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The Boxer

MY HUSBAND SAM TELLS ME he's going to start boxing again. I ask him when he started. He just got home from his job as a sales director for a pharmaceutical company with a long name and he looks at me as if there's a stranger in the kitchen, and here I am, his wife, saying something that's embarrassed and offended him.

"In high school," he says as he sits down and loosens his tie. "I boxed when I was in high school."

"Honey, you never told me that before." I smile into the pot of soup on the oven burner.

"There was this place a couple of blocks away from where I lived," Sam says. "I went there every day."

I know Sam took chess and debating in high school. I've seen the photographs and the medals and trophies in his parents' basement. I've never seen anything connecting Sam to boxing.

"It's been so long." He stares out the window at the snow hills on Dante Drive. "I'm going to get into it again."

Sam is tall and lean. In pictures taken when he was an adolescent he was tall and thin. He was a boy who either had to be at the front or back of every line, because he simply didn't belong in the middle.

"They're having an amateur boxing contest in Stoney Creek," he says and sinks his hands in his pockets. He looks out the window as if he's seen something he recognizes.

Sam turned thirty-eight last month. He has a good-paying job with excellent health and dental benefits, and a couple of times a year work sends him to Calgary, or Vancouver or Montreal, where he always manages to take a few hours between meetings to see the sights. We've been married ten years and we live in this brown-

and-red-bricked bungalow on a street with other brown-and-red-bricked bungalows. We have a mortgage, two cars, and two children.

Sam unsinks his hands from his pockets and turns to me. "The contest is in one month. I'm going to sign up this weekend."

I imagine a photograph. Sam, adolescent and lanky and not yet accustomed to his long legs and arms. His hair is out of place. His pink cheeks make you want to reach out and feel how hot they are. He's got his red boxing gloves up. They're a red shade he's never worn since.

That weekend Sam and I and the kids drive to Stoney Creek, where brick houses line the roads, and factories let smoke into the grey sky. I didn't say anything all week, hoping Sam would change his mind or forget about it. Now I hope he'll forget about it by next week and I've decided to pretend it's a day trip. Giulia and Adam were so excited they got up early this morning and now they've fallen asleep in the back seats. I try to mark some of my students' essays, but as the snow falls I worry about black ice, so I watch the highway with Sam. It's as if by looking I can prevent something bad from happening.

A sign outside the Stoney Creek High School reads "Third Annual Ontario Strong Man Boxing Contest. Prove How Strong You Think You Are. Registration Inside." In the auditorium a man and a woman who look alike sit in folding chairs in front of a long table that looks as if it was borrowed from the teachers' staff room upstairs. Men stand in two lines. They wear flannel jackets and steel boots or old jeans and caps. Their arms are crossed as if they've been listening to their union leader for more than ten minutes and he hasn't told them a thing about how they're going to pay the bills this month.

There are a few women, too. Their long hair is pulled back in ponytails. Some of them hold babies. Others stand next to men who sit on benches while they fill out forms. Giulia and Adam run to inspect groups of children with runny noses who play games while they wait for their fathers.

The auditorium walls are covered with posters of a talent contest from last week, a moustached former police chief who's running for mayor, and the Ontario Strong Man contest. "Are you tough as nails strong?" It asks. "Strong enough? Enter the third annual Ontario Strong Man contest."

I turn back. Sam is talking with the man at the registration table. The man leans forward and looks down at his paper. It's littered with pen markings. "Where you from?" he asks.

"Toronto," Sam says as if it's a foreign word.

"Job?"

"Truck driver."

I look away, up at the basketball hoop. After a few moments I turn back. The man looks at Sam's leather boots, his corduroy pants and green turtleneck. Then his stare lands into Sam's dark, brown eyes.

I walk toward the man. "My husband just got back home last week after being on the road for over two months," I say. I shake my head. "And now he wants to go off to do this. I guess there's not a whole lot I can do now."

The lights reflect off the man's bald head. He looks at me while he hands a form to Sam. "You're going to need to fill this out and bring it back to me when you're done. You're a lightweight. And you're going to need a nickname."

Sam crosses his arms. "Sam 'The Man' Belvedere," he says. "How about that? I think I like that."

Sam begins to run every morning before work. He drinks fruit juices he makes in the blender and he eats raw eggs and carrots. He transfers his golf bag to the corner of the basement and moves in a punching bag, a pressing bench and weights. He joins a gym and trains there every night. One night when he comes home his face is marked with bruises.

"Jesus," I say as I hold his face up.

He tries to pull away.

"You're going to do this?"

He nods.

I want to clean away the bruising, but I'm too scared to touch his face and hurt him any more. I bury my head in his chest. "You're going to do this?" I say again.

He kisses my hand.

I look up. "What're you going to tell them at work?"

He looks in the hallway mirror. "I'll tell them I got into a fight."

We drive to Stoney Creek late Wednesday night, three days before the contest. I call work and I leave Giulia and Adam at my brother's and Sam and I settle into a cabin with a hard mattress.

When Sam goes running the next morning, he brings back a man. The man's head reaches the light fixture in the living room. He's got a heart-shaped pink face and his name is Tim Jenkins. His boxing name is Tiny. He's going to be in the contest Saturday night and he's waited for it all his life, he says. When Sam introduces him, Tim pulls off his wool hat, takes my hand and bows to reach my face.

"Hello, dear," he says, smiling, and when he does his small blue eyes disappear into the rest of his face.

