

# Jeremy Collins

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## *Shadow Boxing*

Study people's success stories hard. Study their failures even harder.

—Sylvester Stallone, *Sly Moves: My Proven Program to Lose Weight, Build Strength, Gain Will Power, and Live Your Dream*

THE original *Rocky* was released in 1976; I was born the same year. In a weirdly literal sense, we've grown up together. We recently turned thirty, and neither of our prospects look good. *Rocky* has to contend with the films Stallone has made since; I have bad knees, student loans, and credit card debt. What keeps me up nights, though, is that I've yet to publish the book I've been writing for ten years. I'm not sure how healthy it is to inventory one's life next to that of a movie or a celebrity, but I can't tell my story without telling Stallone's. I know how strange (or, in the words of *Rocky III*, "mentally irregular") that sounds, but I have Stallone to blame. He introduced me to the world of stories—and, later, when I was nineteen years old, *Rocky* taught me something about grieving. I'm too old to be looking to Stallone or *Rocky* for inspiration and guidance, but I do. I'm hard-wired. I've heard or seen *Rocky* thousands of times; I can't prove this, but it's true.

I.

In 1982 the Academy Award-winning *Rocky* was the CBS movie of the week. I was six years old and enraptured in front of the television when my parents told me it was time for bed. Kicking and crying, I refused my mother's appeals that I listen to a story from the pile of books by my bed. As a child, I was an insomniac with an imagination. I saw snakes in sock piles, legions of monsters poised under my bed, bats inside my closet. To get me to sleep, my parents had

to do some hefty reading. On that night, though, I didn't want a child's story. I wanted to know what happened to the man in the baggy gray sweat suit. I'm not sure what it says about Stallone's film that it captured the imagination of a six-year-old, but as my parents tucked me in, my father promised to tape the rest.

We didn't own a VCR and wouldn't until 1988. My father taped the balance of *Rocky* (even editing out the commercials) by resting a tape recorder next to our imitation oak television. The next night and countless nights that followed, I fell asleep to—and in—the world of Rocky Balboa: the sounds of Rocky wishing his pet turtles (Cuff and Link) good night, pounding his fists against raw meat, and jogging down the streets of Philadelphia.

The tone and shape of Stallone's voice became part of my inner world—*What about my prime, Mick? At least you had a prime! I didn't have no prime. I didn't have nothin'!*—and by the time I was nine years old, I'd memorized the last hour or more of *Rocky*. My recall was robotic. I'd perform scenes for third-grade classmates, complete with Stallone's slurred speech and the facial features I had to imagine. The story cast a spell over my young life. *Rocky* was like an imaginary friend, a portable book on tape playing inside my head.

There are probably several things wrong with a savant-like child quoting *Rocky*. Looking back, I know my biggest problem was that I thought Rocky won the fight at the movie's climax. If you close your eyes to the movie's final ten minutes and just listen, it's hard to tell who wins. During those nights, I was usually fast asleep even before the opening bell of the fight in which Apollo Creed would be declared the winner.

The audiotape of *Rocky* faded with my early teenage-hood, my idea of Rocky replaced by our VCR and the bloated spectacles of *Rocky II*, *Rocky III*, and *Rocky IV*. I watched these over and over after school until my parents got home from work. In each sequel, when the final bell rings Rocky is unbroken, smiling, blowing kisses. My classmates and friends also watched the sleek major motion picture sequels. We purchased the soundtracks at record stores and watched the gory fight scenes in slow motion. The voices of the original *Rocky* began to disappear.

When I was thirteen, the original *Rocky* came on television again. For the first time, I *saw* the movie. The experience was strange. Everything seemed dark and grungy. I felt as though I were watching some forgotten dream of my own or an old home movie I'd never seen. I mouthed the lines before they were spoken, and I watched each character closely. Rocky didn't resemble the

bodybuilder Stallone of the sequels. He looked like a club fighter with a slight gut. I should've been prepared when Rocky lost, but I wasn't.

Growing up in the suburbs in the 1980s meant growing up a winner. Ronald Reagan had declared the Vietnam syndrome over. Bruce Springsteen's "Born in the U.S.A." wasn't a defiant song of protest, but a patriotic, kick-ass rock anthem. The Huxtables on *The Cosby Show* suggested mothers and fathers could be successful lawyers and doctors and yet always at home. Donald Trump was on his first wife and first millions. Greed was good. Image was everything. Homelessness, hunger, and AIDS were rumors to those of us wandering the neighborhoods and shopping malls of metropolitan Atlanta. Watching the original *Rocky* end in defeat reeked of some other era, some other country, and some other people who were unsure of themselves. The Rocky I knew was a winner, just as I knew I was a winner. I didn't want this new knowledge. I wasn't ready for it. It was like discovering that Santa Claus isn't real, that the Virgin Birth and the Resurrection are metaphors, and that all of our heroes are ultimately human.

