

Ordination

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For my parents

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Tough Man

Kennedy was in too much pain to be embarrassed about the state of his living quarters. He mumbled a small apology, that if he had known he was going to have company, he would have made an effort to tidy up, at least to throw out the old newspapers and clean the refrigerator of its spoiled milk and moldy fruit. But she told him to hush and touched her finger to his cheek. Kennedy winced. Everything hurt, even the most gentle touch. When she disappeared into the kitchen, Kennedy leaned back on the sofa and closed his eyes. He tried to concentrate on something other than the pain. He wanted to tell her that she didn't need to stay. He wanted to thank her for her kindness. She returned with the ice wrapped in a towel and placed it against his swollen eye. Kennedy bit his tongue against the pain and reached for her hand, pushing the ice pack away. He held her hand in his hand and guided it back toward his eye, slower this time, more gently. She understood. She stroked the side of his head with her hand, his hair sweaty and sticky from the heat.

The woman told him she had always admired boxers. Her father had been a Golden Gloves district champ in Chicago. Kennedy tried to tell her he wasn't a boxer, tonight was something different, something more raw, brutal. But she wasn't listening. He wasn't even certain his sentences were coherent. He could imagine them in his mind but he was certain they weren't reaching his tongue in the same forms. She told him she thought he'd fought bravely, ferociously, and she took his hand in hers and began to peel the remaining tape from his wrists, to unwrap it from

his palm. She kissed each red-raw knuckle tenderly, then rubbed each hand between hers, as though she needed to conjure it back to life, restore the flow of blood. She told him that she found men willing to step into the ring and engage in physical combat to be more attractive, more alive, that it must be some primal response on her part, an instinct, something she couldn't explain to her co-workers or her family. Kennedy pulled one hand away and touched his nose—swollen and sore—and he wondered if it would be further disfigured or just disfigured differently.

“Lean forward,” she said, and he did. She grasped the bottom of his T-shirt between her fingers and lifted it up and over his head. Kennedy's chest was flushed red and damp under the lamp light. The air felt cool on his bare skin. She placed her hand on the center of his chest and leaned forward and kissed his cheek, then his ear, the sharp edge of her teeth on the lobe of his ear. She bent over Kennedy, her breasts pushing against the confinement of her little blue dress. If only I could see clearly, Kennedy thought. He wanted to taste her.

“Give me a minute,” Kennedy said. He placed his hands on her bare upper arms and tried to push her back, tried to push her off him. Though he didn't want her to get the wrong impression.

“Sure,” she said. “Anything you need.”

She pulled herself away, modestly adjusting her little blue dress. As Kennedy rose from the sofa, he felt the room toggle from side to side, like the flight deck in a video game. He took his time to steady himself, tried to plant one foot flat on the floor, then felt her hand on his arm.

“Where are you going?” she asked.

“Bathroom,” Kennedy said, or at least that's what he wanted to say and must have said because a few moments later he was closing the bathroom door behind him.

“I'll be right here,” she said. “If you need me.”

Kennedy couldn't figure out why he'd need her. He maneuvered himself in front of the stool and lifted the seat. He struggled to unlace the drawstring on his shorts, the white cord damp with sweat, his fingers thick and swollen. The nylon fight shorts dropped and then he lowered a pair of gray cotton shorts he wore underneath for luck. Finally he pulled down his cup and jock strap, relieved to be free of the constraint. The air felt good on his damp balls, his limp dick, as he stood there naked.

Kennedy waited for the flow to begin and after a bit of hesitation it did. But even before he saw its stream arching out and down into the toilet bowl, he knew something was wrong. Maybe it was the feeling of clot as it came through his urethra, maybe it was related to the pain in his side. The red tint of his yellow urine—blood—only confirmed it. Kennedy looked to the ceiling and swore to himself. He was trying to remember the fights, trying to remember any low blows, any kicks to the crotch or to the kidneys, but who knew? He'd taken a lot of punches, a lot of punishment. That much he knew; that much he could remember. Again he felt the room tilt, first one way and then the other. He felt the stream finish, the last few drops dribbling off the end of his dick. He shook himself off, and then reached to flush the toilet and fell into blackness.



