

Thom was certain jumping rope was killing him, or would kill him soon enough. They'd find him dead on the canvas with the rope spindled around his leg. Thom and Owen looked at each other in the mirror as they high stepped in almost the same rhythm. Owen's twenty two year old body skipped like a metronome. Thom stuttered every nine or ten revolutions. It was better than six months before he stopped worrying about falling and breaking his goddamn face.

There was never any real competition between Thom and Owen. To the other fighters, maybe, Owen was a contender. Thom was a pity case. Two separate worlds right there. But Thom knew that had nothing to do with boxing. Owen had an army career. He fixed telephones for a living. He had a wife, or serious fiancé or something. Owen lived the life.

Owen didn't carry razor blades in his gym bag to cut purse strings on his way home. Owen never climbed a fire escape to break into a bedroom window. That was the real difference between Thom's world and the kid's. Nobody knew but Thom, and somehow it kept him safe in the ring. The punches hurt, but somehow, he'd always survive in here.

Cee's first session with Thom lasted forty-five minutes. Cee was the trainer. He spent most of his time shaking his head while Thom huffed through the drills. Thom sweat like a goddamn pig. He broke the middle of every round wheezing. Thom heard some of the other fighters snickering over the fat old man who had shown up for an ass-kicking. It didn't matter though, because in that lesson Thom was getting what he wanted. Those first forty five minutes were the first forty five minutes of his new life.

Thom's life as a boxer. A life that was completely separate from his other muddled incarnations.

As Thom heaved the two handles, he noticed, in his reflection, a small swell over his left eye. Must have come from sparring with Owen. It looked small in the mirror. But as Thom's calves pulsed in cadence with the swing of the rope, it felt like blood was starting to balloon into his face. One of the ways Thom envisioned himself dying while jumping rope was a colossal blood clot to the brain, shaken loose by consistent bounce of the exercise. This made for good material, so he concentrated on the fear for a while, wondering if he'd see it shake loose before he felt a stabbing pain in his skull. Or maybe he'd go the other way, just a plain old heart attack. His fucking heart sounded like it was going punch out of his goddamn chest by the ten minute mark. Heart attack at thirty-five. Jesus Christ.

In round four, Thom sucked air like scared asthmatic. Between the gulps and squeaks in his throat, he wondered if maybe he was having a breakdown. It was plausible, just like the blood clot. That is how the best got stopped. By some monkey wrench in the head. His friend Clark hadn't even been caught. He just sat next some freak cop dressed as Santa Claus on thanksgiving and spit out the whole game. He wasn't late for thanksgiving dinner in the holding pen.

Thom hadn't heard one word from Clark since he went inside. Just that Frank Moriello, the cop who booked him had made sure the D.A. pushed for maximum time. Thom could never think about it for long. Prison made him sweat ice. It dried out his mouth. It made his neck weak. And he had to keep his strength to keep jumping rope.

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The showers at Cee's were pretty fucking rancid. Four nozzles in a single half-tiled alcove made for some grade-school charm. But they were good for standing motionless under a jet of steaming hot water and praying you never had to box in your life again. Thom was sure to never touch the walls, but his showers were long. The scald in the water helped Thom forget about the complaints of his body.

Often, Thom would think about Mary while he stood under the heat. He would close his eyes and think about her face. He wasn't getting over her. Thom had pretty much given up thinking he could get over her. He would scheme angles of getting her back but they never came to anything more than calling her once a week or dropping by her place uninvited. Like she had said once, he didn't have any real ambition.

Thom agreed with her when she said it. Thom never wanted ambition. His whole youth passed without it and it kept him strong. At fourteen, Thom's pop started hitting the bottle professionally. There wasn't food in the house and Thom picked up the slack boosting groceries. Then he got a new angle. He started lifting a few wallets in the store paying for everything he wanted just like a customer. He didn't have to beat guards, just grandmothers. That wasn't ambition, it was necessity.

A lack of ambition kept him out of trouble. He wasn't the type to play long shots. Thom had seen plenty of guys go down for stretches of ten years or more on three strikes because of ambition. Because they wanted too much.

Slow, steady scores. Safe scores. That was the way to go. Mary just never saw that play. But Thom knew he had a sense for things like that.