## II.

*Rocky VI*, officially titled *Rocky Balboa*, has been lauded for its humanity. A December 2006 issue of *Newsweek* called it "a provocative exploration of heroism and aging . . . a mature handling of loss." In the movie, Rocky's wife and number one fan, Adrian, has died (from, Rocky tells us, "woman cancer"), and Rocky has to deal with "the beast inside of me." To "purge" his grief, Rocky fights an exhibition bout against a champion thirty years his junior. (Watching the film, I tried to imagine what percentage of sixty-year-old widowers would handle the loss of their wives by taking their shirts off and punching other men in the face.)

The film explores grief about as deeply as does *Bambi*, and perhaps not as well, but Stallone has taken the reviews in stride. He's appeared at *Rocky VI* openings worldwide, complete with a botox smile and his fists up, as a spokesman urging aging baby boomers to still "follow their dreams." The tag line on the DVD version says, "Never give up. And never stop believing." The movie's message seems to be, "It's never too late to be naive."

When I walked into the theater last December, I knew better than to expect *Rocky VI* to explore grief. But I wanted it to, because grieving has been on my mind for the past ten years. I've been trying to write a book about it.

Ten years ago my best friend and college roommate, Jason Kenney, was killed in a single-car drunken driving accident. He was the driver and I was his passenger.

Both of us were believers. Rocky believers. As boys we held boxing matches in Jason's basement, taking turns being Rocky. To get pumped before basketball games in junior high, we'd watch *Rocky IV* over and over, and during timeouts of close games, Jason would quote lines from the movie to break the tension. Years later, our answering machine in college played the opening bars from "Eye of the Tiger," the theme song from *Rocky III*; at Young Harris College, our small two-year school tucked away in the Appalachian Mountains of northeast Georgia, we ran each morning on a narrow mountain road, thinking ourselves not unlike Apollo Creed and Rocky on the beach in that movie. Our shared affection for Rocky was based more on nostalgia for the cartoonish, oversized Rocky of the sequels than the original film. But we loved thinking of ourselves as underdogs who only needed to dig a little deeper to overcome any obstacle.

The accident left me with broken nose, a crushed right shoulder, and a shattered left foot. I was covered in road rash—bruises, cuts, scrapes. But my injuries seemed embarrassingly minor. Jason had severed a vertebra in his neck. His death was immediate. A few weeks later I returned to Young Harris. I requested a single room and found that at night, after I ran out of Percocet, I couldn't sleep.

I'm not sure how many times I watched *Rocky* in that tiny room. I don't know how many times I saw Rocky wake up at four in the morning to the insipid talk on his radio alarm clock, stumble out of bed, drink raw eggs, stretch, and then hit the ground running. I don't know how many times I watched him run past the statue of George Washington and then up the stairs of the Philadelphia Museum of Art and raise his arms in the air. I'm not sure how often I saw Rocky get the holy hell beaten out of him by Apollo Creed. But I watched the movie over and over because I was afraid that if I didn't I'd act on my other fantasies and throw in the towel.

I find it hard to call any moment in front of a television screen "spiritual," but watching *Rocky* kept me afloat through those nights. Rocky's refusal to submit to disaster helped me to invite pain, to see what it could teach. For a year after Jason's death, I didn't laugh or cry. The people I loved the most couldn't touch me. The promises and assurances of the church seemed suddenly out

of Disney. But *Rocky* gave me an escape and a dogged hope that I could move into tomorrow.

In time, I started looking for a way to mourn Jason and give grief a shape. I shot baskets each night in the run-down gym where we'd played one-on-one. When the pins were taken out of my left foot and my rehab was done, I ran in the mornings up and down the same mountain road the two of us had run. I also discovered the kindness of an English professor who gave me books to read. I read and ran and played basketball for Jason. I made mourning my mission.

Grieving was often simply a matter of endurance, of putting one foot in front of the other, but in time I found my horizons expanding. I'd discovered something through reading. In books I found a kind of temporary immortality where characters and scenes seemed more real than reality. In books like *The Great Gatsby* and *A Separate Peace* I found echoes of Jason. I didn't want him to disappear. I decided I'd become a writer. The week after I graduated from Young Harris I drove to the Kenneys' house in Atlanta and promised Mr. Kenney that I would write a book about his son.

### III.

That summer, while wandering a used bookstore in the Atlanta suburb of Decatur, I stumbled onto Stallone's *Rocky: The Movie Scrapbook*, published the year after *Rocky* was released. I was set to enroll at the University of Georgia as an English major—to make good on my promise—when I found Stallone's strange book, which outlined the story of his creation of *Rocky*. I sat down in the aisle and read the entire thing. It wasn't hard to read the short book (with photos) in a single sitting; it was hard not to be inspired.

