

Our Man McCoy

A Short Story

By Alisar Eido

Acknowledgments

For your combined 117 years of support, advice, help and friendship,
I thank you all.

Amanda Cavazos Weems
Anastacia Anderson
Andy Hand Jr.
Charlotte Griesel
Janet Hancock
Jeffrey Hawn Jr.
Missan Eido
Sebastian Garcia
Tara Serio

It had been like thunder. Torrent after torrent of yells poured from the crowd as two men, two rippling boulders, pummeled each other, alive in the storm. There was lightning; the crack of fist on skull, stone on stone. It rang through the arena leaving only one standing in triumph. The crowd shot to its feet, frenzied and cawing like black birds, clawing to see the slaughter before the victim even hit the ground.

Men with pens, pads and cameras surged forward, elbowing each other, jostling like scavengers, some slithering into the ring, skating across the blood and sweat in an attempt to get closer. And in the eye of the storm stood the man in red. He hovered, swaying over the kill, lion's chest heaving, surrounded by the vultury rabble. He kept his eyes down. Though the crowd was beside themselves he was empty of victory. The blazing electric lights above steamed up the sweat from the floor and their bodies. The ascending mist lent an almost angelic glow to the white shorts of the man on the ground. A woman screamed. A scream that contained all the horror one heart could muster, the ripples from which washed over the crowd, hushing them. I had never been one for boxing, but I could tell something was wrong.

Lucky for me I was at the back. Of course by 'I' I mean the York City Digest, and by that I mean always at the back. Our ratings were shit and so was the seating. I had a feeling there was a correlation. Cheapskates.

From my position in the nosebleed section, behind all the carnage craving bobble-heads, I knew my camera was useless. There was no shot. Besides, the fight was over. The real action would be on the steps outside where would take place the most Biblical of battles, a press conference. I turned over my shoulder and headed for the back door at the top of the dingy, gum-laden steps. As I came out into the hall, I heard the rumble recurring. The single scream was now being answered by a chorus of others screeching their shock. But I was out of that jungle and I didn't look back.

Once outside I felt considerably more human. I leaned against the wall at the top of the steps, lit my last cigarette and tried to adjust the camera strap that pressed into the back of my neck. It was uncomfortably damp and the weight of the machine didn't help. But hey, I could at least be thankful for the silence.

"Jacob Lawry," called a slimy voice in greeting.

"Dr. Jekyll," I responded without bothering to take the cigarette out of my mouth. I could hear the tap of expensive dress shoes on the stairs, the product of success cheaply won, no doubt. It always amazed me that, despite the obvious expenditure on clothing, he could never afford a less rank cologne. I gave my neck strap a final tug to make sure it was secure and looked up. Robert Brinkley of Merit Weekly, ladies and gentlemen. He was just as vile as I remembered. Slick black hair, a hand held recorder and a smarmy smile. If there were a moral text for journalism, he'd burn a copy nightly. He looked dapper enough, but this guy was just the kind of rabid drama jockey that would write a story about his own grandmother's whoring if it got him a raise.

"What kind of a hello is that?"

"The unfriendly kind. Piss off, Robert."

"Someone doesn't like boxing I take it."

"Nah, love the stuff. Mothers milk."

“Ha. Always the quick wit. Important to stay positive when you’re handed the short straw.”

I whipped the cigarette out of my mouth. “Just what the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“I mean this match. I’m sure when you were assigned to it the thing looked like it was going to be fairly routine. A real last pager. I had a hunch though, and I was right. This is going to be front page for at least a week, if not more. Dynamite. Absolute dynamite.”

“What?”

“You don’t know? Jesus, Lawry, a man’s dead! Didn’t you get that? That little publication of yours better thank its lucky stars you’re not a journalist.”

I suppose I was stunned. I don’t know why two and two hadn’t come together but now they were air tight. The thunder, the lightning, the fall, the scream, the silence. One alive, one dead, one black and one white. This was a career ender. Normally it would be called a tragic accident but this was 1967 New York. If a black man killed a white man, no matter how much of an honest mistake it was, he’d get put through the wringer. I suppose that was why Robert Brinkley turned up. I took a last drag off my cigarette, dropping and crushing it underfoot as I tried to swallow my surprise. One man lay dead, but both were goners.