Being right didn't get Mary back in his life though. And that is what Thom wanted. It was a necessity.

When his back was ruby red he twisted the nozzle shut, dried himself off, and dressed for the evening.

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Thom rode the six train uptown. It was winter so he wore a scarf tied up around his chin and knit cap down around his eyebrows. He was also sporting a mustache. He hated that fucking mustache, but half the plane clothes guys had his picture in the daybook. For never being pinched, Thom Casser was a pretty famous guy. They knew he was Caucasian, between six foot and six foot one, stocky. They'd studied his deep-set, hazel eyes – the large features of his round face – and the deep cleft in his chin. They knew he targets women or the elderly. He was dependably non-violent and known to use service and way as routs of escape. They kept a look out for him. A lookout almost five years long.

Thom sat down next to a pair of young women who were talking about the mayor, and the way he was taking all the power away from the school board. He figured himself pretty a-political. He was none too sure that career criminals could be political in the traditional sense. The old joke with his friends, Clark and Sterner, was that he only voted when a mayoral candidate proposed cutting back cops to balance the budget. That was the kind of policy he could get behind. Clark and Sterner went into stitches over that.

When politicians came on television, they weren't really talking to Thom. If they said something about guys like him, "it was time to get tough on crime." And really, how did they know about Thom the Thief. That was Thom to a "T." A Thief. Thom wasn't white-collar embezzlement, race-attack, rape, loitering, ticket scalping, fraud or racketeering. Thom was thieving. He stole on the subway, or in stores or from

apartments with easy locks. It was so old-fashioned you could see it on a playground. Some took from those who weren't looking. That was thievery and that was Thom.

Thom folded his paper over his knees, obscuring the woman's purse, his right hand, and the razor from the other passengers. Thom liked the Times. The print was smaller so other passengers didn't try and stare at the articles over your shoulder. In the features, nobody got too emotional. And the fucking cops never got the page-three glory stories like they did in the other New York rags.

He opened up the length of the bag with the razor and removed a wallet as the train wailed into the next stop. Thom stood up with a groan. His left arm was still cramped something vicious. He lumbered off the train. One of the women said, "Well fuck Bloomberg," and the other laughed at her little vulgarity.

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Thom got into Queensboro Plaza at eleven thirty after an OK night. Way to cold for plain-clothes. He slipped passed the lights of Queens Boulevard and into the residential hills of Sunnyside. The walk was dark, but really, in this neighborhood, there wasn't much to worry about. Every once in a while you got some horror story that was good for keeping rents low. But mostly, it was just stuff that could happen to anyone. An old guy steps off the curb at the wrong time or some lady runs into a psycho on the train. What are you going to do to prepare for that? In Thom's decade of living in New York he had mellowed some, and just saw these crazy things as a reminder that he couldn't control everything.

At Greenpoint Avenue Thom headed south, away from his place. He was going to drop by Mary's. He didn't have a reason, so he was none too sure he would get in the

door. He thought about picking her up something, like a cantaloupe or something. But all the stores were back on Queens Boulevard and it was freezing.

At the corner he saw Mary's light was on in the front room. He rang the bell and blew into his hands. Cee said to get gloves, but he hadn't gotten around to it.

"Who's there?" Mary called from behind the bolted door.

"Thom. Come on, its freezing out here."

The door inched open for one of Mary's large brown eyes to blink at Thom. A chain clattered and the aluminum plated door swung to reveal Mary Vargas jutting out one hip, her eyebrow cocked and lips pursed in a sardonic kiss that ended with her sucking her teeth.

"What are you doing here?"

"I forgot my key, girl, you going to let me in?"

"You don't live here any more."

"It's been over a month since I've been over."

"And a day since you called. Nothing changing." Mary started to shut the door.

"Mair, I just want talk a little." The chain rattled back into place. "Are you still waiting for me?" Thom said. The reinforced door was silent but inside Mary was shivering.

"Yes," she said not able to keep sadness from drying up the portent. Thom knew his time was short.

"It's not that hard to live like me," Mary said, cracking the door back slightly, "Like normal people live. Can't you just try for me?"

Thom got a chill off a passing cold wind. "Okay, I'll find a way. Be back soon."

