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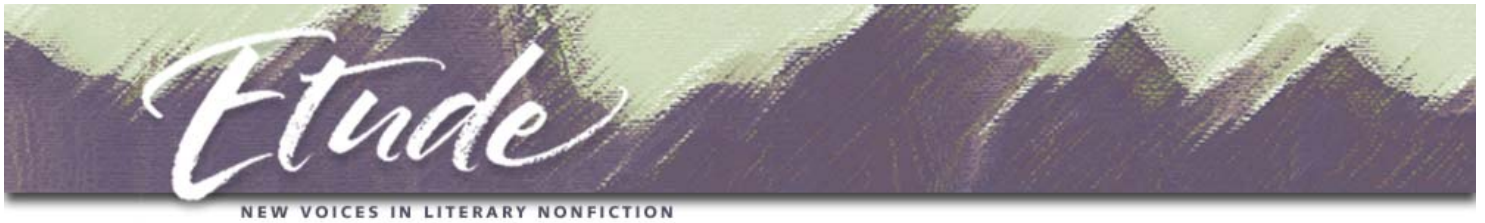
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## Wall Street Fight Club

**A left, then a right, then a left**

by **Andrea Murad**

Jack “The Cadillac” Kolker parked his black Mercedes, grabbed the gym bag holding his boxing gloves and headgear and crossed Front Street in Brooklyn. He opened the door to the warehouse building and walked up two flights of stairs into Gleason’s Gym. It was 4 p.m. on his 49th birthday, and he would spend the next few hours waiting for six minutes in the ring to fight his opponent, Charles Russell.

Kolker registered with the two women sitting at the table blocking the entrance. His trainer, Gary Marder, and his girlfriend stood next to him. Kolker had his four children this weekend, but he’d left them at home. He didn’t want them there if he got hurt.

No one talked over the beeps that marked the time intervals, speed bag cadence and stomping from the two men in the wrestling ring who were flinging each other between the ropes and flipping each other over their shoulders and onto the mat. Yellow “Caution” tape surrounded the area around the boxing ring that would be used for the evening’s bouts. Spectators willing to stand for a closer view would soon fill the other rings while everyone else watched from the chairs assembled behind the yellow tape.

Punching bags hung from exposed beams, and worn free weights, benches and treadmills lined the red walls. Fans pushed around the humid, stale smell of dried sweat. “Gleason’s” signs were plastered everywhere. Tonight was fight night.

Kolker placed his bag by the chairs and headed to the room with aqua-colored walls covered with framed photographs of boxers. Three men monitored the weigh-ins. He dropped his tan shorts on the floor and untied his sneakers before stepping on the scale.

When he started boxing, he stopped eating steak and potatoes and drinking wine and scotch at client dinners. Now Kolker ate salmon and steamed vegetables and drank tea when entertaining clients. He’d been a broker for almost 30 years and leads his own group at Morgan Stanley Smith Barney. He has relationships with up to four generations in about 50 families and knows some of their most personal business: he manages their money.

The week before the fight, he avoided all dinners out. He didn’t cut open the watermelon that had been sitting in his refrigerator since last Sunday. He didn’t satisfy his cravings for cookies or the banana bread that his girlfriend’s mother had baked for him. That morning, he had fasted in preparation for this one moment on the scale.

“One hundred fifty-nine pounds,” Kolker said while leaving the room. He’s five-foot six-inches tall and, from the neck down, has a body that can double for a museum statue by an Italian master. From the neck up, he has slightly sunken cheeks, brown eyes and short, salt and pepper hair along the sides of his head with scars in the back from hair implant surgery. He was in the best shape of his life, having finished his last two half-marathons in 98 minutes.

Kolker is a licensed master boxer, a division created for athletes 35 and older who want to compete in matches sanctioned by USA Boxing. Master boxers fight for three two-minute rounds against other master boxers whose ages are within 10 years and weights are within eight pounds of each other. All boxers must pass a physical exam, yet master boxers over 45 years old, like Kolker, must also have a graded exercise EKG every five years.

After the weigh-in, Kolker, his girlfriend and his trainer had lunch at a nearby deli. Kolker ate a chicken sandwich and a Clif energy bar. Master boxers are weighed hours before a fight instead of the day before like professional boxers. When Marder, the

trainer, competed as a professional kick boxer in the 1970s and 1980s, he fasted to make his weight and, hours before the fight, ate an orange and two spoonfuls of honey for energy. He wanted Kolker to do the same.

“I’m going to box, and I’m going to box hard,” Kolker said while eating his sandwich. “I’m going to remember all the things I have to remember. I’m going to throw a lot of punches. I’ve done it already. It’s another battle. It’s no different than any other thing.” Kolker only knew that he would be fighting a tall, thin man with one previous fight.