By that time, the rest of the flashbulb-flock began to arrive. Slowly they gathered, alighting like crows on a wire, twitchy, with mean little eyes. Brinkley stepped off and took a place in the front of a group of pads and pens as they all clustered to await the arrival of their next meal. Again I stayed on the sidelines. Frankly, I was freelance and better than their squabbling. Then in an eruption of noise the doors swung open. Coach T.J. Williams came out like a battering ram, chest out, chin jutting, and was greeted by a waterfall of flashes. A few of the more stealthy columnists followed in his wake, likely having found him near the lockers as he desperately tried to conjure up a speech. At his right side he dragged the victor, if you could call anyone a victor that day. Newly robed, his head was held high but his footsteps were tentative. They stopped at the edge of the steps, the coach holding up his hand to silence the mob. Only Brinkley kept jabbering.

“Mr. Williams, Mr. Williams!”

“What is it, son?”

“There are rumors going around that your fighter’s gloves were tampered with, made harder to assure a bone crushing swing. Tell me, did you plan for the fight to end this way?”

“That is a damned stupid question. And no, no one could plan for an accident like this except a journalist,” Williams finished, staring Brinkley down with his vicious blue eyes. I liked him already. Though the shot was nothing remarkable, I snapped one anyway hoping to capture the sour look on Robert's face.

“Mr. Williams!” yelled another penman, but he held up his baseball mitt of a hand.

“I only got a few things to say to you boys.” Wise decision, say as little as you could.

“There was nothing unfair about this fight except for the fact that a good man left us today. McCoy’s gloves were regulation and unaltered. What happened here today was not only unfortunate, but tragic, and above all completely unpredictable. An accident,” he proclaimed. Just as I suspected, the ‘tragic accident’ plea.

The interview flowed on in the midst of camera flash. After snapping a few more myself I noticed something odd. Williams had kept hold of his fighters elbow, secretly supporting him. He

was still slightly swaying. McCoy was a relatively new fighter, but brilliant, just making a name for himself. He hadn't even had a major title yet, hadn't had time to see all the things that could go wrong in the ring. He looked shell-shocked and much smaller than he had seemed in the fight. The power had drained from his muscular form, leaving him docile, helpless in the spotlight.

"Sir, I'm hearing that McCoy will be charged with murder and you accessory to. They say you saw this coming."

"What?" For the first time Williams' defenses fell. His steely blue eyes clouded up as he struggled with the allegation. McCoy however, came wide awake. The stern introspective look he had had since he walked out to meet the press vanished in an instant. His eyes flashed and found the man who had said the word murder. Under his robe I could tell he was breathing fast again. I could see fight or flight in action. For a moment I thought he might take a swing at the man who said it but I knew that deep down he wanted to run, to get away, to make this all the past. He was trapped, an animal caged in pictures and newsprint. McCoy homed in on the accuser. His fists clenched into stone; his heel lifted to take a fatal step. Thankfully, Williams came out of his reverie in time to seize McCoy's elbow with a little more ferocity. McCoy stopped short of the step that would have sealed his fate. Aggression towards reporters would do him no favors in court.

But when McCoy eased back his face had changed. His eye dropped and all the vigor in his clenched fists dispersed, but he wasn't empty. He was filled with the thunder that had been his heartbeat, the lightning, the death blow, and the scream. That shriek hadn't ended for him. I could see it bouncing between his ears, welling in his eyes as he swayed with the nauseating anxiety of the word 'murder'. The hot lights had made vapor of both the sweat and soul of his vanquished opponent. His lips were slightly parted in disgust, as if he could still taste it. In awe of the tumultuous fear, rage and grief on his face that made my stomach roll, I raised my camera to my eye. There was a flash and it fell to my chest, hitting me like a ton of bricks. I didn't know what made me snap that shot. Fate pushed the button, I guess. God knows I never would have.

*

It was about ten o'clock. I had been in my bathroom-turned-darkroom for hours developing the film from the fight. The red light and the smell of the chemicals soothed me in a way I couldn't explain as I watched the faces from earlier that day melt into view. There were a few from inside the stadium, the backs of heads silhouetted against the incandescent ring, two men in the center, one mid punch, the other mid dodge. Red ducked down, enveloped in a flurry of fists, white wailing away. The nasal voice of the announcer seemed to leap out of the film as the photographs dripped dry.