\*

At home, Thom counted four hundred and fifty four dollars onto his kitchen table. He took out one hundred and fifty four and rolled it into a wallet that hung around his neck beneath his undershirt. The remaining three hundred went into a small safe Thom had bolted to the floor within the gutted frame of his non-functioning oven. Before laying the bills into place by denomination, Thom recorded the date and amount in a minuscule ledger on the top shelf.

Besides twenty seven thousand dollars in cash, Thom kept two pictures of Mary, his actual driver's license, and a familial heirloom pocketknife in the safe. Both photos of Mary were from a trip they'd taken to cape cod. One was her on the shore, smiling at the sunburn Thom's pale flesh had taken during the day. The other was her on the bed dressed in the stockings and garters Thom had bought for her. She was holding her left arm over her eyes, too embarrassed to look at the camera. At the same time, her other arm crossed over her belly to touch her opposite hip, causing her breasts to swell out of her brazier. That fucking girl. She put on airs, but really she was heat through and through. Thom never knew a girl who could balance both acts like that.

Thom didn't look at the pictures this evening. Mary wasn't getting easier to deal with and tonight had gone just as well. Maybe even a little worse. Thom ran a hand through his baby thin blonde hair. He couldn't worry about Mary anymore tonight or tomorrow. He had plenty to do. Had to wash his boxing trunks and shirts tomorrow. He had to buy, or maybe come by some new slacks. His old ones were two loose around the waste and he was looking like a goddamned ho-bo. He had to check the papers for a better job. Useless, but he had to check. Had to be at Cee's again at four so he could get

to Sterner's by six. Fucking Sterner's. Friend or no friend, this was the last month. The goddamn last month he worked the door of that fucking claptrap.

Thom went to sleep thinking about Owen. He needed to step away when that boy hooked, regroup, and hit the ribs when Owen went on by. Next time, just a tiny step out of the way and he'd push a low hook into those ribs.

Once asleep Thom dreamed about Mary, in cape cod, and the way she'd run her hands over his face in the dark.

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"That's it champ, now move!" Cee barked from the corner. Thom backed away from Owen, even though the kid was hurt from the combo to the body. It was the first time Thom ever saw Owen not come charging back, hungry for retaliation.

"No Motherfucker, move in, not out. Damn!"

Thom lumbered in, but the kid had caught his breath, and in the mix Thom caught a solid left hook and pair of uppercuts to the ribs. Thom almost took a knee.

"Goddamn it. That's too late. That's it," Cee manually rang the time bell.

"Owen, ropes. Champ, get down here," Cee motioned to Thom with a nod of his head. They eased into the back corner of the gym, where two treadmills droned consistently with the paces of the younger fighters. Cee waved Thom in close with a thick left hand, like he was going to whisper something. The overhead light reflected off of Cee's two gold rings. One was a broad wedding band. The other was a squared off face he wore on his little finger. The ring said "CEE."

As Thom stepped in close, Cee turned his left into a quick, playful slap. Thom faded his head back quick, just out of the way. Cee grinned.

“Saw your name on the exhibition list.”

“Yeah,” Thom answered skeptically. He wondered if Cee was going to talk him down. Maybe Thom really was way out of line with this boxing thing.

“Not in Senior?” Cee rubbed the stubble on his chin with his giant knuckles.

“Birthday’s in July, so I’ll still be thirty-five. Senior is thirty-six and up, right?”

“Yes, sir.” Cee looked expectantly at Thom, but Thom couldn’t really see the play Cee was trying to make. A few strained moments passed, with Cee watching Thom’s eyes, not saying anything.

“Well, you had a good exchange with Owen. We’re going to need to see more of that. You’re getting to be an okay counter-puncher.” Again Cee waited for Thom to answer but nothing came back.

“You had Owen in there. You had him, but then you let him off. Why did you end it like that?” Cee asked as a lopsided smile stretched open his mouth. Thom could see a few gold teeth.

“I don’t know. I guess I was low on gas.”

“No, champ, you had plenty legs left. You counter and fade and counter and that’s good. But when you hurt him, you have to not hold back. Especially in an exhibition. You have to get in there and hit the guy with your whole life behind it. Got me?”

