

ENRICO AND MARCELLA

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Late in the fight, when the losing boxer is weary, hurting and desperate, he thinks in slow motion. The other man's glove looks two feet wide as it pancakes his nose. His neck snaps back, exposing his jaw to the following blow. Every muscle goes stringy and disjointed like the froth flying from his mouth. His arms flail. Unbidden, knees collapse; legs fold. The screaming voices of the crowd stretch into one drawn-out moan. He floats to the mat as though he's settling on the bottom of a pool.

While in real time it is, pow, pow, blackness.

Months after that fight Enrico still couldn't keep the strung-out moment from replaying in his mind. The recollection was so strong that, if he was walking down the street when the memory assaulted him, he would slump, gripping a pole or a car fender to keep from crumbling to the ground. In nightmares he floated up from the floor of the boxing ring, disappearing in a whisp of smoke. He would scream against becoming nothing. Marcella would wake with a jolt. She would stroke his shoulders and whisper to him. The only time Enrico was vulnerable was in his sleep, and that allowed her to fully express her natural tenderness. Within seconds he would be calm, grounding himself by wrapping his muscular arms around her and holding on. His embrace would almost crush her ribs, and his tears would both crush her soul and tempt a smile.

She loved him with a passion she could not explain. Before she was ten years old she lost her parents, and as a girl growing up in foster homes, she knew no continuity or loyalty. As an uncommonly homely girl she found no close friendships or affection. A girl with limited imagination, she could not envision a brighter life. Once Enrico came she no longer existed; she merged into him. Enrico, with the crooked nose and harsh mouth, was her lover, her brother, her father, her priest. She confessed all her sins for his forgiveness: shrinking his T-shirt, denting the car fender. These were her crimes.

Enrico worked nights, valet parking Beamers and Hummers for an up-scale restaurant, facetiously called Bernie's Lounge. He had some caché from his fighting days; a few people recognized him. They gave him a high-five or maybe a handshake. Only one person ever wanted to have a conversation. This heavy-set, balding man would pull up in his black Range Rover and shout through the open passenger window, "Enrico working tonight?" If the answer was yes he would wait until Enrico was available and toss him the keys. "Enrico, my man! Look after my baby." Unless cars were lined up, the man would share a moment of pleasure conversing about his obsession, boxing. "Enrico, did I ever tell you I saw Hagler at Caesars in '79? Got robbed by a draw. THAT was a fight." Or, "Did you know Hopkins learned to fight in prison? Hell, yes. In prison." Then he would slide a hundred dollar bill into Enrico's hand. Enrico never knew the man's name, never looked in the glove box, never looked in the back seat, never changed the radio station, always parked the Rover in a corner of the garage where it would not get scratched. It was too good a deal to mess up.

On the day of the night that changed everything, Enrico left for work at 5:30 in the afternoon. He kissed Marcella on the cheek and patted her butt. "Later, baby," he said.

As always, Marcella thought he looked incredibly handsome in his sharply pressed dark pants and crisp white shirt. His black hair and black shoes shone equally. She pretended to brush some lint from his shirt so that she could touch him. "You look like a movie star. George Clooney."

He grinned. "I know. But I will come back anyway."

He would come back; he always did. But would he be late? Would he be happy to see her? It was difficult for her to know.

Whenever he left the apartment it seemed to Marcella that the world became dark, so she put on all the lights and scrubbed and polished things that were already clean. She often waited up for him well into the early hours, but the next morning she would have to be working the large press at the dry cleaners by 6:30, so she went to bed.

The bald man's Range Rover was what Enrico would have if he could afford an expensive car. It was a man's car. It was a boxer's car. He gunned it down the ramp to the underground parking lot, its throaty roar rebounding off the cement walls. Another valet was bringing a car up the ramp, and they nearly collided. Enrico got a blaring horn and the other driver got the finger. Enrico raced down the row of cars, then slid the Rover neatly into its spot in the corner. He didn't want to turn off the engine because the pulsing power of the machine took him back to his three years of fame. It had been intoxicating—his picture in the papers, hangers-on treating him like a king. He'd had everything he wanted, except staying power. After that last fight his body stopped doing what he expected of it. Trainers told him, "It's in your head. Get rid of it." But the fear never left him. He fell from the spotlight like a stone into a black well.

He raced the Rover's engine a couple of times and turned it off. He sat still for a few minutes with his head back before he noticed the envelope tucked up behind the visor. It was not hidden; it was not as if he had to search the vehicle to find it. He took it down. Inside were ten \$100 dollar bills and a note. *A simple favor my friend. I am supposed to meet an acquaintance at Boulevard Park, east side, at 2:00 in the morning. Please meet my acquaintance. He will give you a package.*

With his left thumb, Enrico flipped through the bills. He used to carry this much cash just for incidentals. Too bad he hadn't saved any of it. He stuffed the bills back in the envelope and tossed it onto the passenger seat. His stomach contracted a bit. His anxiety level, and his excitement level, both rose. Of course it was a bad idea. Absolutely, there would be more to it. And more money where this came from.

The restaurant closed at 1:00 and the garage was empty by 1:20 except for the Range Rover. Enrico asked if anyone had seen the bald man leave the restaurant.

Apparently he had taken a cab. Enrico realized he was meant to take the Range Rover, that the bald man's friend would recognize the vehicle.

Marcella woke before the alarm went off. She stayed very still, not opening her eyes. There was a quietness in the room, a remembered aloneness, which frightened her. She stretched one leg over to Enrico's side of the bed. Cool, empty sheets. Not wanting to believe it, she tugged at his pillow and it easily slid her way. She pulled the pillow closer, hugging it against her stomach. She had known it would happen. Enrico with his tall walk and his cocky smile. Someone pretty. Someone with smooth skin. With a satin dress maybe. Or sharp ankles. How many times had she lain in bed and wondered who it would be, but he had always come back before morning.

She didn't cry. She had rehearsed this day a hundred times. How could one cry over what one had expected?

She showered, dressed and took the bus to work. It seemed odd that her boss said good morning. Didn't he know the world had dimmed? Nothing was important to her. She saw only Enrico with another woman.

At 10:30 she went to the storage room where she usually ate her lunch, but she had not thought to bring one.

"Here." A co-worker offered her half a sandwich. "It's tuna."

Marcella shook her head.

"What's up? You not feeling good?"

"I'm okay."

The other woman turned on the old TV which only got network channels. A morning talk show was on, which was interrupted by a news story. Marcella glanced at the screen with no interest. The reporter said a Hispanic man had been shot while sitting in a black SUV downtown.

"Some news flash," the other woman said.

Marcella heard bits of the story. The owner of the vehicle claimed his Range Rover was stolen during the night. The dead man had been identified, but the family had not yet been notified. He was dressed as a waiter or possibly a parking attendant.

Marcella came out of her stupor. “What was that he just said? About a parking attendant?”

“He worked for a ritzy restaurant. Their logo was on his shirt pocket.”

Marcella hesitated.

“What logo?” she asked.

“The letters BL.”

Marcella clamped her hand over her mouth and turned toward the wall. Preparing to fight back tears, she made her way to the washroom. She leaned heavily against the stained sink and waited for the pain. It was there, down deep, but something else was rising more quickly. It felt like a reprieve. From what, she wondered. Or was it relief? But why would that be? Perhaps she was in shock. No. She felt quite lucid. A smile grew beneath the hand that still covered her mouth. Stupid. Stupid woman. She pressed harder against her mouth, but the smile would not drop. Then she realized why. It had not been a woman in a satin dress that kept him from their bed. It had not been someone prettier than she. Might he have actually loved her?