There was Brinkley! I had captured the sour look after all. I toyed with the idea of pinning it inside my jacket to show him the next time we met, or just for whenever I needed a laugh. I continued along the line of pictures until I was deep into the press conference. These were still coming to life. I stood and watched as the strong jawed face of T.J Williams appeared, sealed into a state of perpetual scolding, the mics of the reporters straining towards his face.

"Brought you dinner."

“Jesus, George!” I nearly jumped out of my skin as a voice sounded from just outside the bathroom door. “You scared me.”

“I had the feeling. Sorry ‘bout that. Thought you might think it was worth it for beef stew. You about done?”

George was the best neighbor I could have possibly asked for. He was maybe twenty five, just a tad younger than me, could talk like a man and cook like a woman. He had a special sense that told him when I hadn’t eaten in a few days and, believing sincerely that I shouldn’t starve, he’d manage to scrounge up enough dinner for two. Now if there had just been a buxom brunette across the hall I would never have reason to leave.

“Yep. Finished. Give me a sec,” I told him, and started to tidy up. But knowing George, that wouldn’t mean much. I’d hardly turned my back on my work when he cracked the door and slid inside. He was always excited to see the my new stuff.

“You know, one day your gunna barge in here like that, I’m gunna be naked, and neither one of us is going to be very happy. You heard of knocking?”

“Once. From a friend of a friend. Never liked the guy,” he quipped and quickly moved on to scanning the photos. “Wow. These are really great.”

“I guess they’re alright.”

“Alright? Just alright?”

“Yeah, I mean they get the job done, but where’s the art in them?”

“The paper doesn’t want art. They want action. You certainly captured that,” he said, looking at a picture of the two men boxing. “Look at these guys! You got the whole story here. The paper’s going to love these.”

“Well, I hope they are as enamored with them as you are.” I rolled up the sleeves of my pale blue work shirt and turned to wash my hands.

“Hey, what’s this?”

He had his nose an inch or two away from one of the more recently distinguishable photos. One not even I had looked at yet.

“This, this is...” his voice trailed off.

“What is it?” I asked grabbing a hand towel as I went to investigate.

“Well, what...” I stopped. McCoy stared out at me from a piece of film, his white robe dyed red with the lighting. “I...” I tried to continue. What I meant was that I had had no idea; no idea that I would have to face him and no idea that what had made my camera so heavy was the fact that I had taken so much of him. In one face there was all the world and a whole world besides, made of sorrow and everything we should have thought of beforehand that perhaps bloodthirstiness had made us overlook. What was worse was I couldn’t tell if he was looking at me, his eyes were turned ever so slightly downwards with the weight of shame. Not shame for his actions, shame for mine. It was my fault after all, wasn’t it? If no one had bought tickets, if no one had waited in line, if no one had filled the seats, if no one had snapped a picture or scribbled down a quote, no one would have ever had to hear the scream that was surely still ringing in the ears of a face that now hung by a clothespin in a dirty bathroom in Queens.

Thankfully, George found words before I sank any deeper.

“Now that is powerful. Man, a paper would kill to get a hold of a shot like that. That’s front page stuff, my friend. Especially since there’s a whole court case coming up about it.”

“Court case?”

“Yeah, they’re really going to wring this thing dry. I mean, it’s clearly an accident. Nobody could have knocked a guy’s nose that neatly into his brain on purpose. It’s just ‘cause he’s black. Not fair if you ask me.”

“No. No it’s not. That’s why they’re never going to see this picture.”

“What?! That’s an award winner!”

“I don’t care.”

“You don’t care? You see, this is why you starve. Here you are a genius and you refuse to show the world the proof.”

George was practiced in how to inflate my ego, but it wouldn’t be enough this time. There was too much of him in that picture. I couldn’t in good conscience let the press have it even if I starved for a month, which was likely. They were animals. McCoy was already injured and lost in a jungle of microphones. I wasn’t going to be the one to trap him there by plastering his face on the front page, even if it was only the diminutive York City Digest.

I reached and plucked it from its clothespin as if it were a spider, holding it delicately by its edges and trying not to think of just what was in my hand while removing it from the room. I slipped out into the dark main room of my apartment, closely followed by George and my own sense of righteousness.

“What are you doing?” he asked me urgently. “You’re not going to put him in the trash are you?”