Thom nodded yes, with his jaw squared straight and his eyes right on with Cee’s. But inside, Thom was feeling a collapse. It was more of his old problems, no ambition, no fucking follow through bleeding into this. Damn it. This one thing he had carved out for himself was fucked because he couldn’t keep his life organized in its proper places.

“Sometimes when a fighter is smart,” Cee looked away from Thom and watched a younger boxer dancing around the double end bag, “Sometimes they think too much in the ring.” Cee’s light brown eyes came back to Thom. “That’s why the best guys just have a sense about when to go and aren’t really too smart about other stuff. That’s why some of these hammer-heads make it big.”

Cee was right. Thom didn’t have the right sense for boxing. He didn’t have the drive. But Thom knew where he did have the sense, and where he did have the drive, and how he needed a big score for the first time in his life. A real score, one that retires you on an island, like the Bahamas or Riker’s. Things were stacking up against him, and Thom needed to gamble.

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Thom was at the penopulant moment just past the Vernon & Jackson Stop, just as the seven train rushed from subterranea and climbed a steel spine over Queens. He had just finished the cut and was letting his thick fingers forage into the hollow of a counterfeit Louis Vutton. The woman was lost in her own world of thought, mesmerized by whatever crazy problems she had that make people stare at nothing. Thom had his hand past a compact case and had ferreted out her wallet when his cell rang, jarring him and woman right into the same fucking moment. Thom froze, unsure, as he went from invisible to the dawning sun to every last passenger in the car. With attention like that, it’s impossible to be a thief. It’s just impossible. Blazing, you’re just a bum with your fucking hand in some lady’s purse. Thom’s phone rang again and the woman was looking right at him.

As the echo faded, the train rocked forward in a tiny, fateful cataclysm. The train sought to be still, and everything that had been motionless went kinetic. The wheels sung so loudly as they halted their ascent that drowned out the third ring of the phone and provided just enough distraction for the escape of Thom's criminal hand. What a fucking break? You had to catch them sometimes, right? And Thom had some coming.

He answered the phone before ring four. He said "hello" and when no one answered, he thought that, just like the lurch of the train, the call was some dangerous mysticism. One turn got him into trouble, and the other bailed him out.

"Hi, Thom." Mary's voice sounded distant and pensive, but she had decided to answer her own call just as Thom was ready to hang up. As Thom began to speak, the conductor's voice brayed over the train's intercom.

- *We apologize for the inconvenience.*

"Hi Baby. I'm sorry, I'm on the train."

- *There is a train directly ahead of us,*

"No, its okay. I just got off work."

- *As soon as it clears, we'll be moving shortly.*

"No, I'm not doing 'other work.' I'm just going home."

Old reflexes got Thom on his feet, getting him away from this car, even as all his attention was focused on Mary. When he rose, he saw the hole he'd cut in the purse. He'd thought it had been an absolutely surgical incision performed beneath the cover of his jacket but revealed, the bag was splayed open. The folded corner of a matching, counterfeit wallet was poking out of one end of the slit. Nobody was interested in it

though. They all watched Thom, yearning for a juicy line of conversation or wishing for the train to start abruptly so they could watch him stumble.

“Is there something you want to tell me?” Mary purred into the phone. Her tone hit Thom’s ear rich with willful ambiguity. He started to panic a bit in the chest. He wasn’t sure if she was joking around or if she was bating him into admission of some forgotten half-truth. He felt like either way, he was laid bare like the open bloom of his near pilfered bag.

“Look, I want you to tell me the truth. Are you on drugs?”

Thom almost laughed right into the phone. Of all the dumb fucking luck.

“No, Mary. I’m not on drugs,” he got out deadpan. The train pushed forward again and Thom steadied himself against one of the chrome poles.

“I hope you’re not lying Thom. I saw you last night and you looked all crazy and you were so damn skinny. Skin and bones. You looked like Bobby, Jeanie’s kid.”

“The one who shot up all the time?”

“I’m not joking!”

The seven pulled into Courthouse Square. Even though Thom only had one more stop he thought he just better wait for the next train. He didn’t want to take chances.

“I’m not joking either. I lost weight because I’m still boxing. Remember I told you I was going to that place? Cee’s?”