Stallone recounts his twenty-ninth birthday party as the turning point in his creative life. He was broke and unemployed. His wife was broke and pregnant. They lived in a garage in Los Angeles, and Stallone was trying to make it as an actor and writer. In L.A. he'd landed a few television commercials as well as a part in *The Party at Kitty and Stud's*, a soft-core porn film later released as the *Italian Stallion*. The work didn't pay better than had his jobs in New York (lion cage cleaner, fish-head cutter, bouncer for an apartment slumlord). His biggest scores were minor roles in *The Lords of Flatbush* and Woody Allen's *Bananas*. The phone wasn't exactly ringing off the hook. In fact, it had been disconnected.

As Stallone blew out the candles on his twenty-ninth year, he promised himself that he'd make a deeper commitment to his writing. The next day he bought spray paint and blacked out the windows to his garage home. He got rid of his television and "entered the subterranean world of writers." With a nineteen-cent Bic and a forty-nine-cent yellow legal pad, Stallone got to work. He didn't panic. He didn't go to film school. He didn't enroll in a creative writing program and take out a student loan. Instead, he wrote and kept on writing.

Stallone's writing was, in his words, "pretty juvenile stuff." He wrote short stories. He wrote television sitcoms. He wrote screenplays. He wrote pages and pages that led nowhere.

Stallone needed a spark, needed a subject, and both arrived one day when a friend gave him a ticket to watch a closed-circuit broadcast of a boxing match at the Wiltern Theater in L.A.

The year was 1975, and the fight featured Muhammad Ali against Chuck Wepner, whose career record was an unremarkable 31-17-2. Wepner had two nicknames. He was from Bayonne, New Jersey, and was called "the Bayonne Bleeder." He was also known in boxing parlance as a "tomato can"—which, no matter how you hold it, is never very threatening.

The boxing world wasn't exactly holding its breath for the matchup between a champion known as "The Greatest" and a challenger considered a "tomato can." Las Vegas oddsmakers were less likely to take bets on who'd win the fight than on whether Wepner could survive three rounds. Las Vegas odds said no.

Wepner was battered and bloodied throughout the fight, but he kept coming out of his corner for more. In the ninth round, Wepner landed a shot to Ali's ribs and, for the first time ever as heavyweight champion of the world, Ali went down. Wepner went to his corner and said, "Hey, I knocked him down," to which his trainer reportedly said, "Yeah, but now he looks really pissed off." Ali got up and won on a TKO in the final round's last seconds. Wepner had gone the distance with Muhammad Ali in a display of sheer will.

Watching the fight back in L.A. was that struggling writer, and B actor, who was about to sell his dog. He went home, picked up his yellow legal pad, and on a diet of coffee and NoDoz, stayed up for eighty-six hours writing. Stallone took his ninety-page script to Irwin Winkler and Robert Chartoff, producers at United Artists; he knew them from his many failed casting calls. According to legend, both producers were impressed and offered Stallone

\$25,000 for the rights to the script. Stallone agreed, as long as he could act in the lead role. They refused, and so did he.

Allegedly the bidding soared to \$100,000 to \$250,000 to \$360,000. United Artists' studio was certain it could land Al Pacino, James Caan, or Burt Reynolds for the role of Rocky, so they were willing to substantially increase Stallone's checking account balance, which at that point was \$106, for the rights to a script they thought would be a hit. But Stallone held his ground. If he couldn't be Rocky, there'd be no deal. Stallone's perseverance paid off. Chartoff and Winkler went to bat for Stallone and convinced United Artists to let him star in the lead role. The movie was given a budget of \$1 million, the union minimum.

*Rocky* was filmed in twenty-eight days. Most of the scenes are first takes. Some of the best dialogue, especially between Rocky and Mickey, is ad-libbed. But these rough edges give the film its charm and suggest something closer to a play than to a major motion picture. Of Stallone's claim to have written the screenplay in three and a half days, Pauline Kael wrote in the *New Yorker*, "Some professional screenwriters, seeing what a rag-tag script it is, may think that they could have done it in two in a half. But they wouldn't have been able to believe in what they did, and it wouldn't have gotten the audience cheering like *Rocky* did."

I felt like cheering in that used bookstore as I read Stallone's story. I wanted to cheer for Stallone and myself. I'd found a blueprint, a plan to follow by the letter. Here was how I'd write a book about Jason. What I *didn't* see was the most important lesson of the creation of *Rocky*: some things, perhaps the best things, cannot be taught.

#### IV.

Writing takes time, and good writing is earned a word at a time. That lesson isn't profound, but it can take a lifetime to learn. When I headed to the University of Georgia, I plotted a writing course like Stallone's. I rented a studio apartment in a rougher part of Athens' west side. The place had one window—two feet by two feet (with bars)—directly overlooking the scrap yard behind a glass shop. I slept on a bare mattress on the floor. No television. No Internet. I cleared my desk and set out to write a book about Jason's short and troubled life, and my experience of mourning in the mountains. I knew Stallone had

written *Rocky* in eighty-six hours. I was willing to give myself a little more time, but not much.