That had been exactly what I was going to do, but the word ‘him’ stopped me dead in my tracks. It was, wasn’t it? Our man McCoy. A piece of him, quite possibly the last one. I dared to look down and caught a glimpse of his face through the fence of my fingers. I gritted my teeth and turned to the chest of drawers I used for all purpose storage. I threw open the top left one and tossed the picture carelessly into the flurry of odds and ends.

“Better,” George conceded. “Let’s have dinner.”

*

McCoy hadn’t left my mind all night. Even when George tried to make conversation over dinner I said very little. I felt too heavy. I was pretty sure holding the bowl of stew was the maximum effort I could expend. Once dinner was finished, I left his flat and stumbled the few feet to my own. I kicked off my shoes and toppled immediately onto the couch, not even bothering to fold it flat into my usual bed. I fell asleep wondering if McCoy had noticed that ten pounds or so had gone missing from his being. I looked over to the chest of drawers, watching it in the inky stillness. The sighing of the passing cars on the street below made it seem like it just might be breathing. I shut my eyes for what seemed a few seconds and reopened them at three in the afternoon. My appointment!

I threw myself out of bed and ran to gather the pictures from the line, quietly glad that I was still dressed from yesterday. I tossed the photos into a folder and shoved it into my briefcase. I tried to tidy my hair a bit in the mirror. The last thing I wanted to look like in front of the editor was sleepy and desperate. That bastard loved to lowball and if he thought he could get one over on me he would sure as hell try. I went back to the couch and pulled a pair of

shoes from underneath, yanking them onto my feet with blatant disregard for socks. I nabbed my briefcase and was about to make an exit when I realized...where were my keys?

I dropped my case and scrambled around the room for them until finally they turned up in my chest of drawers. I slammed the drawer shut and was halfway out when I realized what I hadn't seen. McCoy. Where was McCoy? I bolted back to the dresser and threw it open. Gone. My heart stopped. Only one person knew I had that picture much less where I put it.

A moment later I was pounding on George's door. I had no idea if he was home or not, but if he was I was going to make God damned sure he heard me.

"George! Get the hell out here!"

I was about ready to start kicking it down when it swung open.

"Jake, what's going..."

I didn't give him a chance to finish. I seized his collar and slammed him against the wall just inside his apartment.

"Where's McCoy?!" I screamed. He looked confused, which only added to my rage. "The picture! Where's the picture?!"

"I, I turned it in. To your editor."

The horror was overwhelming. I couldn't even yell at him. I just squeezed his shirt harder and hissed, "You what?"

"I turned it in for you," he whimpered. "I told him that you were still planning to come in with more stuff, but you weren't going to show him that one. He'll only use it if you don't turn up by five. He's got it in his office."

By the time the story had leaked out of his mouth I was clenching his collar so tightly I was shocked I wasn't squeezing the yellow out of it. I ground my teeth and tried hard not to punch him. I might have, too, if I hadn't just learned that I had less than two hours to save McCoy. I gave him a last hard shove into the wall and got in close to his face.

"Fuck you," I snarled and left at a sprint, praying that I made the bus.

*

Exactly an hour and forty-four minutes later I was rushing through the doors of the York City Digest. I looked at my watch. Sixteen minutes to get McCoy back, sell the other photos and get the hell out of there.

The paper pushers all turned and stared as I shot past them. The office I was looking for was just two corners and a hall away. The first door on the left. I skidded around the first turn and slowed to a walk, trying to catch my breath and hide any signs of the gnawing fear that swung in my stomach like the pendulum of a clock, making me acutely aware of how quickly I was running out of time.

I jogged a few steps to close the distance to the next corner but ran into a solid wall of cheap cologne just as I was about to round it. Robert Brinkley. He was close. Very close. From the smell of things, he was right around the bend. He must have been there for a while too, stewing in the stench of his own poor taste; letting it pool around him and dissipate in the hall so I wouldn't suspect he was lurking ahead of me on my way in.

I braced myself. I would turn the corner, step into the office, shut the door and ignore whatever he had to say. He didn't matter. He might as well not even exist. I now had thirteen minutes to get in, out and done with the whole debacle and I was dead set on doing it in twelve. I took a deep breath of what oxygen was left and whipped around the corner, hand out and ready for the door handle.

"Lawry!"

"Shit!"

I nearly ran right into him. Brinkley must have used my few second pause to lean himself against the wall just around the corner. When I finally came barreling around it I almost poked my eye out on his chin.