“Are you lying? I’m serious?”

“Baby stop. I’m not lying. I am not a fucking junkie, okay? You know I couldn’t deal with the needles, right?”

“There are other ways, Thom.”

“Oh my God, please stop. I am thin because I am boxing. I have a fight coming up. An exhibition. If you don’t believe me you should come see it.”

Mary was quiet. Thom could picture her, scribbling on the notepad she kept by the phone, weighing him.

“You know I looked crazy last night because I haven’t seen you.”

Mary laughed lightly.

“You’re crazy all the time,” she said with her old, lurid edge.

“I’m coming over.” Thom saw the lights of the next train closing in on him. “I’m coming to see you.”

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The next train was mostly empty. Thom got in and scanned the couple of faces out of habit. Standing up against the opposite doors was Frank Moriello. Frank watched the passengers through mirrored glasses, listening on a false walk-man that was a police radio while he held a folded New York Post in front of his face. Thom gave his back immediately. He looked out the window just to not be looking in at Frank. Outside, a full, ice blue, winter moon cast a light that gleamed against the silvered rooftops and windowpanes.

Thom tried to convince himself Frank hadn’t seen him, but he couldn’t keep his panic down. Not that Frank had anything on him. He couldn’t. But then Thom thought of the bag he’d left on the last train. She could’ve phoned the police with his description. Frank could be here not just on duty, but looking for him. Ready to give Thom his first pinch, after almost fifteen years of cutting on trains. Fucking Hell.

Thom turned crisply and went to the rear doors, nimbly pulled them open and burst on to the next car. He pushed on through. He only had to go one stop. If he were able to make the last car the emergency exit from the platform would be right there. He could get down the stairs and be at Mary's without any problems. How could he get pinched right before Mary was finally going to see him? No way, no chance.

Thom gated through another car. He was almost there. There was nobody riding on these. His steps echoed as he paced through. He was trying to listen for the sound of the doors opening and closing behind him but he was too worried to turn around. There wasn't any tell tale sounds. Maybe Frank really had missed him.

Thom got to the last car. The train was only two minutes from the next stop at fucking most. There was only one guy in the last one, way at the end of the train, with his back to Thom. Definitely not a cop. His jacket was way too big. Thom jerked open the last door. He was going to make it.

As the door closed behind him Thom heard a sound that crept and took hold in his mind and seemed to slow down his thoughts. Even his whole sense of perception just dropped into slow motion. The sound wasn't so much of a scream, but more of a strange, drawn out wail. It dripped with panic. It reminded Thom of a time in his childhood when he'd seen a dog whose hind legs had fallen through the iced over cover of a pond. Just before the Shepard fell in completely, he let out this whine for someone, anyone, to stop this mortal calamity. The sound drew Thom's eyes back to the man. Below the man, two brown legs with stockings and ivory shoes vibrated in fright.

Thom yelled out "Hey!" without thinking of life, injury, money, Mary or anything.

The man turned and came at Thom desperate. There was a knife that wavered in the man's right hand. His legs pushed against the subway floor like starting blocks, driving everything in him forward. Thom tried to shuffle back but the train door had latched closed behind him. The man was across the train car in half a breath - on him.

Thom slipped left in a hungry fear to get out of the corner. The knife cut past him, slicing into the heavy down of his jacket, kissing through to Thom's clavicle. It slipped right along the bone to his shoulder. Thom thought he might be dead then, that the man had slit his throat right in that instant. Maybe the man thought he had gotten Thom too, for the both of them felt time freeze up on the train. Their eyes caught each other, Thom, looking down from above, frightened. And the man, looking up, realizing Thom wasn't dead, and seeking another cut. The moment ended and Thom never gave the man a chance.

Thom's left fist collided against the man's jaw, cracking it at the ear. Thom's knuckles rang with pain. He hadn't hit anyone without a glove on since high school. And fuck if he ever tried to hit anyone like this. Stunned, the man sought the beginnings of collapse. Thom's right swung into the man's ribs. The man's body constricted and the air rushed out of his lungs. The man's eyes bulged. The knife dropped out of his hand. Thom heard the woman. She was screaming her fucking lungs out.

