

## *The Boxer*

**September 21<sup>st</sup>, 1972**

For as long as I can remember I've been dying to come home, so it really stirred the killer in me when I got kicked off my flight – all 'cause I asked for something to drink before takeoff. Goddamn airplane companies can't do shit right. I was waiting on my feet for so long that if I didn't know better I'd have thought that I was slowly being swallowed by quicksand; quicksand littered with half-chewed and spit out chocolate wrappers, quicksand littered with shimmering trails of coins careening with the crowd. After a few wasted hours I caught the next flight home. I bumped into people left and right, up and down, trying to get a cab – man they were everywhere, not an empty space in sight. You know how crowds make me sweat. Finally an oriental driving a piss-stained who-knows-what obliged me with a ride.

“228 Fordham,” I said as I got in.

He didn't understand me. I repeated the address but the gook still didn't get it, so he pulled out a map of the area and I pointed him to the apartment building. It's a long drive over, and on that account I guess he figured he oughta try to make some conversation.

“Having a good night?” he asked.

I didn't feel like talking to him, so I kept my mouth shut and acted like I hadn't heard him. The gook clucked out the question again, louder this time, but I wasn't about to give in. I kept looking out the window like he hadn't said a damn word. We rode in silence for the next twenty minutes.

When we finally arrived, I gazed down at the old boxing basement and knew I was home again. I could tell nobody had been down there in a while; even though the boxing ring was still there, I couldn't see any bags hanging around. I was tempted to grab somebody off the street, shove a pair of gloves on them, and have a round or two. Maybe tomorrow, not that anyone would be a partner like you. For now I'm just relieved to be home, and relieved to take off my fatigues and those damn tight boots.

### **September 24<sup>th</sup>, 1972**

Now that I'm back I've been thinking I should find a job, if only to keep bread on the table. Walking down Fourth today I saw one of those appliance and electronic retail stores hiring salesmen. "NO EXPERIENCE NEEDED" the sign said, and seeing as I have none I walked in for the job like a rat into a rat trap.

You never realize just how many people have appliance and electronic needs until you walk into one of these places. There are floors and floors and floors of TVs, microwaves, toasters, vacuum cleaners, air conditioners, refrigerators and more, and not a single empty aisle. Guys and girls, young and old, black and white – they were all there. I stood in silence for a second, trying to take it all in. I then headed to the door marked "Manager".

"Can you not block the customer's view of what you're trying to sell?" asked the man behind the desk, not looking up from the crossword he held a breath away from his face. He could sure as hell see the puzzle's letters, but to see the words the boss would have had to take a step back. You would have laughed at him. He was fat and short, a demolition ball of a man, but groomed like a goddamn show poodle. Not

a hair follicle out of place, not a hair follicle without purpose. He moved slowly to preserve the arrangement.

“Yes, I – ”

“Congratulations, you’re hired.”

The boss handed me a work schedule and saw me out of his office. As I was exiting the store this one gook wouldn’t stop staring at me. I kept walking but I could feel those empty eyes watching, patiently watching and never wavering. I moved faster and faster until he was out of sight and it took everything I had in me to not go after him.

I couldn’t sleep that night. I headed up to bed, but after rolling around for a couple of hours I got what I needed and came back down to the basement. I hunted all around our old ring for a decent bag and couldn’t find one– the only bag I recovered was so disgusting I almost spent the night bashing up the walls instead. You could tell the thing used to be white, real white and real pretty, but now it was scuffed up by soot, dirt and blood. When you hit it you could feel its ribs cracking, you could hear its nose breaking, you could hear it coaxing you for more. With a set of hands nearly too numb to unlock the door and sweat tickling the inside of my eyelids, I slept like a baby.

### **September 25<sup>th</sup>, 1972**

Just before seven in the morning, a persistent knocking woke me up. I don’t know how the hell I managed to walk all the way to the door in the state I was in. I stumbled on each and every piece of crap that I’d been too lazy to pick up from the floor. When I finally did get there, a little gook girl, one more with hollow cheeks and

without a mother beside her, locked eyes with me the moment I swung the door open.

“Money?” she asked in a familiar accent, without shame.

“Don’t have any,” I replied.

“Please?”

I shook my head.

I was about to head back inside when she started to walk away, as though she’d already met a hundred assholes like me, and without even thinking about it I called out to her.

“I could give you breakfast.”

She turned around, a little scared and confused. I did that stupid hand-motion of spooning food up to your mouth, pointed at her, and then at the kitchen. She understood. Cautiously, she allowed me to lead her inside. I still don’t know how I allowed myself to do it. Can you try to understand?

The gook girl and I sat there for a long time. I watched her fling mouthful after mouthful of food into her mouth, like a dog desperately digging to the center of the earth. I snatched the plate out of her tiny hands once I figured she’d had enough. What followed was a staring contest without a winner. I have to admit she was pretty good looking, for a girl. Twelve, maybe thirteen years old. Not that her gook looks could keep me awake at that bum hour; as soon as we broke eye contact, I felt my head settling into my arms on the table. Before I knew it I was out cold.

I couldn’t fucking believe the gook girl was still there when I woke up. I didn’t have much time to think about it though – looking at the clock I saw I was running

late for my first shift at the store. I threw on my work clothes, got what I needed, and rushed out. As I was leaving, I looked my guest straight in the eye, pointed at the door, and yelled, "Out!"

The boss assigned everybody sections of the store to patrol. The place is too damn big to do it any other way, he said. I'm stationed at the TV section.