He spent weeks shadowboxing an imaginary opponent in front of a mirror. To block his opponent’s punches, Marder reminded him relentlessly to “clean your windshield and tap your forehead” with one glove, as if Kolker were an actual Cadillac, to protect his head from his opponent’s fists and to “scratch your head” with the other. Marder knew if Kolker didn’t fight properly, he could suffer a black eye, broken jaw, broken nose, cuts, a concussion, or talk with a stutter or mumble because of brain damage. He worked with Kolker so that he protected his head, tucked his elbows in to protect his chest, and punched high because his opponent was taller.

In the time leading up to the fight, Marder told Kolker, “Fight with bad intentions! Follow up your punches with another punch! Rip off your opponent’s head and shit down his neck! Fight like your opponent tied up your mother and that the only way you will ever see her again is if you win!”

“I want to hurt him,” Kolker said a few days earlier. “I want to scare him. I want him to feel pain. I want him to feel fear and respect.” Yet hours before the fight, it was Kolker who felt the fear. He was anxious to fight and even more anxious to get the fight over with.

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After lunch, the three returned to Gleason's Gym for Kolker's medical exam. In three minutes, the doctor checked Kolker's blood pressure, eyes, ears and heart. He asked Kolker to bend over and touch his toes. Kolker pushed and pulled on the doctor's hands as a check for torn ligaments and muscles. Kolker was cleared for battle.

He introduced himself to Charles Russell, his six-foot tall, 157-pound opponent. There was no name-calling or stare downs before the fight. There were no promoters looking to make millions, no TV cameras. Kolker learned that Russell was a school administrator. What Kolker didn't know was that Russell was 42 years old and married with a six-year-old daughter, that Russell started training only a year ago, that Russell's trainer encouraged him to fight, and that Russell was just trying to manage his nerves before the fight. When Kolker looked into Russell's eyes as they talked, all Kolker saw was fear, fear that calmed Kolker.

Before Kolker changed into his cobalt blue satin boxing shorts and shirt, Marder wrapped his hands in white gauze and placed tape in between the strips. The judges inspected Kolker's hand wraps, looking for plaster or any other foreign material between the gauze that could unfairly harm Russell, and marked the white gauze with black lines to prevent anyone from tampering with the wraps before the fight.

Kolker stretched and shadowboxed while he waited. Marder kept everyone away so his fighter could focus on the fight. If Kolker's mind wandered for one second in the ring, if he put his guard down for one second, if he blinked when he shouldn't, if he forgot to breathe, Russell would have a chance to attack, and Kolker could get hurt.

Moments before the match, Marder helped Kolker into his 16-ounce gloves that reached halfway up his forearms. A master boxer's heavier gloves provide more protection by softening the blows, and the headgear has more padding than that used in an amateur bout.

\*

Professional boxers step into the ring to change their lives. They typically come from poverty or lower- to middle-class families, oftentimes growing up on farms or in neighborhoods with gangs and street fights, or suffering from physical abuse as a child. Boxing is a sport where education is the exception and violence is necessary. A boxer uses his fists and his brain to survive in the ring. An educated man like Kolker uses his brain to survive in the corporate world. Kolker never used his fists until he stepped into the gym. Even then, it took years before he hit another man.

Fighters start perfecting jabs, hooks, crosses and uppercuts as teenagers. They work on their stamina to be able to withstand brutal punches. They build strength and endurance to hold their arms high round after round. They develop speed so they can move their torsos faster than their opponents' punches. They learn how to dance with their opponents, cutting them off to deliver a beating worth a championship, a violent moment that changes a boxer's life. Still, a person can take only so many punches before the mind and body slows. Each punch brings a professional boxer closer to his retirement, with most ending their careers in their early to late 40s, the age when Kolker joined his gym.

At the time, he weighed close to 210 pounds and wanted to lose weight. He knew little about the sport and its history, but he knew he wanted to look like a boxer. Runners are too thin, in his opinion, and weight lifters are too bulky, but boxers have the perfect physique.

Kolker hired a succession of trainers who took his money without teaching him how to fight or helping him lose weight. Then, one day, when Kolker was the only boxer in the gym, he and Marder talked. Marder promised him that he would train him like a real fighter if Kolker promised to work hard. Kolker hired Marder in 2008.

At the same time, his personal life started to unravel. Kolker had been married for more than 10 years to his second wife, when that marriage went sour. His wife wanted a divorce. Kolker moved from a house filled with the energy and the chaos of four children to living alone in a 4,000 square foot townhouse. Then the economic downturn began to affect Kolker's business. His clients were losing money. They called in a panic to ask whether they should sell or hold their investments that sometimes dropped more than 50 percent in value. He had never seen markets turn like they did during 2008. Between his divorce and work, he felt like he was in hell.