The train dropped out of cruising speed and everybody hit the ground. The woman collapsed against the sealed back door. The man dropped, praying through delirium, for unconscious nirvana. Thom staggered and then up ended over the train's metal pews.

- *Queensboro Plaza. This train is express. Express train to Flushing.*

Frank Moriello beat into the car, his dark, square-faced handgun out in front.

“Nobody fucking move!”

The doors opened and half an army of police swarmed the last car on the seven train.

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“Thom Casser. Okay. Is the first time you’ve ever been in a police station, Thom?” Frank placed a manila folder on the table Thom had been sitting at for forty minutes. Before Frank had come in just now, the room had been muted in absolute silence.

“No, not the first time.”

“So in Phili? Cause we’ve never had you, right?”

“Yeah in Phili. Look, Officer. Moriello ...”

“Hey Thom, I want to go home and fuck my wife too, Okay. But we have some things to take care of. And call me Frank.”

Frank and Thom gave each other the eyes of seriousness, but for both of them, it was just decorum.

“And if you feel like I am wasting your time, this folder here, this one,” Frank shook the manila folder, “has sixteen affidavits from women who had their bags sliced and you know what? They all finger a hefty white guy, sans dumb-shit mustache who sat next to them. Now a smart guy like you could beat that rap, you know, some of these are like five years old. But I might just throw it at you, you know, to fuck up your life.”

Thom stayed quiet.

“Okay so I think we can deal here. Now that you understand how things are for you, I’m going to bring you in on the bigger picture. I think we can fix things right, and Thom I am going to give you the dream fix.”

Frank took a package of cigarettes out of his jacket and offered one to Thom. Thom shook his head no. Frank drew up a strange deadpan honesty and asked if Thom minded if he smoked. Thom hardly could voice any objection.

“Okay, so all you need to do to get out of here tonight, Thom, is tell me the true story of this evening’s occurrences. We’re going to go through it once together so I can get a sense of it, then we’re going to do one for posterity, and then we are going to do one for my boss. Think you can handle that?”

“I think so.”

“And you’re also going to need to shave that mustache. You’re just not the type to have one. Too fucking blonde.”

“Okay.”

“Grand, Thom. Fucking grand. So you were on the train.”

“I was on the train and ...”

“Why did you get on the train at Courthouse Road? I saw you get in, remember? That’s one stop from your house. You could have walked there faster right? Unless you were on another train and you got off to wait for the next one. Why would you do that Thom?”

“I had a call.”

“A what?”

“A telephone call. I couldn’t hear too well so I stepped off the train to talk on the platform.”

“That’s a smart answer Thom. You always have smart answers. Did you know we met in 1999 on the L going to Brooklyn? I was dressed up as a Rabbi, you probably don’t remember, but I sat down next to you and started talking and you were nothing but smart answers.”

Frank was bewildering, the way he spoke, and switched gears, and seemed so dead interested in what you had to say even when he hardly let you get a word in edgewise. Thom thought about Clark rotting in prison. Thom wondered if Clark had the same treatment before he got six years.

“Okay, so a phone call gets you off one train to another. We’re not putting that in the posterity version but that’s the way it went. Okay. You come on the train and you see me and you say, ‘shit, it’s Frank Moriello!’ and you head on down the train.”

“I figure I will walk down to the last car ...”

“And maybe jump the service exit. You can be cool, cause you don’t have anything on you, we checked that. But why not be careful. You were always a careful guy, Thom.”

“Something like that.”

“So you get to the last car and Frank Moriello isn’t anywhere. You gave that bastard the slip. But then you see what?”

“I see a guy standing over a woman. He’s got his back turned to me, so I only see the woman’s legs. And I hear her crying a little.”

Frank’s eyes got narrow in extreme interest.

“And then I said something?”

“What did you say?”

“I don’t really remember. Like ‘hey’ or something.”

“Okay, ‘hey’ and this cocksucker turns around.”

“He runs down the train car ...”

“And he’s got a knife, Thom, a big fucking pig-sticker. How’d you’re fucking skinny ass take that?”

“I don’t know, just lucky.”

“No way. Little fuck-up thieves from Phili don’t get lucky. How?”

