?"

"I want you to bless me."

"What, like a priest?"

"Just want you to say it's all right I go and do this."

"I can't do that, Iz. You know I can't do that with your eye all fucked up to high heaven."

"It's all I want right now."

I thought it over. I folded my hands and unfolded them. I kept doing that.

"I can't. I'm sorry."

"Okay."

"I know you understand why." But I think he couldn't understand, because I knew where his love resided, and to say I couldn't bless him in his decision was like saying I didn't understand that love or where it was coming from or where it needed to go.

"Okay," he said. "I'll catch you, Ship. Got things to do."

The two of us stood. We put our hands out to shake. I pulled him to me instead and held him for as long as I could. When Izzy let go, I still didn't see what I wanted in his eyes, only this distant look. He walked off then, a dip in his stride as he stepped over leaves in his leather boots.

1987

I decided to date again after Izzy died. In the past I'd tried, too, but you can't manage having someone in your life and living inside a boxing gym. It was one or the other, and you can't be great at either if you don't focus all your efforts on that one thing. I suppose I wanted to be a great trainer more than anything else. It's all I really knew. I had seen a few women here and there, but after a while I just quit trying.

Madelyn was this woman in her late fifties who was always

coming around the gym to talk with Arnie. She owned a flower shop a few blocks from us and knew Arnie's wife, and she would drop in every so often. Sometimes between holding the mitts for Izzy I'd step over and say a few things to her. I remember talking to her once about how she got started with the flowers. One of the mitts was in my hand and the other was under my arm. I felt the sweat rolling off the mitt. She said she worked flower beds with her mother as a kid. I couldn't picture a pretty woman like that with her knees in the dirt. She said they showed flowers in Oregon, or maybe it was Washington. I could only half listen to her because I could hear Izzy's breaths in bursts as he shadowboxed behind us. Never was too good at talking to women. How does any man make conversation with a woman out of weaves and jabs and hooks, if that's all he knows? It seemed the grit of the gym didn't bother Madelyn, because she came up to the ring sometimes and watched the sparring, didn't flinch if a guy took a real nasty pop. She would just laugh and cover her mouth and look away like it never happened. That gave me some hope about her.

I got her telephone number from Arnie a few weeks after Izzy passed and gave her a call. I told her who I was right when she picked up the phone. She breathed hard into the receiver like she'd been skipping rope.

"What are you up to?" I asked. I had Izzy's bread sack in my hands and was stretching it out and pushing it together like an accordion. Some of his notes were still inside. Most were lying around my apartment.

"I've been going from the car to the house, hauling in groceries. I thought I heard the phone from the garage," she said. "Well, did hear it. There you are."

"Yeah," I said.

"So, how are you?"

"I got your number from Arnie. Hope you don't mind."

"Not at all. I'm kind of flattered, actually."

"That's a relief. I thought maybe now was a good time to get back in touch with you. I've been retired awhile. I don't know if you heard." I pulled one of the notes out and looked it over.

"Well, I'm glad you got in touch. I've actually been out of the state for a few weeks," she said.

“Oh, where to?”

“I went to see my mother. She’s still sick.”

“I’m sorry. Really.” I’d heard Madelyn talk with Arnie a few times about her mother. Breast cancer that seemed to pop up and fade away, pop up and fade away. Attack against her body like those boxers who don’t fear tired.

“Well.” I dropped the note on the coffee table and reached in for another. “What I called about was some dinner. I mean, I called to ask if you wanted to meet me out sometime this week. If you don’t have anything else going on.”

“I could do that. What night are you thinking?”

If I had a boy. Train in the morning. Parks in the afternoon. Chocolate milk at night.

“What’s that?” I held the note. I kept rereading it.

“What night are you thinking?”

“Oh, any night’s fine. You pick.”

“Let’s do Friday. That would be great for me.”

“Friday. Good. It’ll be good to catch up,” I said.

I hung up the phone. I couldn’t put the note down.

If I had a boy.

1985

Even though I couldn’t give Izzy my blessing, I didn’t just disappear on him. Being retired gave me plenty of time. I’d walk down the street with a foam cup of coffee and stare through the windows of Iron Mitts. They had it all set up so you could see into the gym from the outside. It wasn’t like that at Gabe’s. We didn’t have any windows because it wasn’t about being seen. It was about busting your ass in the dim light and not caring about who was watching you or what they might think. It wasn’t about the big lights, the spectators, it was about the way you moved around the bag, how you looped your hooks, how you shot your jabs. It was about the one heart you shared. The beats from trainer to boxer. *Bump-bump*. The quick one-two.