That night Sam and I go bowling with Tim and his wife Maggie. They've lived in Stoney Creek all their lives. Maggie's family can trace its roots back three generations; Tim can trace his four generations. Tim's father and grandfather and great-grandfather were police officers. Tim and his younger brother and uncle work at the local steel plant. Maggie raised five children, all boys, who are married with kids of their own and now live in Collingwood and Goderich, but they call now and then to say hi. Tim and Maggie are in their mid forties, but they got married and had kids when they were young, so now they want to enjoy their lives and God hoping when Tim retires in one piece maybe they'll take winter vacations in Florida.

The bowling lanes smell like feet and beer and perfume. We do more talking than bowling. Maggie and I swap stories about raising kids and recipes. When she smiles I notice her apple cheeks and I want to reach out and hold them to the light.

Tim and Sam drink beers and talk about how they shouldn't be drinking beers, not the night before the fight, but then they order more.

When they're busy laughing, I turn to Maggie.

"I'm scared," I say as a ball strikes into pins.

She pats my hand. "Honey, it'll be okay."

"They're going to kill him."

"Sweetie, they might knock the shit out of him, but they won't kill him." She looks at Tim and Sam and then back at me. "Sometimes they just have to slam their fist into something."

Tim drives us home three hours later, over sheets of white and grey ice. He tells us about the night he nearly cut off his arm at

the steel plant. His brother had to hold it in place while his uncle drove him to the hospital where they put him back together again like Humpty Dumpty.

He entered the contest when it first began three years ago, but he had to pull out because his back gave out at work. The year after his father died a week before his match.

But he always knew he'd come back. "Only the hand of God will keep me from the Strong Man tomorrow night," he says.

Tim looks at Sam. "Must be nice driving for a living. Being out in the open. Not being caged up in a factory."

Sam looks at the snow prints outside. "It started raining on my last day on the road," he says, turning to Tim. "I'd been gone for more than a month. It was a late summer afternoon. And all of a sudden it started pouring like something else."

I slouch down. Maggie sits up.

"It was as if there was a flood coming from the sky," Sam says. "The rain smacked against the windows like it wanted to get inside. Cars stopped by the side of the road. People walked in knee-deep water. I didn't want to chance it. I saw this little nothing place up ahead. And when I got inside, there was a whole mess of people. Just waiting out the rain. And then I see this waitress. She looked about my mother's age. She looked spent, like she'd probably done nothing but being a waitress her whole life."

Tim smiles and looks at Maggie.

"So I started singing this song," Sam says. He pauses to look at Tim and Maggie. Then he says, "Feel Like Making Love."

Tim slaps his thigh so hard he almost loses his control of the wheel. Maggie screams with laughter.

"I start singing it to her," Sam says. "First in a hum, and then full-out. And then we start dancing in the middle of this restaurant, to wait out the rain, even if it was going to take all night."

On Saturday night the roads crunch under my boots and the wind forces tears in my eyes, but the high school auditorium is warm and bright and loud. The Canadian flag hangs from the ceiling and red and white streamers decorate the walls. Benches hold old men with bellies and suspenders, teenagers with smirks and ripped jeans, women with fresh curls and pink lipstick, men with old T-shirts, and children who play fight.

A woman with red heels and blonde hair sells beer in plastic cups. Maggie says the woman's hair is black as night and that she dances at a strip club in Barrie. Then Maggie tells me the announcer is the school principal, the ring doctor has an office in town, and the referee is a former police officer. The judges are a city councillor, a mechanic who's fixed just about everyone's car, and last year's heavyweight winner.

The fighters are construction workers and welders from Windsor and Barrie, retired army sergeants and bus drivers from Peterborough, assembly line workers from Mississauga and Thunder Bay. Each fight is divided into three one-minute rounds. Some fights look like bar fights. Awkward, fast and angry. Men stumble and fall. A glove falls off. A necklace comes apart. There are dislocated shoulders and broken ribs. Soon, the ring and the auditorium get covered with blood and sweat.

When Tim comes out, the crowd rises. "Get 'em Tiny," they shout. Tim fights against a bouncer from Scarborough who has tattoos all over his back. Tim punches and dances around the ring as if he'll never get tired. The crowd raises its beers. Tim blocks and then attacks. Whenever he ducks a punch or takes a swing, the crowd shouts "Hit 'em big, Tiny."

When it's over, two teenage girls from the high school present Tim with his heavyweight belt and a cheque for \$1,000. The girls wear a red top and a matching skirt. The teenage boys whistle at them but then quickly quiet down, remembering the girls' fathers are sitting in the benches. Tim raises his gloved fist to the crowd. "Taking Care of Business" plays over the intercom.

When Sam comes out an hour later I take a breath and Maggie takes my hand. Sam fights against a twenty-four-year-old construction worker who looks like he's thirty-four. The man's arms and legs are thick and tanned and his movements are fast and deliberate. He punches until Sam's head jerks back. One of the blows lifts Sam onto his heels and backwards before he lands on the seat of his trunks. When Sam gets up, the man dances around him and hits him on the side of the face. A small crowd jumps up with laughter.

The man throws punches until sweat flies off Sam's head, and some people sitting in the front benches lean back. Sam stumbles and falls into the ropes. When he untangles himself he takes a swing and then another. He misses each time. The crowd gets up.

Sam is going to lose. Any fool can see that. But he's not going to run away. He puts up his red gloves and runs across the ring and into the man's fists.

When we leave the auditorium, the spotlights shine on the new fallen snow. Men clean the ice off their cars while their wives watch their children grapple each other to the ground. Sam leans on Tim, and Maggie and I follow closely behind them. We watch as Sam's nose makes tiny blood tracks on the ground. And as the snow falls he hums a song I've never heard before.