I wrote and wrote and had no idea what I was doing. I wrote five or six hours at a time: descriptions, sketches, explanations of emotions. On the wall beside my writing desk, I kept three pictures. One was of William Faulkner as a young man in New Orleans in snappy tweed, holding a pipe. He is smiling, ever so slightly. The second picture was of a young Hemingway fishing a stream in Upper Michigan around 1913. The current is running against him—pooling at the backs of his knees. His mouth is slightly open in an expression of concentration and care. Next to Faulkner and Hemingway, I tacked a photo of Rocky Balboa on the stairs at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, his hands in the air, exalting.

After a year of working, I wasn't satisfied. My writing was confused. Unruly. I figured I wasn't working correctly. I decided to improve my writing habits by reading everything Hemingway and Faulkner wrote. Pyramids of books took over my room. I also decided what I needed was to make a commitment more truly like Stallone's. I needed to surrender totally. I wanted to make my life about willpower. I decided to be alone. I broke up with my girlfriend. I stopped calling friends back. I didn't make social plans because I had *other* plans. I wanted to prove I had the will to write a book.

I set two goals. I decided I'd write three pages a day for one hundred days, and I signed up to run the Philadelphia Marathon, which ended at the steps of the museum. I wanted my training to be strenuous. I figured here was a natural goal for a writer—running a marathon—and that somewhere in the silence and solitude of the road, words would fill my consciousness. The right words. Poetic words. Lean, sharp, lovely words.

I spent weeks running and writing. Sometimes I ran for miles on small country highways past fields and farms as the sun rose. Sometimes I woke and wrote for blocks of eight hours. I wrote pages without paragraph breaks and ran so far I stopped counting miles. When I wasn't running or writing, I read biographies of Hemingway and Faulkner. I slogged through *The Sound and the Fury* and *Islands in the Stream*. I read and reread Stallone's story about the creation of *Rocky*. I stared at the pictures on my wall. I wrote plans for writing. Outlines. Charts. I made lists of titles for my book. Occasionally, I'd have to take a break from reading about writing and crank out my three pages. I'd hold the pages up to the light, call them good. I posed in the mirror and pictured the expression I wanted on the back of the book.



I devoured everything I could about Hemingway and Faulkner. Interviews, biographies, critical essays. I figured I'd wasted time by not knowing the essentials, the secrets. Hemingway and Faulkner knew the secrets. I was going to discover them too.

Here's what I found.

Hemingway: Write it first in pencil, then again with a typewriter. It's better to type standing up. It's nice and pleasant to work in clean cafes. Good to keep a horse chestnut in one pocket. A rabbit foot in the other. Harder to write in the summer. Too hot. Easier in the fall and best in the mornings. Stop when it's going well so you'll know what happens next. When you're done, take a walk. Read a book. Make love with the woman you love. Watch people do things they enjoy and understand. But when you're done, don't talk about your writing. Don't listen to others talk about your writing. Don't think about your writing.

Faulkner: Write when the feeling is hot, the material alive, while you are demon-driven (you must be demon-driven), and make sure you read, read, read—read everything! Think of yourself always as an amateur: don't think of writing in terms of duty or profit, but as a game of tennis, as fun. Realize that the longer sentence can be a metaphysical exercise in expressing our desire to outrun life's brevity, and that reality will always fail to be commensurate with this desire—as it will with so many other desires of the human heart. Don't be a "writer" but always be writing. Summer is a good time to write because the blood boils in the veins. Whether you are in the saddle of a horse or leaning on a fence, always carry a pencil and paper because you never know when inspiration might strike. But don't spend too much time thinking about writing; otherwise, you'll never get started.

I wrote these maxims down and spent a lot of time—too much time—thinking about writing. But I still wrote my three pages a day. I took a notebook everywhere. I wrote in the mornings and the evenings. I wrote between classes and during classes. I scribbled notes on scrap pieces of paper while working at a local bookstore. I stayed up late and woke up early, in the shadow of the glass shop, writing.

I'd have trouble calling those pages a continuous narrative. The writing was scattered, unfocused. I couldn't decide how to tell Jason's story. I didn't trust my own voice, so I wrote it as a novel and then as a screenplay. I wrote short stories from a third-person point of view, referring to my character as

“the young man” and Jason as “the friend.” I wrote our story as a cycle of poems. Some of them kind of rhymed.

I loved my friend,  
 but wait,  
 stop.  
 No more.  
 Jason was not a metaphor.

I took writing classes and was too thickheaded to listen to the sound criticism from my professors. Instead, I listened to my peers’ encouraging feedback (“Great! I really like the dialogue on page 7!”). But, after awhile, it was hard to feel encouraged. When I got honest, the sheer amount of really bad writing I’d done seemed an overwhelming testament to how shitty a writer I was. I’d finished a first draft (titled “Mountains Like Waves”) and was tempted to burn it. When I looked at a book like *The Sun Also Rises* or *As I Lay Dying* and then at “Mountains like Waves,” the gap seemed insurmountable. But I kept writing.