Through the glass, I could see my guy in there. He’d gained a little weight, probably pushing the size of a light-heavy. I didn’t know if it was depression or the way they were feeding him. He was working with Albin Mortensen. A pretty good trainer, but

the kind of man who was always looking for a fat payday over a good fight. Albin babied his champs, was known for putting them in fights with slugs after they'd won a belt. A slug had no chance against a fighter with gold wrapped around his waist. Everyone knew that, but a win was just another number on a man's record, regardless of who his opponent was. The numbers could make no judgment.

Albin was holding the mitts for Izzy. I could see Albin's mouth open and close in fast movements. He was calling out the numbers that corresponded to the punches he wanted. Every trainer associates a different number with a different punch. I kept mine simple. The more complex the punch, the higher the number. With a guy like Izzy, no technique was complex to him anymore. I'd trained him from thirteen, and he didn't hear those numbers anymore like they were numbers. They'd lost all that meaning, like when you say a word over and over and it blurs.

One and jab became the same thing to Izzy. One-jab. One-jab. He probably saw one as just a symbol for that thing he'd do—shoot his left arm out straight, turn his fist over at the last second. Make it snap on the pad, crash right into the chin of a drowsy opponent. One beautiful movement. And it doesn't last forever or anything, but the beauty of repeating something quickly for a short while is that a person forgets what the word was supposed to mean in the first place.

As I watched him move about in front of Albin, I could tell the blindness was bothering Izzy. Albin didn't notice a damn thing. Izzy was keeping his left up higher than his chin. Had it at eye level. Albin probably took that as Izzy being smart and protecting himself well. I knew better. Izzy used to let that hand drop for a couple good reasons. One: it allowed him to bait an opponent who thought he was lowering his hand out of being tired or a loss of will. Two: it enabled him to paw at his opponent, get a sense of space and separation. I told him a hundred times before, you have to ask yourself, at what distance from your opponent can you be hit, and at what distance can you be most effective in hitting him? It's all about the balance of ultimate punishment, measuring an invisible distance so you can put an actual physical hurt on someone who's occupying the ground on the other side. In the space: blood and movement and air and expectations and fear and

dreams and the unknown. That's where it all resides. It's all in the air between them.

I watched for a while, taking sips and swirling the coffee around, feeling the heat go between my teeth and splash my gums.

What I hated most about watching over Izzy was that I couldn't let him know I was there because then I'd be giving him an unspoken blessing. My biggest fear was that he would get hurt even worse in the ring, and I didn't want that on my conscience. I felt I'd done enough already. It was also hard to watch him with Albin because I couldn't let him know about his mistakes and how he looked too tight in the shoulders and sometimes wasn't rotating enough on his back leg when throwing a hook, how his uppercut wasn't coming from his torso and powerful legs. Maybe I just wanted to hear that old breathing again. The *hiss-hiss* of the punches, the way each came out of him like an air hose, plugged and unplugged, timed just right, on and then off, on and then off. *Hiss-hiss. Hiss-hiss.*

1987

Christmas coming soon. Got Ship some sneakers. He's going to flip. Never had sneakers like this. Ship's going to be a fashionable old man.

Chipped tooth sparring. Ship says no big deal. Didn't feel it. Made a joke about a new mouthguard for toothless folks.

Cold today. Saw my breath in the apartment.

Met a girl playing pool. I told her she was a shark. She was all smiles and gave me her phone number and told me to stop by work at the Nine. Ship says ladies take my mind off the game. One track takes you only one place, they say.

1977

A man called Gabe's one day in the fall. Said he was a guidance counselor at Orville Middle School and had a thirteen-year-old

boy he wanted me to look at. I said I didn't train kids. He told me this boy had been beating people up in their homes, taking their money, their valuables: TVs, stereos, records. Said the boy needed a place to come after school to keep him in line and channel his negative behavior into something positive that would build character. The kid's mother had died recently, and he'd been in and out of homes.

"Isaac Brody," the counselor said when he brought the boy in the following day. The boy was skinny. His T-shirt was too small and came up a few inches from his waist. He was mostly ribs.

"Hey," I said, extending a hand to the boy. He reached up with a solid hand, midsized in width but larger than some of my guys'. His shake was limp.

"I'll leave you two," the counselor said, and went over near the door and took a seat on one of the metal folding chairs. He crossed one leg over the other and pulled a newspaper from his coat.

"What are you here for, Isaac?"

"Told me I have to come here or else."

I laughed at the "or else." He didn't see the humor in it.

"Why are you breaking into homes?"

He didn't say anything, only crossed his arms. He breathed in heavy and looked around the gym. He turned his whole body to look like he wasn't interested.

"How about you show me your stuff?"

Isaac turned back to me. "Like what?"