"Oh-ho! Scare you, buddy? Sorry 'bout that. Truly," he said with a sneer that told me he knew something I was going to hate.

"No time," I said and stepped around him. I dove for the doorway but he pivoted and blocked me, leaning a shoulder casually against the doorframe, crossing his arms and ankles.

"Comfortable?" I asked.

"Oh yes, yes," he trailed off. He only had a few inches on me in height but he treated it like a mile.

"Got a minute?"

"Not for you."

"Oh come on, Lawry. Work, work, work. You're gonna put yourself in the ground like this."

"...Put you in the ground," I mumbled.

"Pardon?"

"Nothing. I need to get through."

I reached for the door knob once more but he grabbed it.

"What are you doing, Robert? You don't even work for York City."

"Well," he said with a snorting little laugh that made my hair curl. "I might as well tell you first. In a way I do. Well, will."

He had to be kidding. One, it was completely unrealistic that he'd agree to being paid at least five bucks less per hour to work in a hell hole like this just to screw with me. Two, even if that were true it would be suicide. He had to know I'd kill him, even if I only came in a few times a week.

"You're hilarious. Now cut the crap."

"Honest! Get this. The nice men I work for at Merit Weekly are going to buy The York City Digest. We're pulling you guys out of the gutter. Answer to all your prayers or what? You're looking at your new superior officer. Well, I guess that's not so new."

"What?!"

"Did I stutter? Unless you rabble can pull your ratings up by the end of next week it's a done deal, Baby. Me and your boss in there are going out for dinner to talk it over. After you, uh, do whatever it is you do."

My fists were like vices, one white knuckled on the handle of my briefcase and the other hidden in my pocket, as if the thin layer of fabric would hide my rage.

“Just...move,” I said slowly, keeping my voice as steady as I could while forcing it through my clenched teeth.

“Oh, don’t look so down, Lawry. You’re moving up in the world.”

“Just move!” I shoved him aside and ripped the door open. I turned to face him again just in time to see him recover from the push I’d given him.

“Hey now, don’t shoot the messenger...”

He didn’t have time to finish. I slammed the door in his face. Whatever he said next was lost.

*

It had been five minutes since my ferocious entrance. Five minutes spent standing in front of a desk piled so high with disheveled paperwork you could lose your soul in it. On top of it all sat a tarnished name plate that read *Horace Fellman*. The man that sat behind it had his two uppermost buttons undone and his tie loose, revealing a mustard stained undershirt that was surely stretched near to breaking across his portly belly. He was lazy, slovenly, and naturally balding like a Franciscan monk. It made me cringe to think that I was currently at the mercy of a guy like that.

“Good,” he grunted. “Very good. These will do nicely. I’ll take the lot for one hundred.”

“One? How about four? I worked for these, you know.” He probably didn’t.

“Two.”

“Three. Final.” I leaned forward, gripping the desk and glaring at him.

“Fine, three hundred. But don’t get used to it.”

He reached into his desk for a checkbook. We were left in silence as he searched, save for the discontented growling of the window unit in it’s futile attempt to keep the room cool. I was hoping he would have said something about the picture by now. I cleared my throat. He didn’t look up. I knew I’d have to start the conversation.

“So, how you think that court case is going to turn out?” I asked, scanning the mess on his desk for McCoy’s face.

“Which case?”

“The one about McCoy. I heard they might put him away for murder. Maybe even the death penalty.”

“Maybe.”

Jesus, could he be more uncooperative? He was going to make me drag the subject out of him. I knew why he didn’t want to bring it up. If he didn’t say he had the picture maybe I wouldn’t ask him to pay for it. A man’s life was on the line and this creep was looking for handouts. He was in luck. He wouldn’t have to spend a dime. I wanted the picture back.

“Listen, about the picture,” I began. He looked up from his leisurely quest for my reimbursement as if he wanted me to believe that he had no idea what I was talking about.

“A man named George brought it to you this morning.”

“George who?” he said as he pulled his checkbook from the rubble and messily scribbled my name.

Oh my God I didn't know. I had lived next door to him for two and a half years and I didn't know. Stuttering from embarrassment I tried for a new detail that would make him admit that he knew exactly what I meant.

"It was of McCoy..."

He looked up at me vapidly.

"At the press conference...with Williams."

He started to shake his head.