They were all standing, on tables and chairs, clapping their hands in rhythm, a pack of coyotes. Kennedy looked across the ring to where they were gathered, and he saw Tony flapping his arms like a large bird about to take flight. His face was a burnt red, the muscles and the veins in his neck ready to pop. Kennedy bounced up and down on his tippy-toes, then bounced back and forth from his left foot to his right. He was trying to find his own rhythm, get everything coordinated—his hands, his feet, his mind. Frank was giving him instructions and the referee was giving him further instructions. Kennedy nodded, though nothing registered. Just lips moving. Words. Rose thrust both of her flabby black arms into the air and Jarred waved a sign above the crowd though Kennedy couldn't read it, didn't have time to read it. He heard the chants and knew the words less by sound than rhythm. El Presidente. El Presidente. El Presidente. It made Kennedy's heart sing.

When the bell rang, Kennedy moved to the center of the ring, and his opponent did likewise. Then in a moment that seemed surreal to Kennedy, almost untrue, something flashed in front of his face and he felt the impact flush on his nose. His head snapped back—that it didn't fall off surprised him—and he swung his arm in a wild arc in the direction from which he imagined the blow had come, and when it met nothing he swung his other arm and this time his fist struck a glancing blow.

Immediately he felt another blow to the side of his head, and so he burrowed forward swinging wildly until he felt a pair of arms locked around his and he realized the referee was trying to separate the two fighters. Kennedy stepped back and for the first time saw, really saw, Malik Andrews, the man he was fighting. But before Kennedy could take it all in, the referee motioned with his arms—Kennedy remembered too late the meaning—and Kennedy absorbed the punches again, this time to the ribs, and then Malik Andrews whirled and kicked and Kennedy thought someone had in fact this time knocked his head off his shoulders.

He tried to remember everything Frank had told him, and the one thing he could remember was that he needed to keep his hands up, so he moved forward again, half-bent at the waist, his hands up around his face, his elbows tucked in, trying to protect his ribs. The blows ricocheted off his gloves and he knew he could defend himself, knew he could take the occasional blow, and so he opened himself up a bit more, went on the attack, and he relished the impact of his fist against another man's flesh. Each time he connected, he grew stronger, and bulled his way forward, backing the other man against the ropes and then delivering a series of blows to the body, working the ribs, working the ribs, wearing the man down, splitting him in two. And then the bell was ringing and he was being directed back to his corner and he felt himself wobble, saw flashes, and then the corner. He took a seat and felt the cold water from the sponge on his face and he spit out his mouthpiece and tried to breathe, his lungs shallow, needing air and needing it now.



When he came to, she was pounding on the door and shouting his name and trying to push the door open—but something was in her way. Finally Kennedy realized it was his right shoulder—he was flat on his stomach on the floor of the small bathroom and his body was shaking, his knees banging against the tile, and his shoulder was blocking the door. He tried to remember her name, to say it aloud, to reassure her, but he couldn't remember her name, and he wanted to cry. The room came back into focus. The white ceramic sink. The toilet bowl. The towel rack. He looked down the length of his naked body and realized that he had wet

himself, that he was lying in his own urine. He couldn't move. His body throbbed with pain. Kennedy told himself to just lie still, to collect his bearings, but the woman kept pounding.

Finally, he managed to mutter, "Stop. Stop."

She did. It grew quiet in the trailer except for the sound of the sewer pipes, the toilet tank refilling.

"What's wrong? Are you okay? Tell me you're okay."

Kennedy tried to figure out what had happened and how he could explain it. He looked around for blood, pressed his fingers against his lips, his nose, his scalp. He felt for wounds, gashes, broken bones, tears, holes.

"I think I passed out," he said. "Just give me a moment."

"Can I come in?" she asked.

"No. No. Just give me a second."

He didn't want her to see him like this, not this woman who was attracted to fighters.

"Do you want me to call an ambulance? Do you want me to call 9-1-1?"

"No," Kennedy said.

He forced himself to roll onto his side and then sit up. The dizziness subsided. He tried to prioritize the pain. He knew he needed to drink water. Maybe he was dehydrated. Maybe that was all. He crawled over to his gray cotton shorts, damp and cool with sweat, and managed to pull them back on without standing up. Already his collapse, the passing out, the peeing himself, the blood in his urine—had receded into the past. Slowly he climbed to his knees, pulled down a towel draped over the shower stall and dropped it over the small pool of urine on the tile floor. He used the sink to lever himself to his feet, then stepped on the towel to soak up the urine.