"Like a boxing stance. I hear you've been beating people up."

"So?"

"Look," I said, and bent down a little and held my hands up, palms open, on either side of my body. Held each about a foot in front of my shoulders. "Let me see you in a stance."

Isaac hesitated, glanced over his shoulder at the counselor who hadn't looked up once from his paper. Isaac took his time unfolding his arms after he turned back. He took a stride away from me, stood there on his toes. His shoulders and legs were squared with me, which left him open to a number of punches. He put only his right fist up and let the other hang near his belly.

"Oh, for fucksake," I said. I dropped my hands and walked forward.

“What?”

“How you been beating people up in that stance?”

“I wrestle them down *then* punch,” he said. He got out of the stance and stood there regular.

“Well, you can’t wrestle when you box. This is a science, not a fuckin’ free-for-all. Get back in that stance.”

He didn’t say anything, only returned to his awkward stance. He knew something was wrong with his first try, so he changed it some by twisting his shoulders toward the arm that was cocked and raising the other arm slightly so it wasn’t against his body.

“That’s better, but you need to put that left up. You’re a righty, I’m guessing?”

“Damn right,” he said.

“You’re not old enough to swear, and scoot that left foot forward. Get those feet staggered so you can move right. You want to get knocked over by a goddamn gust of wind, or what?” I stepped closer to him and got down on my knees and moved his feet for him with my hands. When I got his feet into position I stood back up.

“Yeah, good. You’re already smart and on your toes there. I like that. Now, bring that other fist right up near your jaw. Yeah, the left. Good. Let the right drop a little. Yeah, that’s it. You got it. Now bounce a little. Put some spring in those shoes. Good. Better. You’re like a famous fuckin’ two-stepper there.”

Isaac was feeling it, I could tell. He had a nice light to his face now. I put my hands up again. “Throw a one,” I said.

“A what?”

“A jab. You know what a jab is, right?”

“Heard of it.”

“Well, now you’re going to do it. Throw that left out from your jaw and keep it in a straight line. Turn your fist over at the end. Aim it right here under my lip.” Isaac threw the jab. It was some first punch. I told him to hold it at the end. He did. It sat there hanging frozen between us.

“How’s that?” he asked.

“Great. Now let me see a two, a straight right. Pull back that jab and come at me with a two,” I said. There was fire on my breath. I

could feel things happening, something really starting. He threw a right, and it looked just as sharp as the other, except for a minor thing. “You have to twist that torso. Pull from down in your legs and move the middle of your body like this.” I showed him with my own body, twisting my wrinkled gut.

“That?”

“Yeah, better. You’re getting it,” I said. “Now make sure you’re breathing right. Let it shoot out of your nose. Pretend like you’ve got a cold and you’re trying to push out a shitload of snot. Now throw a one-two.”

Hiss-hiss.

“Yeah, that’s it. Keep your shoulders up. Try and touch those babies to the bottom of your earlobes. There you go. Now pull those hands back fast so you can’t be hit. One-one-two.”

Hiss-hiss-hiss.

“One-two.”

Hiss-hiss.

“Again.”

Hiss-hiss.

I yelled over to the counselor that he could leave. He looked up from his paper a little confused and watched us from the chair, me calling out numbers to this boy and the boy moving his fists like he’d been born to do nothing else.

“Again.”

Hiss-hiss.

I could see everything before us. For the first time I knew I really had something.

“Again.”

Hiss-hiss.

He was going to be a champion. He had it in his guts and build and the way he just knew how to do these things that a person couldn’t possibly know unless he’d been handed some kind of powerful gift.

“Again.”

Hiss-hiss.

And I’d never heard that sound so clear, this boy punching before me, the sound coming from him like a snake coiled around

itself and ready to strike, the warning hiss cut off each time as if choked by a hand and then released.

1987

I took Madelyn to one of the nicer restaurants in town. The kind you dress up for, suits and brightly colored cocktail dresses. I hadn't been out like that in years.

I put on a tan suit jacket. It had taupe patches at the elbows that I thought she might like. I took Izzy's bread bag out of my everyday windbreaker. I'd started carrying the bag around with me. A lot of the notes were still scattered around my apartment, but new ones, unread, remained in the bag. I pulled out a note: *Seen some Lincoln Logs at the dumpster. Haven't seen them in years. Pocketed some.* I folded the bread bag into squares until it was able to fit inside the breast pocket of my suit jacket.

"Thanks for getting me out of the house," Madelyn said when we were done with the meal and started in on drinks. "I'm always checking in with Mom and seeing how that whole thing is going. It's nice to just get out once in a while."