"I know you have it, damn it. And if you're thinking you can just..." I wasn't getting anywhere. It was already 4:54 and if I didn't have McCoy in hand by 5pm it was over. I'd have to change tactics fast. Then, I had it.

"Does your wife like stories, Fellman?" I asked casually. He looked up at me with a confused squint. "You think she'd like the one about how I saw you down on 38th and Causwell? Then again, I it was hard to tell if it was really you, what with all that red light..." That seemed to refresh his memory.

"Oh, that picture?! Yeah, it's right here," he said whipping it out of his desk drawer instantaneously. As soon as the photograph flitted to the table top a chill ran through me. There lay McCoy, helpless.

"So what you want for it?" Fellman licked his chops.

I couldn't hand McCoy off to the press. The piece of him that was in that picture was not mine to sell and neither was it theirs to consume.

"Nothing. I want it back. It's not for sale," I said. He settled back into his chair with a snide smile.

"Oh no?" He steepled his fingers. "How much? Go on Lawry, name your price."

"I don't think you understand. I'm not selling it."

His smile faded a bit.

"Come on, Lawry. Stop this hard-to-get shit. We can strike a deal."

"No, we can't. I don't want it published."

"I'll give you two hundred for it. Just the one. On top of the three hundred. Come on, it's just a picture. What have you got to lose? It'll be front page."

Everything stopped. I took a moment to absorb what he had just said, hardly keeping my jaw from the ground. Who the hell did he think I was? Another one of his sell-out columnists? One of those bloodhounds he used to seek out people's misery and bring it back howling? At that point it didn't matter how much he offered, or how much I needed it. I was walking out with that photo.

"I don't want your money. And what does the front page of your sad little paper matter? The man you're looking at right now, in that picture, his life is on the line. Why don't you ask him what *he* has to lose?!" I whisked McCoy off the desk into the safety of my inner jacket pocket, away from the fat, sausage fingers that tried to beat me to him. Fellman's face started to turn pink with the frustration and the thought that he might have to throw more money at this.

"I should have you thrown out."

"No need," I barked.

"You got one more chance, Lawry."

“A chance at what?!” I practically screamed it. What was he going to pretend he could do? Could he take back the thunder or the lightning? Could he take back the death of one man and the unfounded infamy of another? Could he take back the shame I felt for having taken so much that wasn’t mine, that shouldn’t have been anyone’s? Because unless it was a chance at one of those things, I didn’t want it.

“One more chance to sell it. You got twenty-four hours to get your act together and get your ass back here with that picture. Maybe you wanna bring a new attitude too.”

“You honestly don’t get it, do you? I’m not going to sell someone’s sorrow for a paycheck! I’m not one of your blood-loving kiss-ups!”

“Oh, get off your high horse, Lawry. What’d you expect? This ain’t church, boy, it’s the media. And if you wanna play clean you’d better get out. Here’s your three hundred.” He flicked the check in my direction. I snatched it, angry that I didn’t have the funds to back me tearing it up and throwing it in his face.

“Just remember, twenty four hours.”

My exit wasn’t much different from my entrance. I snapped the door shut on my way out, so focused on Fellman’s piggy afterimage that I forgot who was waiting outside. Brinkley was slumped low in one of the hallway chairs with his fingers laced, as always looking a little too comfortable. I should have been acclimatized to his stench by that point, to the condescension, to the slick, slippery way he moved. But every time I saw him, it hit me like new. He remained silent, that is until I turned to leave.

“So what do you feed a high horse like that, Lawry? It’s lookin’ pretty sturdy.”

I froze. I didn’t want to. I had to. My whole body just locked up on the spot. He’d heard the whole conversation. I don’t know what it was, fear? No. Rage.

“What was it? Blood-loving kiss-ups? You say that like you’re something different. You really think you’re above it all, don’t you?” I heard the vinyl of the chair creak as he stood. The tap of his shoes echoed with his approach, like the ticking second hand of a clock counting down to D-day. “I think you do. And I think you know you’re wrong.”

My knuckles were white again on the handle of my briefcase, the smell of iron in my nose. I was suddenly aware of the shape of the photograph my inner jacket pocket as it hung against my chest.

“You know how I know? Hmm? This little act about not selling the picture. You don’t know when to drop it and take the prize, Lawry.”

“Oh, no?” I whispered, feeling the picture grow heavier. Brinkley was close now, hovering right over my shoulder.