“I don’t know. I go a good shot in before he got me.”

“Bullshit. How?”

“Look, he took a swing, he got me a little in the shoulder and I hit him in the fucking face before he fucking murdered me.”

Frank rifled his jacket pocket for a notepad and read aloud. “‘Patient suffered bone fracture to the right vertebro-costal eight and nine’ which are your lower ribs, and ‘fracture to external pterygoid’ which is what they call a broken fucking head. How?”

“I’ve been doing a little boxing ...”

“Okay, boxing, good for you. My wife’s been doing that and her ass looks great. Where?”

Thom got a little panicked in the face.

“C’mon Thom. I’m not looking to give anybody trouble. We’ll keep this out of the posterity report to.”

“Cee’s, in Clinton.”

Frank put that right into notebook, and then folded the whole thing back into his jacket pocket.

“So he comes at you, you give him a little Iron Mike, the train stops and then its Frank Moriello and cop city.”

“That’s pretty much it.”

“Aces Thom. Aces.”

The rest of the evening was like sleepwalking. Thom talked non-stop, into the tape recorder, to Frank, to Frank’s partners, and to Frank weaseling boss. And when he wasn’t talking Frank was gnawing his ear off with stories of being in strange disguises and riding the train looking for Thom, ‘and his cronies.’ In the middle somewhere Frank got him into a bathroom to shave off the mustache. As Thom pulled the razor over his upper lip, Frank spoke with the most haunting honesty while he watched Thom in the mirror. He said,

“You know I’m sorry I never caught you. You’re smart, and I would have liked to have put you in jail. And now, the way this is playing out, I’m never going to get the chance.”

Right afterwards Frank arranged a picture with him and a clean-shaven Thom shaking hands.

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Thom got to Mary’s apartment at three-thirty AM. She didn’t fight with him. Maybe it was something in his expression, but he got through the door without explaining one single word. She got a little nervous when Thom got his jacket off and the plastic and gauze popped out on his shoulder. But Thom said please could we talk about it

tomorrow. Mary put him in bed and said she was sleeping on the couch. Thom begged her to stay, but she wouldn't, and Thom didn't have much fight left.

Thom jerked around while he slept until the morning light breathed through Mary's curtains. He dreamed about that fucking guy coming at him. He dreamed about crazy fucking Frank Moriello. He dreamed about Clark falling to shit in prison. Around nine-thirty Mary got into bed with him. She was cooing something in his ear but Thom was really too tired to hear anything. Something about her being happy he'd shaved his mustache. He got his arms around her, pulled her ass against his waist, and dropped off for two hours of real rest.

When he got up, the article was laid out on Mary's kitchen table. It was a page three story in the Daily Post. Across the top third of the page was a black and white of Thom Casser and Frank Moriello shaking hands. Block letters underneath read

### **REFORMED THIEF STOPS MR. SATURDAY NIGHT**

Thom read the headline over a few times. The words "reformed thief" was right under his image clear as fucking day. Mary came up behind him and looked at the article again herself.

"What am I going to do?" Thom said.

"What are you going to do?" Mary asked at almost the same time. Only her question seemed full while Thom's was thin with loss.

"Well I can't fucking go back to Stanton's after shaking hands ... after fucking this," Thom shot his hand at the photo. "And I can't very well ever work on a train again."

Mary stayed super-calm, the way a champion stays calm over an upstart with spent legs.

“No, you can’t,” she whispered, her tone sweet and low, “you’re Re-formed, Thom. Whether you like it or not.”

Thom narrowed his eyes in frustration. There wasn’t an angle to play. Not that he was ever good at seeing them, but Frank Moriello had reached into his life and cut him off from anything that had ever sustained him. Mary didn’t wait for opening though. She put her hands on his face and then pushed them down to hold Thom’s neck.

“What do you want to be doing, Thom?”

Thom waited a spell, before answering, even though he had some answers at the ready.

“I want to box more.”

“Okay.” Mary smiled.

“I want to be with you.”

“Well, maybe we can work on you’re priorities, but I think that might have some possibility, now that you’re the “Queens County Champion of the Streets and a friend of Justice everywhere.”

“I hate the daily post.” Thom said and smiled into Mary’s eyes.