"I know what you mean," I said. I looked over to the bar and watched the man back there pouring drinks, holding several big bottles by the necks. He had the necks between his wide-spread fingers. He couldn't hurt a thing with those long, bony fingers, no matter how hard he balled them up.

I took Madelyn's hand, and squeezed her warm fingers. She still had wonderful circulation. That's the one thing I feel like I've come to know about women, at least the few I've had in and out of my life—they circulate their blood in a steady way. It just runs all smooth through their body and to the proper places when it needs to be there. Mine, it just always comes and goes, my hands and feet so cold in the winter, overheated in the summer.

We sat quietly. I slid my drink back and forth. Madelyn kind of looked over her shoulder like she was expecting someone.

Out of nowhere, I said, "I've got these notes."

"What?"

"These notes he wrote and stuffed in a bread-loaf bag and put into a cardboard box that he taped the shit out of. I don't know

what to do with them.”

She was quiet. She pulled her hands into her lap and said, “Oh.”

“You see what I’m saying? I’ve got all this shit now, and I don’t know what I’m supposed to do with it.”

“Wait, who left you what?” She tilted her head to the side like what I’d said made no sense. I turned to look at the bartender again. How easy it would be to work a job where you got paid to smile and look good and pour drinks for people who saw you as some kind of savior because you always had the right thing to fix their problems.

I reached into my breast pocket and felt the rustle of the plastic bag, those notes so thin and fragile. It made me stop what I was doing, what I was going to do.

“Never mind,” I said.

Music played for the first time. Some kind of mid-tempo Latin music with trumpets and shakers and heavy drums. Someone dimmed the dining room chandeliers and illuminated the dance floor with a soft, purple light.

“Hey, let’s go have a dance,” she said.

“I can try.”

We stood. I dropped some money on the table. I finished my drink before following Madelyn to the dance floor. She put one arm around my back, and I did the same with her.

“Take my hand here,” she said. We held hands about six inches lower than our chins. “We can do this simply. Not quite the real thing, but close enough. Now, I’m going to step back one, and you step forward, and then I’ll come toward you, and you step away.”

“Okay,” I said. She took a step back on the slick, hardwood floor. I went forward.

“Now back,” she said. “And forward. And back. You’re doing well.”

“Cake,” I said.

“Try the same to the side now. Step to your right.”

Every time she was away from me I measured the distance between us, the length of her reach, the position of her small feet.

“You know, I’d like to see you again,” she said. There was about a foot between our bodies at that point, and I thought about stepping in with my left and closing the distance.

“What’s that?” I asked.

“I said, I’d like to see you again.”

“Oh, so would I. I mean, not me, but I’d like to see you again, Madelyn.” She laughed. I wondered if my grip was tighter than it needed to be.

The song changed to something a little faster. We moved our feet in a different way and separated our bodies, always holding at the hands. Sometimes I would pull her in and lift an arm and spin her out, far from my reach. Then she’d come back, and we’d have our faces real close, our foreheads touching beneath the lights like the way you see two guys get together in the ring before a fight, when they’ve got so much bull-heat to them that they stick their noses down and grind, forehead to forehead, just to push that intensity.

“You move real nice,” I told her.

“Thanks, you do, too,” she said.

After a silence, she said, “Look, I’m sorry about your boxer. I saw it in the paper. I know it’s probably not something you want to talk about, but I wanted to let you know, I’m sorry.”

There were other couples on the dance floor, and things were getting crowded. I took my hand out of Madelyn’s grip and loosened my collar and watched a heavy man’s feet move real sluggish and deep like it was taking all the effort he had in that whole body to dance with his girl.

“Did you hear me?” Madelyn asked.

“See how he’s stepping too wide toward her?”

“What?”

“That big guy over there. See him?”

“What about him?”

“He’s opening himself up. Look at his legs.”

“He’s dancing fine,” Madelyn said.

I could tell she was lost by how she was looking away and not even at the fat guy I was trying to tell her about. “I know you never saw Izzy actually fight, but he had this way with his feet. He could move them better than anyone I ever saw. It’s like all this we’re doing here.”

“Oh,” she said. I pulled her in closer. Let her back out and then reeled her in again. “The boxers stand right in front of one another.

I've seen what they do," she said.

I shook my head. I pulled her in real close so I could talk in her ear. "No, it's not standing at all. Boxers are always moving. It's just like this. You can't be too close or too far. Don't you see what I'm getting at? They're always thinking or moving or thinking about moving. It's hard staying up on your toes for all that time. Man, if Izzy was here, I could really show you."

"Oh," she said. "Yeah."

I looked up at the lights. I looked at the floor. I looked at the blur of unrecognizable moving feet.

"I could really show you."