He stood at the sink, both hands firm on its rim. He waited for the world to slow down, to steady itself again. He dared not close his eyes even to blink. He turned on the cold water, just let it run for a couple minutes. He filled a small Dixie cup with water. He raised it to his lips. He drank. He did it again. Again. Again.



Frank stood in front of him, wild-eyed and nervous, cricking his neck from side to side. Frank was an Indian, though Kennedy could never remember what tribe. Kennedy owed his fight career to Frank. It was Frank who had convinced Kennedy to do this, eight weeks ago. They'd been seated at a table at Sunset Strip, watching the girls do their thing, which is to say, the girls were undressing in front of the men and shaking their tits and asses and offering lap dances for twenty bucks so they could feed and clothe their children. Kennedy was a sucker for single mothers. Kennedy had met Frank before but they'd never really talked. Frank asked what he was into and Kennedy said he didn't know. Frank suggested boxing, maybe hitting a heavy bag and jumping rope and sparring and knocking a few heads around. So, the following Monday night Kennedy was in the gym. Frank gave him pointers and told him he was a natural. Soon they had a goal and this was it, Fight Night at The Wildcat House, a mix of traditional boxing, kickboxing, and street scrum. Kennedy didn't know where Frank had learned all this fight stuff; he certainly didn't look like a fighter, too muscle-bound, too slow. But it was all up there in his head and he told Kennedy what to do and Kennedy did it. Jab. Punch. Counter. Move. Move. Move. Never stop moving.

So here was Frank on the big night, nervous, more nervous than Kennedy. Kennedy could see the sweat beading on Frank's brow.

"Relax," Kennedy said. He gestured toward the sweat.

Frank brushed it away. "Just warm in here," he said.

Kennedy stood, flexed his shoulders back and forth, bounced up and down on his tiptoes once, twice, three times. He felt Frank's nervous energy pass into him. He tried not to think about it.

"I just want you to know I appreciate all you done for me," Kennedy said. "It means a lot, you know."

"Fuck the sentimental bullshit, Kennedy. Just get in there and hit him hard a few times."

"I will."

"Get your money's worth."

"It only cost twenty to enter."

"Well, make sure you get twenty dollars worth of good hard hits."

Kennedy nodded. He tried to calculate how many good hard hits it would take—not just to win, but to put the guy on his back.

Kennedy examined the schedule: a straightforward, single-

elimination bracket. There were sixteen fighters signed up in the heavy-weight division so it would take four fights to win it all. Kennedy had drawn Malik Andrews first, a man that Kennedy knew by reputation. Andrews had once played football for the university, nearly a decade ago, an undersized linebacker who blew out his knee early in his senior season and who had had to settle for local celebrity, appearing year after year in commercials for a local pawn shop. By the time Kennedy realized that if he won his first fight, he'd have to fight again right away—back-to-back fights—Frank had disappeared from sight, slipping through the crowd, which watched ambivalently as two undersized white kids danced around the ring, each occasionally flailing an arm toward the other, hitting nothing.



He told himself he didn't need a doctor. If you didn't need a doctor, it wasn't serious. Drink the water. Take some Tylenol. Ice the bruises. Apply heat for twenty minutes to the sore muscles. Rest. Above all, rest.

There was swelling around his right eye and cheek, a purplish-pink bruise rimmed with yellow. The skin around the other eye was red and puffy, and his jaw had the shadow of three days without a shave. His blondish hair was a mess, as though it hadn't been combed or washed in a week. It appeared thinner than usual on top, his scalp a whitish-pink that always reminded him of an infant's. He turned his head left and then right, and wondered if he would be able to tell if his brain was swollen. If only part of his brain was swollen, would he be able to see it here, in his bathroom mirror? He looked for bruises, purple-black marks on his skull. Was it broken? It felt like it was broken. He thought he would vomit, and leaned over the sink to wait for the acidic burn to rise up his throat. He could feel the capsules of Tylenol—all seven, all lucky seven—threatening to return. But nothing came. He spit into the sink and then cupped his hands beneath the flow of water and splashed it into his face.

When he opened the door, she was slumped against the opposite wall, her ass on the floor, knees against her chest, arms around her bare legs. Kennedy stepped into the narrow hallway and sat down across from her, avoiding her gaze.

"Sorry," he said. "I'm not a very good host."

He wanted her to laugh, but she didn't.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

"Define okay," he said.

Still she didn't laugh.