“Hey, listen, I’m trying to help you out here. We’re all just sacks of meat anyhow. Some of us get thrown to the dogs. That’s just the way it is.”

“Is it?” I said gritting my teeth and trying to force myself forward. Away. Anywhere else. Out from under the ever growing burden of the image I’d inadvertently placed in my own care.

“It better be, Lawry. Because in a few weeks I’ll be running this show, and if you want to have a hope in happy hell of keeping your job you’re gunna have to admit it.”

“Admit what?” The lonely tap of a single step forward snapped out into the silent hall from under his long leather shoe. He leaned in so close to my ear I could feel the poison in his

breath. My knees began to shake, but not from fury; from the incredible weight of McCoy as he hung in my coat, depending on me.

“Admit that pain is your paycheck, Baby. There’s no saints here. You’re just like the rest of them, whether you sell your pretty little picture or not.”

Maybe the snap I had heard hadn’t been his footstep after all. Maybe it was the sound of my fracturing restraint. The whip of a flailing flag. The swift crack of lightning. Without even thinking I turned, swung, and hit him as hard as I could, right in his smug jaw. He toppled backwards and slammed into the ground so hard I felt the vibrations through my shoes. I stood over him, panting from righteous anger as he weakly struggled to prop himself up on one elbow.

“Just what...what the...?” he muttered in a daze, clutching his face.

“My two weeks noticed,” I spat, the thunder of my pulse in my ears. Brinkley tried to struggle to his feet but the fog hadn’t cleared yet. He couldn’t even make it to his knees. My fist, which I hadn’t yet been able to unclench, was beginning to throb, reverberating from the impact of bone on bone. I shoved it into my pocket like that would hide the pain I was in.

I didn’t know what would come of what I’d done, but it was too late to take it back, even if I’d wanted to. It was time to go but I had one last bit of spite in me. Feeling the cool round of a dime in my pocket I snatched it up.

“And oh, Brinkles?” I flipped the coin onto the ground next to him. “Buy some better cologne.”

I turned and stepped off down the hall, around the corner and away. It was five o’clock, and I was gone.

*

I actually don’t know what happened next. One minute I had been storming out of The York City Digest with steam coming out my ears and the next I was being gently jostled awake by the ungainly motions of a subway car. I immediately checked my pockets for McCoy. The photo was still there. So was the check, my wallet and my loyal briefcase leaning wearily against my ankle. I looked around. God, I wanted a cigarette.

There was only one other person in the car with me, an old homeless woman dozing between her three multi-colored shopping bags full to bursting. Covering her like a blanket was a dirty newspaper. I scooted a few seats closer so that I was directly opposite and could read the headline perched on the woman’s right shoulder.

Does Knockout Mean Lights Out For McCoy’s Career? Judge Gregory Pith Decides!

The picture below must have been taken by one of the photographers opposite me on the steps. It was a side shot of McCoy and Williams looking out over the crowd. It had been taken right as the coach raised his hand for silence with the dizzy looking fighter at his side. There was Robert down in front with his hand held recorder halfway up Williams’ nose. A host of other columnist pressed in from all sides like greedy sardines. But more terrible than all their flushed, over-eager faces combined was the fact that I stood among them. I was completely indistinguishable from their swarm. All the way in the bottom left corner of the picture, standing where I thought I was set apart. Suddenly I had the urge to be sick and might have been, if my focus had not been broken by the train coming to a grinding to a halt. Where was I anyway?

I picked up my briefcase and stepped off onto the platform, gazing about for a sign. Fifty-first street. I lived on thirty-sixth. I turned back towards the train but ran into a wall of my own guilt. Unable to cope with the thought of staring at that newspaper for another stop, I decided to walk.

I hadn't really noticed the time, but when I finally jiggled the key in and out of my front door the clock above my kitchenette read '2am'. I set my briefcase down by the door, stumbled the short distance across the room, and sank onto the couch with my head in my hands. I was about to doze off when I heard footsteps and a dull clank outside my door. The footsteps retreated and I heard the familiar squeak of hinges.

George. What the hell was I going to say to George? I had been an asshole and I knew it. It was just going to make it worse that he was the upstanding kind of guy who would accept my awkward, halting apology with friendly grace. Then he'd probably cook for me and make me feel like shit to the nth degree. I put my hands on my knees and pushed myself to my feet again, trudging to the door and pushing it aside. At my feet sat a green plate with a sandwich on it. I hadn't realized how hungry I was. Not having eaten since the beef stew the night previous, that ham and cheese might as well have been manna from heaven.