I kept writing because I liked the clean feeling at the end of a day’s work. I kept writing because occasionally I’d write a sentence or even a paragraph that surprised me. I kept writing because I had a promise to keep. And if I felt spent and wasn’t sure what to write next, I’d copy pages and pages of Hemingway and Faulkner. Over time, I copied all of *The Sun Also Rises* into my computer. But when the hundredth day arrived and I packed for my Philadelphia pilgrimage, I’d written three hundred pages. Of something.

V.

When Rocky hits the pavement running at that ungodly morning hour in Philadelphia, he’s alone. When I hit the Philadelphia streets early on a November morning, I was surrounded by people. Waves and waves of people. Strangers. I’d spent the last six months in solitude—reading alone, writing alone, and running alone; being surrounded by thousands of other marathoners made me seasick.

After a few miles—past old churches, past Chinatown, past Independence Hall and the Liberty Bell—I found my legs. The morning was bright and cold, and I was startled to be in a city that dripped history on every block. I ran those first half-dozen miles in a touristy reverie, until two older women ahead of me in matching pink Nike jogging suits began talking.

By their accents I could tell they were indigenous to the South. While growing up I'd seen their types in the Atlanta malls: goose-stepping housewives power walking past food courts and department stores. Their conversation hooked me. I could've moved to the sidewalk or to the other side of the road, but I didn't. I'd forgotten what it was like to listen to voices other than ones on a page.

In the South, many of our conversations move horizontally: Who is getting married to whom? Who got into what school? Who didn't? Who is getting a divorce? And who isn't? I took a strange pleasure from listening, and in spite of my reticence I almost introduced myself. Then they began talking about art. The subject was Russian literature. The subject was Oprah's Book Club.

The Golden Girl with the purple fanny pack and white headband did most of the talking. She mused about Anna Karenina's suicide and Tolstoy's peasant life in Russia. I wanted to gag. What did they know about sacrifices for Literature? They discussed Oprah's charity work and her long-distance running. I wanted to gag again. What did Oprah know about running? We ran along the Schuylkill River, and they gushed about Oprah's performance in the Chicago Marathon—four hours and twenty-nine minutes. "Now, that's just so amazing," the woman with the purple fanny pack said. Four hours. Twenty-nine minutes. The time seared itself into my head. I checked my Ironman watch and did some frenzied math. By mile twelve, I was slightly ahead of Oprah's pace. Barely. I looked again at my watch, took a breath, and sprinted past the Golden Girls.

I ran fast. I ran far. I ran as if my identity as a man depended on it.

No one ever warns you about bleeding nipples. When you sign up for a marathon, no one pulls you aside and discreetly warns you to cover your nipples with Band-Aids. The cold and constant friction between the fabric of my shirt and my nipples rubbed them raw. The pain wasn't terrible, but at mile eighteen the pain was a new one in a growing list—shinsplints, dehydration, sore knees, cramp in left foot. *My nipples are bleeding*, I kept thinking as I ran. It was absurd enough to make me want to quit. I thought of explaining to friends and family why I'd traveled so far only to stop, but *My nipples were bleeding* didn't quite contain the gravity I needed. I kept running and tried to imagine Rocky saying, "Yo, Mick. Bad news. Can't go anymore. It's my nipples. Gotta throw in the towel."

At mile nineteen, I had to piss. Bad. So bad it burned. But when I stopped inside a Port-A-Potty, I couldn't go. Nothing. At mile twenty, I was run-walk-

ing. My legs locked up. They felt like pieces of wet firewood. I told myself to snap out of it. I told myself to run. I'd played basketball my whole life. I'd survived football two-a-days. I was an athlete, damn it. But soon I found myself stopped, out of gas, at the foot of a big hill. *No mas.*

From the bottom of the hill, I could see the chubby runners in front of me making their way to the top, where volunteers manned a water and Gatorade station. Marathon volunteers might be the friendliest people in the world—to call them eternal optimists would be to greatly understate their enthusiasm for your running. I heard the cheers for the runners ahead of me:

“Way to go! . . . Only a few miles . . . Looking strong!”

I'm not sure how I looked as I dragged myself to the top of the hill, but I remember the voices.

“Are you OK? Do you want us to call an ambulance?”

I grabbed the hem of my shorts and leaned over. Before I could tell them, *Yes, yes, please call an ambulance, preferably one with a bed*, I felt a hand on my shoulder.

“Here, man. Eat this.”

I looked up and saw a Good Samaritan in a Columbia fleece pullover. He wore a well-trimmed beard and a look of concern. He opened his hand and revealed what looked to be a small packet of toothpaste.

I stared at his offering.

“Take it.”

I reached for the packet and held the cold plastic container in my hands.

“Eat,” he said.

I studied the small plastic tube.

“What is it?”

“Electrolyte gel,” he said. “Banana flavored.”