To answer her question, he wasn't sure where he should begin. In how many ways could he define himself as okay or not okay? He didn't think he was going to die. So that was something.

"Did I tell you what I was going to use the money for—if I had won tonight?"

"Yeah," she said. "On the drive over."

Kennedy nodded. He couldn't remember the drive.

"Did you drive?" he asked.

She looked up and Kennedy saw something in her gaze, though he couldn't sort it out. Not right now. Maybe he saw nothing. "You did, didn't you? I remember now," he said. But he still didn't remember.

"Yeah, I drove," she said. "You talked the whole time, about your little girl."

"Anna."

"Yeah, Anna. She's six, lives with her mother on the east side."

Kennedy nodded. He pointed down the hall, back into the living room.

"That's her," he said. "In those pictures."

The woman rose and she walked over to a card table that Kennedy had turned into a family shrine. On it were pictures of an elderly man and woman, a younger Kennedy and a little girl—now an infant, now a toddler, here a kindergartner, sometimes with teeth, sometimes with a smile, always with her father's blue eyes. The woman lifted a framed photo from the table and examined it closely. It was Kennedy and the girl in the park in midtown, the one with the old steam engine and a public swimming pool. She was on his shoulders, her small hands pressed against his forehead, mouth open, head thrown back in joy.

"I'm trying to get shared custody," Kennedy said. He wasn't certain if he'd already told her this. He wanted her to understand something about himself, though he wasn't certain what that was. "But I need to get my act together, show the judge I'm a good father. I mean, I am a good father. I just keep fucking up in other ways."

"A girl needs a good father," the woman said. She set the photograph

back on the table. She looked around the rest of the living room, as though seeing it for the first time. And now Kennedy was embarrassed by its shabbiness, its cheap, second-hand furniture, the stained carpet, the dishes in the sink and on the counter and on the coffee table. The tear in the window screen above the kitchen sink, the one he always intended to repair. He was ashamed by the lack of order, the sense of indifference it reflected.

“I need to dust,” Kennedy said.

This time, the woman laughed, though he had been serious. He needed to dust.



A curtain had been set up to create an impromptu locker room in one corner of the bar, and behind the curtain, fighters stripped down to their fight clothes, stretched out, had their muscles massaged by friends acting as trainers, and stood in front of a full-length mirror to shadowbox. Other fighters jumped rope in tight spaces or did jumping jacks or push-ups and sit-ups, trying to get the body loose, the muscles warm, to break a sweat before they stepped into the ring. Kennedy sat on the floor and unzipped his blue Goodwill duffel bag. He removed his gloves and his tape, a pair of used, red leather shoes with twenty eyelets that rose halfway up his calves. He'd bought them for fifteen bucks off Rodriguez at the gym. Rodriguez had been a semiprofessional boxer in Mexico when he was much younger, and he assured Kennedy that they were magical, that he would feel like he was floating on air if he wore them in the ring. Kennedy had bought them without ever trying them on, drawn to the color, a rich red that reminded him of adobe houses and Mexican girls at bullfights in Nogales. He had tried them on at home to make sure they'd fit and they did, though when he wore them around the trailer, while he made himself an omelet or drank a beer and listened to the radio, he didn't feel like he was floating. He just felt like he was wearing a pair of leather socks.

Kennedy pictured Malik Andrews in front of him, tried to generate animosity and rage toward Malik Andrews. But he couldn't. He'd always felt sorry for Andrews whenever he saw him on those commercials for the pawn shop. He wasn't half-bad in them, standing in front of the shop

in a shirt and tie, the shirt looking like it would burst at the seams if Malik took a deep breath. He would smile affably into the camera and go through his lines, giving a half-punch of his right fist to punctuate the tag line: “There’s nothing we won’t buy or sell—Wildcat Pawn Shop.” Kennedy wanted to rush out and sell something to the pawn shop, anything to spare Malik the humiliation. At least he could stop by and browse over the things they had for sale, not actually to buy anything, but maybe Malik would be there and they could talk a little football, talk about those glory days, the blocked punt he had against ASU his junior year, the four sacks against Cal.

When Kennedy emerged from behind the curtain, he saw Claudia. She was wearing a tight black dress. Kennedy loved that about her. Two children. Thirty years old. And still. Look at that body. If that didn’t provide incentive, Kennedy didn’t know what would. It had been seven months since they’d seen each other and even longer since they’d last had sex, but when Kennedy saw her in that tight black dress, he knew she’d worn that dress for him and that this would be his night, this would be a new beginning for the both of them, together. Fuck her husband. He was a bastard. And he was still in Mexico. She wasn’t going back. Not with her kids. Not where the husband could get his hands on her kids.