Who was I kidding? I couldn't eat that. I had been way too much of a jerk. I picked up the sandwich reverently and made my way to George's door like a kicked dog. I think I even knocked apologetically. Needless to say the door swung open.

"Sorry. I shouldn't have...shouldn't have, you know...thrown you against a wall."

Saying it out loud made it even worse. I couldn't even make eye contact.

"Yeah well, I'm sorry too. Hence the sandwich. I shouldn't have taken the picture when I left. It should have been your decision...did you?"

"No," I said with a smile and a sigh. "Still in my pocket."

George smiled too, then pointed to the sandwich.

"You know it's okay if you eat that now."

"Thanks, George."

"You wanna come in for a minute?"

"Sure."

I headed into his apartment, a considerably tidier dwelling than my own, and took a chair at the small table in the kitchen next to a pile of neatly stacked mail. George leaned back against the countertop, crossing his arms.

"Where were you all this time anyway? I was starting to think you went and drank yourself under the table somewhere."

"To tell you the truth, I don't know," I said between bites of what had to be the best sandwich I had ever tasted. "The last thing I really remember was storming out of the building. I guess I just wandered around and thought for a while. Ended up on the subway. Got off at fifty-first and came home."

"Walked?"

"Yeah."

"Jesus! You're lucky you didn't get mugged!"

"I kinda would have deserved it."

"Oh, don't talk like that. How'd it go anyway? With Fellman?"

“Fine I guess. He gave me three hundred for the lot. He said he’d pay me good for the one of McCoy but we sort of got into it over that one. Said if I came back within twenty-four hours he’d still buy it. That’s when...” I quickly calculated whether or not telling George about my latest Brinkley encounter would result in one of his anti-violence speeches. I’d skip it. Sometimes a guy just needs a knock in the face.

“I left,” I finished. Luckily George didn’t push the matter.

“You know, I’d ask you how much he was going to give you for that picture of McCoy, but you probably don’t care enough to remember, do you? Why won’t you sell it? Just out of curiosity. You know ratings would soar, right?”

I stopped chewing and slowly swallowed the last bite of sandwich. Maybe ratings would go up. Maybe selling the picture would keep Brinkley at bay for a little while longer. But how do you justify selling a piece of someone for rent money?

“Because it’s just not something to sell. And even if it were, it’s not mine. I’m trying to do him a favor. Both of us a favor, really. I’m not about to sink to Brinkley’s level and make him look like some sort of helpless victim. And for what? A few bucks? It’s nothing you can keep. What you can keep is dignity. Your own and if you have the chance, maybe you can save someone else’s....There’s just too much of him in that picture. He’s wide open with his guard down. They’d be able to see straight through him.”

“Maybe that’s what he needs.”

“What? You think he needs the world to see his darkest hour? He looks broken!” I cried and tossed the picture from my pocket to the table.

“No. He looks innocent.”

I glanced up and found George’s knowing smile. My heart stopped and my stomach turned over. He was right. He was absolutely right and I had no idea how I’d missed it. The whole world snapped into crisp, clear focus. I knew what I had to do. I heard the grating sound of the chair scooting out but by the time I realized I was up I was already halfway into the hall.

“You know they’re closed,” George called after me from the door.

“Yeah. I’m going to be waiting when they open.”

“Forgetting something?” George held up the picture of McCoy by a corner. I dashed back and took it.

“Thanks,” I said. But before I bounded off, I remembered something else I had forgotten.

“Hey, George?”

“Yeah?”

“What’s your last name?”

“Cook,” he said, with a grin. “The irony is my secret ingredient.” I smiled for the first time in days and rushed away to get my briefcase.

I didn’t know if I had the right to what I was about to do, or if it would make me one of the make-a-buck bloodsuckers I’d fought so hard against becoming. In a way it didn’t matter. I’d never be able to undo the thunder, to take back the lightning, the scream or the silence. All I could do, all I knew how to do, was hand McCoy over and let the world see what I saw. The trial was in a few days. And I’d be on trial too. Right next to McCoy. If he didn’t come out on top, I might as well be an animal like the rest of the savage scribes. But if he did, I just might be redeemable.