I tore the plastic open with my teeth and squeezed the goo into my mouth. Banana flavored electrolyte gel tastes like what you might imagine. Pasty. Astronaut food. I smacked my gums. He handed me a paper cup of water and then another. I looked at the nice people on the shadow-covered sidewalk and thought about curling up next to them in the fetal position.

“OK?” the man asked.

Before I could tell him “Not OK,” the Golden Girls came swishing by, smiling and waving.

“I have to go on,” I said.

Something like applause came from the volunteers as I began to jog.

I caught up with the Golden Girls and ran alongside the woman with the purple fanny pack. "Well, hey!" she said.

"Howdy."

She reached into her pack and held out a piece of gum.

"Dentyne?" she asked.

"Thank you."

We talked and chewed Dentyne for six miles—jogging at a steady pace—discussing books and movies and their homes in Tennessee and mine in Georgia. We talked about the South and Atlanta and how much it has changed in good ways, but how sprawl and traffic are taking over. We talked about their children, who were my age and attending college in North Carolina. We talked about Philadelphia. "You know," the woman with the purple fanny pack said, "I don't care what they say. These people here are awfully friendly." We rated the hoagie shops in South Philly as if we were experts. We named our favorite Founding Fathers.

Before I knew it, we crossed the finish line. We didn't hold hands, but we did gather for a photo beside the statue of General Washington in front of the museum.

Alone, I virtually crept up the famous stairs, my knees creaking with each step. As I plodded upward, my hands against my nipples, I tried to imagine what Stallone had felt when he reached this spot in 1975. He'd come so far from the boy who was teased because of his slurred speech (caused by a forceps blunder at birth) to the Writer Who Refused to Sell Out or Give Up. I tried to think of my book draft at home. I'd done it. Three hundred pages. But what had I done? I'd created a hodgepodge of Hemingway and Faulkner, mimicking their moves but never catching their music. I tried to bask in the glory of finishing the marathon. I looked out on the Philadelphia skyline and took a deep breath. The only thought I could muster was that Oprah had beaten me by twenty-one minutes.

When I got home I took down the picture of Rocky. Later I took down Hemingway and Faulkner, too. I've tried to keep a lowercase *e* for the epiphany I had that day in Philadelphia while inching my way back down those stairs. I gained an awareness I suspect Stallone resists: no matter how much your abs resemble a six-pack, no matter how far you can run or how strong or great you feel, physical fitness can't take the place of art. Or, as Hemingway once wrote, "Do not mistake motion for action."

## VI.

I'm not sure why I take Stallone's perpetual sophomore slump personally. His is a minor nobility compared to other megastars from the 1980s. He hasn't joined a cult (Tom Cruise) or married an actress from the WB network (Tom Cruise) or jumped up and down on Oprah's sofa (Tom Cruise). He's never owned a pet monkey (Michael Jackson) nor made a movie with an orangutan (Clint Eastwood). He has yet to blame the Jews for any world war (Mel Gibson), and his father isn't alleged to have ties with Nazi Germany (Arnold Schwarzenegger). Maybe, in considering the autumn of Stallone's career, I should remember Nietzsche's warning not to confuse an artist's work with his life. But where else can one look when there's no more art?

Remembering the artistic achievement of Sylvester Stallone isn't easy. There's so much to forget—*Judge Dredd*, *The Specialist*, *Demolition Man*, *Cliffhanger*, *Stop! Or My Mom Will Shoot*, *Tango & Cash*, *Lock Up*, *Over the Top*, *Cobra*, *Rhinestone* (with Dolly Parton), all three Rambo movies, and Stallone's directorial effort, *Staying Alive* with John Travolta. But at this point in his life, he has almost unlimited resources and time. He could start a film company à la Eastwood and Sean Penn. He has options. Or to think of it another way: Stallone once wrote for eighty-six consecutive hours and produced an Academy Award-winning film. Why couldn't he then write consistently, even if slowly, for thirty years and produce a few more good ones?

Maybe it has something to do with the sunshine, palm trees, and Beverly Hills. About his time in Hollywood as a writer, Faulkner said, "Existence evaporates, slips from your grasp in all this sunlight. Experiences become fashions and styles, everything is a pattern for some facetious evasion. . . . nothing ever happens and then one morning you wake up and find out that you are sixty-five."

Stallone's own evasions of writing are numerous. Toward the end of his 2005 self-help/fitness book *Sly Moves*, Stallone lets us in for a closer look at three days in his life. The view isn't exactly pretty, but it's revealing. He spends most of his time at Gunnar Peterson's private gym, noticing, "It's a beautiful place to work out and a lot of celebrities go there, as well as some 'normal' people." I'm not sure who these "normal" people are, but look, there's Jennifer Lopez! "She's very serious about fitness." And Kim Basinger! "My wife thinks she's the most beautiful woman in the world, and part of her secret is that she's committed to working out on a very regular basis." There are all sorts of beauti-

ful people and all sorts of adventures in name-dropping. “Once, Jennifer and I were at the gym with Jamie Lee Curtis, Angelina Jolie, Jennifer Connelly, and Christina Applegate . . .”