Kennedy worked his way toward her. There were college kids in catalogue freshness; businessmen in black suits with gold ties and gold bracelets and gold rings, cell phones hooked to their snakeskin belts; black women and Hispanic men from the barrio in oversized neon football jerseys and matching caps; dye-bottle blondes in micro-skirts and too much makeup, low-cut tops revealing silicone and lace. The crowd milled around the ring that had been erected in the center of the bar, half in practiced poses of indifference, the other half leaning forward and straining to cheer on their friends and coworkers. Kennedy moved deliberately through the crowd, aware of his body, of its physicality, more aware of his body today than he could ever recall. The people around him stepped back, giving him room. He liked the feeling of his body, the tension in his arms, the strength in his legs, the lightness of his feet. He felt buoyant, the air filling his lungs, and imagined himself a butterfly slipping through the net of people. He could almost believe in this moment that there wasn’t anyone in the building that he could not destroy with his bare hands.

He tapped her on the shoulder with his taped fist. She turned and smiled.

“Hello, Kennedy,” she said.

Kennedy thanked her for coming, said nothing else mattered now. He was so glad to see her. He told her she looked beautiful. He tried to forget what she had told him the last night they had been together. They were both lying naked in his bed in the back room of the trailer. They were both huddled under the covers, keeping warm on a cool desert night, the heat moving back and forth between their bodies. She had told him she didn’t think he was man enough to handle the mess she was in—the INS, the children, the threats from her husband in Hermosillo. She said all these things in English, spoke clearly and confidently, so much better than she had six months before, the first time they had lain in his bed after sex.

“You’re gonna win,” she told Kennedy.

“Give me a good luck kiss,” he said. He raised his taped fist to his cheek and bent over. She hesitated, but then did as he said, a quick touch of her lips to his cheek. In that brief moment, he remembered with longing the touch of her fingers on his skin in the morning, tracing the ridge of his spine up and down his back, and then he allowed the thought to pass from his mind.

“I’ll be thinking of you in the ring,” he said, though he knew she was the last thing he could afford to think about in the ring if he wanted to win the five hundred bucks.

She blushed like a young girl. She smiled. “Kill ’em,” she said. Kennedy touched her forehead with his thumb, then backed away, bumping into another competitor who was exiting the prep area, a silk robe wrapped around his shoulders.

Kennedy had run into Claudia’s sister Mishoul the previous week at Safeway and had invited them both. He didn’t think either would come. And yet, here she was. It was a sign. It had to be a sign.



The woman told him he should lie down. She led him into the bedroom with its unmade, narrow double-bed, the mattress cover peeled back to reveal a worn pink mattress. The drawers to the dresser were half-

opened, the closet overloaded. Socks, underwear, sweat-stained T-shirts spilled from the hamper. A punching bag sat in the corner. The only light in the room came from the hallway. On the wall above the bed hung a wooden crucifix, the agonized figure of Christ painted a ghastly red and yellow and brown. Kennedy had purchased it from a street vendor in Nogales, an emaciated woman with a small, dark-skinned child, its gender indistinguishable in the rags it wore.

“Are you Catholic?” the woman asked.

Kennedy sat on the edge of the bed and then lay back. He dragged his body toward the wall, trying to make room for her to join him. But she remained standing.

“Not really,” Kennedy said.

On the dresser there was a golden Buddha. Over the window hung a series of crystals, dull and clear in the darkness. From the ceiling above the bed, a dream weaver twisted slowly, like a child’s mobile. There was a poster of Gandhi and another of John Lennon. A pair of plush, black dice hung from the corner of a mirror above the dresser. A light saber.

“You can never have too much good karma,” he said.

“Do you like it out here?” the woman asked.

“Yeah, I do,” he said. “It’s quiet.”

He had moved here nearly two years ago from D.C., trying to start over, trying to get closer to his daughter somehow. He found this trailer in a wildcat subdivision out near Pictured Rocks. Though it didn’t have much in the way of amenities, he took a certain pride in its austerity, occasionally thinking of himself as a postmodern monk who deprived himself of the distractions of the material world to get closer to the real. Some mornings he would rise at 4:30 when the desert was still dark and cool, even in the summer, and run for thirty or forty minutes along the dirt road that passed his trailer. He would accelerate on the down slopes into the dry washes, then labor to come back up the other side. But most mornings he slept as late as he could before driving into the city to his job at the Circle K, corner of 6th and Park.