Everywhere I turn advertisements jump out at me and try to sell some absurd product: a "10-for-1" bargain on blazers, a Dodge I don't know how to drive, some pretty pants I could never pull off. Sometimes the happy selling voices blare out from behind me when my mind's somewhere else and scare the hell out of me.

A lot of people hang out in the TV section. You figure out pretty quickly that these guys aren't the serious shoppers; they're not the ones who walk in with a game plan. They're killing time while the person they came with is picking up what they need, or they're lost and drifting to the brightest, loudest thing around, or they're just looking for the reason they came in in the first place. Sometimes I'd try to do my job and help them figure out what they're looking for, but they'd mostly keep their eyes on the TV and nod while I stood there asking questions like an idiot. A few assholes had the nerve to scrunch up their noses and move a couple sets down. One dad and his kid had their eyes glued to a set playing on repeat a cigarette ad featuring a real busty lady. I didn't even try to help them. I left the store today not having helped one goddamn person. Walking out of there, I couldn't help feeling that the place was smaller than it had been the first time I'd walked in.

I came home tonight to a familiar sight – the gook girl sitting at the table, eyes ready to meet mine the second I stepped into the room.

“Hi,” she said in that accent of hers, smiling shakily.

I couldn’t help but smile back.

It wasn’t like I wanted her here, but I couldn’t let a little kid sleep on the street either, you know? I sat down with her, and we looked at each other like we had this morning. I swear to God you’ve never heard a more quiet room in all of your life. I was too tired to continue the contest for long though, so after a minute I found a blanket and tossed it her way. She clutched it and started to follow me to the bedroom, but as soon as I got in there I slammed the door behind me.

### **September 26<sup>th</sup>, 1972**

When I got home from doing jack shit today I wasn’t surprised to see her. But I was honestly more hungry than anything else, and I figured if I took her with me at least I’d get her out of the place, so the two of us went off in search of a decent meal. Eventually I found us a hot dog stand. We were both starving, so I bought us two each. I have to admit, even though we didn’t talk much, she wasn’t bad company. It was always quiet with her, but it was the kind of quiet you can only have with somebody you really know, somebody you’ve known for a long time. It was like having you home.

I was walking back to the apartment, squatter in tow, when I heard a sharp whistle from up ahead. As I got closer I could see it was some jackass with his eyes fixed on the gook girl. He stood under the glimmer of the liquor store sign and played with his lighter, flicking it on and off. In the flashes of light, his face looked

familiar. I gave the gook girl a look that said just keep walking. She nodded, understanding.

“Damn, baby, come a little closer!” he called out after taking a drag.

She pretended not to hear and walked faster.

“Don’t be afraid baby, I’m a stand up guy!”

She pretended not to hear and her lips quivered.

“You won’t regret nothing, baby!”

She kept looking straight ahead and walking fast, damn fast, but not fast enough to stop the son of a bitch from grabbing her wrist. I was there instantly, swinging wild and sloppy and knocking that lowlife to the ground. I breathed heavy. When it was clear that he wasn’t getting up anytime soon, the gook girl’s face flooded with relief and gratitude. She turned to give me a hug.

No fucking way.

I pushed her off me and she hit the pavement hard. I could feel my face getting red. Tears filled her empty eyes, and after giving me one last look she ran away.

“Good riddance!!” I yelled after her.

I got home soon after that. I stormed up the stairs to get what I needed and went straight back down to the basement. I beat the shit out of that bag tonight.

### **October 4<sup>th</sup>, 1972**

The past week’s been pretty unmemorable. Day in, day out at the store, and every day the place seems smaller. For some reason I haven’t been able to sell a

damn thing to a single person. This morning the boss pulled me into his cage and made his demands.

“Either you show up on time, dress in uniform, and actually make a goddamn sale, or you’re fired.”

Today the store felt like a fucking mouse hole.

I really did try to seal a deal today, but people avoided me like I had a Charlie Manson tattoo on my forehead. Hour after hour slowly dripped away, and nobody would come close enough for me to convince them to waste a million bucks on a 40 inch TV for their kids to watch *Archie’s TV Funnies*. I would have just quit the goddamn job but I really did need the money. I was walking over to the cheapest television sets they had in stock when I passed the big screens, all playing this picture of a helicopter landing in an empty green field.

And then I saw you again.

There you were, coming out of that helicopter with your finger on the trigger, all scruffy-faced and with life still in your eyes. Your face fixed on each and every screen as far as the eye could see. I grabbed the set closest to me and hurled it to the ground, glass snowflakes blasting in every-which direction. Another one, another one, and another one, all the way down to the end of the aisle.

That night was no different than any other this week; I didn’t leave the basement, and the gloves didn’t leave my hands. Having lost my job, I had nowhere to go in the morning anyhow. When I got too tired to throw another punch, I collapsed on a floor covered in two weeks of whiskey. Yesterday I had drank between bursts of pummeling the bag. Today I sat there lobbing empty bottles at the



bag half-heartedly. Looking into the pool of broken glass spreading across the floor, my reflection didn't look so different from the bag.

As the sun started to rise today I saw a small figure enter the basement. It walked slowly, closer and closer until I recognized her. The gook girl stood over me, looking down with watery eyes. I stared back at her. She blinked once, then again. It was blindingly quiet. Then she bent down and wrapped her arms around me, squeezing with all the little girl strength she could muster. I just sat there for a moment, silent and motionless. And then I began to cry and squeezed her right back.