What’s most depressing about this “book” is that people are sized up with a fascist zeal for health. Stallone makes the classical Greek blooper of mistaking beauty for truth. His own obsession with appearances makes us wonder, to say the least, about the levels of Stallone’s self-consciousness. While reading *Sly Moves* I was reminded of something a friend told me years ago upon seeing Stallone (unlit cigar in mouth) walking through a Las Vegas casino.

“He wears elevated shoes, Jeremy. Elevated shoes.”

I refused to believe then that Stallone would wear designer shoes to compensate for his height (five feet eight inches) just as I’ve refused to believe that Stallone wouldn’t take writing seriously. Now the situation seems clear: Stallone is too worried about the impression he’s making ever to tell another honest story. In the book he writes that every day “I am reminded how much bad food is out there. Everyday is like walking through a minefield. You need to be careful with bagels. Cream cheese will hurt you.”

Our failures often give way to strange neuroses. Perhaps working out and being fit is Stallone’s penance for wasting his time and talent. Hemingway, late in his life, wrote in a letter to a friend, “The time to work is shorter all the time, and if you waste it you feel you have committed a sin for which there is no forgiveness.” Maybe forgiveness is what Stallone seeks.

We seek forgiveness when we’ve failed a better version of ourselves, and Stallone is better than his Fitness High Priest persona. In a 1998 interview with Susan Faludi for her book *Stiffed*, Stallone commented on his willingness to put on weight for the movie *Copland*:

I don’t want to put down working out, it’s good, but you become incredibly self-conscious. You are always aware of yourself . . . everything is display. You take a serious gym rat, a man who lives in a gym, it’s like, what do you do with it? You’ve got it, but it comes out in this vanity thing. You qualify for nothing—like the Chippendale dancers. It’s like the orchid; it’s so gorgeous but it’s a parasite. It lives off of everything but what it is.

Deep down, underneath Stallone’s chiseled features, tanning cream, and Botox, there exists a heretic of his own faith. When *Copland* flat-lined and Stallone was shunned by Hollywood producers, he told Faludi, “I see everyone else

working and I'm not doing dick. I'm in total limbo. I'm a man without a country. It's a scary thing to have all these accolades and then to have nothing." In a sense, we're back at the beginning—*What about my prime, Mick?*—and our ears perk up. We're back in the presence of conflict. Stallone is no longer a man with answers. He's someone with pain and experience. Someone who might have a story to tell.

That was almost a decade ago. Nine years is a long time—plenty of time to start a magazine, star in a reality television show, write a fitness book, and make *Rocky VI*. Why has Stallone allowed himself to become so distracted? I've called Stallone's agency several times in an attempt to speak with him; I'm still waiting to hear back. Stallone seemed willing to talk with Susan Faludi years ago, so I e-mailed her agent to see if Faludi could shed some light on Stallone's inactivity. My e-mail request earned a brief reply to the effect that Faludi was too busy to assist me. This polite rejection didn't exactly discourage me. I was glad someone was getting some work done.

Nine years might be a long time, but ten years is longer. I've had a decade (some 88,000 hours) to finish my book. After graduating from Georgia, I stayed in Athens for a few years, working odd jobs and taking some courses in religious studies at the university. I worked on my book about Jason, but with diminishing returns. Frustrated, I headed west and enrolled in a creative writing program. I graduated in the spring of 2007, but without my book finished, my diploma feels about as significant as the paper it's printed on. I did, however, finish a new draft. It's the fourth draft with a beginning, middle, and end. It's flawed, but it has a voice. A voice I can recognize as my own.

I've given up the frantic writing sessions, the all-nighters. I don't do marathons anymore—either at my desk or on the road. I've gradually come to see that writing is as much about imagination, spontaneity, and being vulnerable as it is about will. I haven't finished my own book yet, but I don't type out other people's books anymore.

When my writing is going well its pace resembles that of the Golden Girls. The speed is steady, the steps are the same. Wake up. Write for two or three or sometimes four hours, then go about my day. I teach writing courses at a local university and community college. If I have to prep for classes in the mornings, I fit the writing in at night. I often take Sundays off, especially during the NFL season. I tell myself this staying steady is healthier. I hold to the



advice of Flannery O'Connor: "I try to write a little bit each day." But there are times when this doesn't feel like enough.

Each year, Mr. Kenney and I get together for lunch, often in Atlanta. Each year he asks—politely—how the book is going. He doesn't prod. He doesn't pry. He doesn't ask for a word count. Each year I tell him, "Steady, steady."