Kennedy told her these things, told her how he’d disappointed his parents. He told her how he wanted to go back to college, get his degree. “It’s never too late,” she said. He talked and talked and he wondered if he was talking too much. But she seemed content to listen and so he told her some more. But there was something he was forgetting. It wasn’t lost to

him. Not yet. It was something he knew he had once remembered, had remembered for a long time. It was something he knew he needed to remember, but right now he couldn't.

"I want to tell you something, but I can't remember it," he said.

"It's okay," she said. "I'm sure it's not important."

"No, it is. I know it is."

"Okay. Take your time then."

"I need to tell you now. Before I forget it completely."

"Okay. Tell me."

"I can't. I can't remember everything."

"Tell me what you can remember."

Here is what Kennedy wanted to tell her. The number of the hospital room. The name of the hospital. The scent of the room. He tried to remember the doctor's name, the doctor's face, any of the nurses. He tried to remember the clothes the infant wore, the clipboards at the end of the bed, the colors of the wall. The tiny hands, the texture of the skin, the shape of the skull. Were there flowers? What kind? He tried to remember the weather that day. For a moment it was sunny and 85, and then gray and wintry, a thin layer of snow on the ground outside. All certainty of the memory seemed to be gone. It had been February, hadn't it? He had this written down, somewhere. He remembered this detail and clung to it as to a life raft. He tried to build another memory upon this memory, to create links. He hoped that one detail would open the door to another. He saw the memory as series of doors he must walk through. If only he could find and open the first door. Manage to unlock it.

Here's what Kennedy was able to tell her. That he hadn't been there for his daughter's birth. Even then, at the very beginning when everything was still possible, when all good things could happen, he'd messed up.

"I need to explain," he said.

"Explain what?"

"Who I am."

"You don't have to explain that."

"Yes I do."

"But why? Why this? Why now?"

"Because I don't want you to think I'm something I'm not."

She laughed. Kennedy smiled though he didn't know why she had laughed or why he was smiling.

He had been seventeen. He remembered this. He had had to go with his father to visit Sienna's parents and to tell them that he was the father. There had been anger and tears. There had been threats. They had sat in the kitchen. There had been coffee. No one drank the coffee. He felt the doors open, pushed through to the next.

He imagined a hospital, like one he'd seen on TV. And a baby. It was a sunny summer afternoon. It began to come clear to him. A woman in a bed, handshakes and congratulations. A table with greeting cards and a blue vase with yellow flowers. Daisies. Someone asked him the name of the child. He said, Anna. Beautiful Anna.

"I used to remember more of it. Lots more," he said.

"You can't remember everything," she said.



There was a conscious moment when Kennedy ceded that he was no longer capable of defending himself. It didn't come in the first fight, which he won by unanimous decision over Malik Andrews, and it didn't come in the second fight, which he won by TKO when the other fighter twisted awkwardly and tore up his knee. It came in the semifinal round against Slammin' Sammy, a 6-foot-2, 245-pound Adonis who worked as a prison guard at the state penitentiary in Florence. Kennedy raised his gloved hands in front of his face and just tried to hold them there while Sammy hit him again and again in the ribs and in the kidneys. Kennedy tried to remember every prayer he'd ever prayed, tried to appeal to every god or spirit or force within hearing range, tried to call up all his remaining good karma, whatever he had left, whatever might be possible to get him through this, to keep on his feet, to keep him from getting killed. He didn't even care if he won now, didn't even care if he made a respectable showing. He decided that he'd been selfish to want to win it all, that had been his mistake—too much pride—and this was his lesson, his payment, his purgatory. He took a blow to the side of the head. His jaw snapped. He thought that it might come unhinged, just drop off his face. He saw silver stars and blue lights and then he was in his corner and Frank was in his face, telling him that he was doing great, great, just great, just hang in there, keep the hands up, look to go on the offensive. Then Frank shoved the mouthpiece back in and Kennedy stumbled forward toward

the center of the ring. Sammy met him there and hit him again and again and again.