During our last lunch, he nodded when I gave my annual answer. He then told me that he'd read recently that Louis L'Amour wrote more than sixty books in his life. That was at least a book a year, Mr. Kenney said, encouraging me to read L'Amour and take a look at his life. I almost said that what L'Amour wrote wasn't real literature, but I stopped. Anyone who's spent time thinking about the inner life of Sylvester Stallone has no business critiquing others' sentimental loves. I simply nodded, and Mr. Kenney encouraged me to keep after the writing—then picked up the check.

There was no venom in Mr. Kenney's comment about L'Amour, but there was a bite. His words left a mark that I carried into my viewing of *Rocky VI*. For weeks afterward, I found myself thinking about my latest draft of the book, Stallone, work habits, and integrity. Now, instead of working on the next draft, here I am writing about Sylvester Stallone. But I've also kept writing about Jason, and I like to think that last year Mr. Kenney was also telling me, "Get it out. Be done."

So I work on—letting Stallone, Faulkner, and Hemingway ride off with L'Amour into the sunset—trusting the steady slowness of my muses, the Golden Girls in pink Nike jogging suits, to carry me home.

## VII.

Walking out of *Rocky VI*, I forgave Stallone. It wasn't hard. I've been forgiving him for awhile. I'm still just a Rocky fan, though I can't say I "enjoyed" the movie. Out of some dogged loyalty I needed to see it—and a week later I needed to flush it by putting the original *Rocky* in the DVD player on my computer and hitting *PLAY*.

I still love the original *Rocky* for what it doesn't do. *Rocky* refuses to be a sports movie. Unlike the leads in *Knute Rockne All American*, *The Natural*, *The Karate Kid*, *Hoosiers*, *Rudy*, *Cinderella Man*, and *Seabiscuit*, Rocky doesn't suddenly receive inspiration and discover the faith needed to win. He's a realist. He knows what's coming, and he gets his face caved in.

Defeat and loss are our most honest teachers. Stallone once knew this, or at least his film did. *Rocky* begins with a black screen, a trumpet call, and then bold white letters announcing R-O-C-K-Y as we hear the dim beat of voices, the low rustle of a crowd. Are we in a revival tent? A subway station? Then a mural on the wall comes into focus as a Byzantine image of Christ holding the host and the cup. We wonder if we're in a church or cathedral until we see fight fans, cigarettes hanging from their mouths, hurling obscenities at two half-naked men locked in a violent dance. Rocky is battling Spider Rico in a club fight.

The brief juxtaposition is clear—this is my body, this is my blood—and our beginning points to the end. This won't be a story of victory, but of the redemption that's found in defeat.

When Christ makes his debut as a literary character—in the Gospel of Mark, circa AD 70—the production is all wrong. The oldest Greek manuscripts of Mark are filled with misspellings, double negatives, and dangling participles. The prose seems as if written by a sixth grader on speed. The original ending, however, is almost perfect. When the women arrive at the tomb with spices, they don't find a risen Lord. They find a young man dressed in white who says Jesus isn't there. Unlike in the other gospel sequels or the gory, action blockbuster *Revelation*, we don't find a ghostly Jesus wandering through doors, showing off his scars, or riding the white horse of Apocalypse. Instead, we're left to imagine all sorts of things as the women rush away from the tomb, terrified, amazed.

At the end of *Rocky*, Rocky doesn't stand over the broken monsters of Clubber Lang (*Rocky III*) or Ivan Drago (*Rocky IV*). He doesn't jump into the air when the bell rings. He doesn't give a post-fight speech to the Kremlin on the dangers of nuclear proliferation. He barely knows where he is. His trainer, Mike, helps him take off his gloves. His right eye is destroyed. The left eye doesn't look much better. Reporters bark out questions, but Rocky only responds, "Adrian! Adrian!"

The shot cuts to Adrian, who's yelling for Rocky as she pushes through the crowd.

"Rocky? Rocky!"

"Adrian?!"

"Rocky?!"

"Adrian?!"

"Rocky?!"

As Adrian runs, her red beret gets knocked off in the crowd. She runs until she makes it into the ring.

“Adrian.”

“Rocky.”

“Where’s your hat?”

“I love you.”

“I love *you*.”

She falls into his sweaty, meaty embrace. We realize, at this moment, *this* is the moment toward which the entire movie has been building. Adrian and Rocky sway in an embrace as the ring announcer delivers the news: Apollo Creed is our winner. Rocky doesn’t seem to hear as he rests his heavy hand against the back of Adrian’s head and inhales. Pulling her closer, he shuts his eyes and breathes out. Freeze the shot. Fade to black. Cue the music. Roll the credits.

Before I try to canonize *Rocky* or Sylvester Stallone, I should stop. I’ve probably already said too much. But I owe Stallone a thank you. I’d like to buy him a beer. Or maybe a post-workout-recovery fruit smoothie with glucosamine and protein powder. *Rocky* helped me through the night when I was a child and carried me through those other days and longer nights. And for a moment in his life, Sylvester Stallone was more than equal to the demands of the task, equal to the art.