By the time Kennedy hit the canvas, tipping sideways like a ship listing to sea, he had surrendered himself to the fates, his hands at his side, his body an open target, a sack of flesh and bones.



In the parking lot, they leaned against Rodriguez's tricked-out Cutlass Supreme, the music loud, a Southwestern mix of rap and ska and mariachis. The sun had long retreated behind the mountains to the west and the air had begun to cool. Someone offered that it had been 105 that afternoon. They passed around bottles of vodka and Jack, some dope, and Kennedy drank and smoked his fair share, content to dull the pain of the bruises and the cuts with the oldest medicine known to man. They told Kennedy he had fought valiantly, that he had proved himself in the ring. How long he had stood there, how much punishment he had taken. None of them could have lasted as long, none of them could've taken more than one or two, maybe three punches, before boom—down, they would've hit the canvas. But not Kennedy. Our own Rocky, someone said. Kennedy tried to distinguish one voice from another, but he was still having difficulty, everything blurred, sights and space, light and dark, sounds and silence, nothing quite in focus. He knew Claudia was there—she had kissed him on the cheek, and Rodriguez—Kennedy knew it was his car—and there were two or three others or maybe five or six, Kennedy didn't really know. Who had gone home? Who had remained? People kept walking up and walking away and they kept saying his name. El Presidente. They touched him on the elbow or on the bicep and Kennedy would shiver, try to nod.

Mishoul was there too. During the fights, she had been in the row behind Claudia. Kennedy had seen her just as he was stepping into the ring. He'd dated her before Claudia and briefly again after, if you could call what they did dating. She was two years younger than Claudia, and if anyone had forced him to answer, he'd admit that Mishoul had been a better fuck, more adventurous, more willing to do everything and to do it anywhere, but she also could be a bitch, highly demanding. Her moods shifted like the fault lines of California.

Kennedy told everyone he wanted to go to Sunset Strip to watch the pretty girls, to see them shake their tits, but everyone just laughed as though it was a tremendous joke.



The woman lifted the dress above her head and slipped her arms through the sleeves, then allowed it to slide back down over her body. Kennedy turned away, embarrassed that she might catch him staring. He pulled the damp bed sheet against his body.

“I can’t remember your name,” he said. “I’m sorry.”

“That’s okay,” she said. “I never told you.”

“You didn’t?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“It’s easier that way,” she said. “Less to remember. Less to forget.”

“Why wouldn’t I want to remember your name?”

“Because it’s not important. A name is just a name. Sounds. Letters. A word. There are lots of words.”

He tried to guess her name. Melissa, Sarah, Sadie, Katrina, Elizabeth, Corinna, Valerie. Claudia. Mishoul. Anna. But he realized she was none of these women.

“I’m a good father,” he said.

She touched his neck with her forefinger. Drew a line down it. She leaned forward and kissed him. Kennedy kissed her back. She kissed him fiercely. He thought she would swallow his tongue.

“Say my name,” Kennedy said.

But she refused.



Kennedy stood in front of the toilet again, the stream of urine filling the toilet bowl in fits and starts. All that water and Gatorade, all that liquor. Just when he thought he was finished, as he was shaking himself off, he saw the spot of blood drip into the toilet and then another, its bright red still a shock. For a moment he thought of the artist who had filled a jar with his own piss and then dropped a crucifix inside. This is what was missing, Kennedy thought. The blood. The blood in the urine.

Before the woman had left, Kennedy had apologized.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t make love,” he said.

“But we did,” she said.

When he was finished, he pulled his shorts up and knotted them. He walked through the trailer with its narrow rooms and its cheap paneled walls, and he opened the front door and sat on the metal two-step grate that passed as his front stoop. It was still dark outside though to the east there was just the first hint of morning light. The sound of traffic from the nearby interstate highway drifted over the saguaros and ocotillo, cars and trucks bound north for Phoenix and south to Tucson. The sky was clear and full of stars and against the horizon Kennedy could see the darker outlines of the surrounding mountain ranges, each distinct in its aspect. In the darkness, Kennedy shaped the words with his tongue, pushed the sounds from his mouth, spoke them into being: the Tortolitas, the Santa Ritas, the Rincons, the Santa Catalinas. He said the names again—Tortolitas, Santa Ritas, Rincons, Santa Catalinas. Just kept saying—Tortolitas, Santa Ritas, Rincons, Santa Catalinas—as though the mountains and the names were forever.