To fill the time outside the office, Kolker studied Kabbalah with one rabbi and the Hebrew language with another, entertained clients, ate dinner with his children or new girlfriend, drove his children wherever they needed to be, or anything else he could find to stay out of the house. He boxed most nights and, some nights, also played indoor soccer or ice hockey. When he didn't play soccer, he spent mornings running five miles up and down the hills in his West Orange, N.J., neighborhood.

After he lost 50 pounds and learned how to box from Marder, the trainer encouraged him to spar. When Kolker wasn't afraid to be hit and to hit back, Marder encouraged him to compete. Kolker lost his first four bouts but had his first win a few months earlier.

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Kolker was a bulldog in the ring and never stopped fighting. And his trainer never stopped training. When Kolker wasn't defensive enough, Marder would yell, "Where's your right? You're letting him do what he wants. He's eatin your dinner! You goin to let him kiss your girlfriend?"

And if Kolker didn't attack, Marder would yell, "Take his goddamn head off with that jab!"

If Kolker boxed well, Marder was silent.

Every morning, Marder sent Kolker an email explaining what he did right and wrong the prior night. Kolker thought the trainer was brutally honest, but Marder was there for him, Marder pushed him, Marder didn't settle. And Jack "The Cadillac" liked that.

Marder, 55, had been fighting since he was 18. He competed for kickboxing titles in 1982 and 1986 but lost both fights. Marder had asthma attacks in the middle of competition. He still wondered whether he could have been a champion if he had been able to breathe. Eventually, he stopped fighting, but in 2004 he got back into the business as a trainer, even though he had four three-inch screws holding his vertebrae together and a herniated disk. The x-ray showing all this was tucked beside his pads and gloves in one of the long red lockers along the back walls. Taped on his locker door was a black and white photo of a younger Marder with curly hair, his leg held high, ready to strike his opponent with his foot.

\*

### ROUND ONE

The two men stood in opposite corners: Kolker in the red and Russell in the blue. Danny Gant, the referee, motioned them to the center of the ring. The fighters tapped gloves as a sign of friendship. Gant held each man's hands together before sending the boxers back to their corners. He pointed to the worn, metal bell with his right hand. The ringside assistant hit the bell with a small mallet. Gant lowered his arm, and the fighters rushed to the center of the ring.

Kolker threw the first jab. Russell answered with a left-right combination. They shuffled as they circled. When one punched, the other jumped back. They were like mirror images as they changed their weight from the left leg to the right and then back again. The men circled each other at a safe distance. Then Kolker lunged forward and punched Russell. The two fighters stepped backwards for a second. Russell hit Kolker's head once with a right cross and followed with another right. The crowd rumbled in the background. Each man started to throw combinations: first Russell, then Kolker. Russell crouched low and looked straight into Kolker's eyes as he jabbed. Kolker moved his torso to avoid Russell's strike.

"Follow up!" Marder yelled. "Come on, Jack! Throw punches! Throw punches! Go ahead! Throw punches!"

Russell jabbed Kolker in the face, and Kolker's head snapped back.

"We're waiting!" Marder yelled.

Kolker punched with his right.

“Follow it up!” Marder yelled. “Throw punches! Throw punches!”

Kolker chased Russell around the ring. Both looked for an opening before striking.

“Punch!” Marder yelled. “Go in! Go in!”

The two men kept circling. Kolker jabbed Russell.

“Follow it up!” Marder yelled.

Russell crouched to hit his shorter opponent.

“Cut the ring off!” Marder yelled. “Cut the ring off!”

Kolker chased Russell around the ring.

“Don’t wait,” Marder yelled. “Don’t wait! Punch! Punch! Again! Again! Come on! Come on!”

The bell rang.

Each man retreated to his corner. The trainers jumped in the ring. Marder stood as he took out Kolker’s mouthpiece and squirted water into Kolker’s mouth. Marder held a bucket in front of Kolker. Eddie McMahon, Marder’s former training partner, held an icepack on Kolker’s shoulders.

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### ROUND TWO

At the sound of the whistle, the trainers left the ring and pulled the stools under the ropes. The fighters stood. Gant held his hands out to keep the boxers apart.

The bell rang.

“Go,” Gant said as he lowered his hands.

The fighters rushed to the center. Kolker hit himself in the head to remember what it felt like to be punched. He didn’t want pain to surprise him. He didn’t want to be surprised at all. In a fight, the punches that you see don’t hurt. They just sting a little. Adrenaline masks the pain. The punches that hurt are the ones you don’t see.

Russell punched Kolker’s head with his right and followed up with a right and a left-right combination.

“Work,” Marder yelled. “Work! Come on!”

Russell hit Kolker’s head with a right cross, leaning into each punch and widening his stance. Russell punched doubles with the same arm. Kolker punched him back and chased Russell around the ring while bobbing his head in defense. And so it went, with the trainer yelling, and the opponent jabbing, and the men circling each other, lunging, punching.

Kolker landed a right and followed with a left.

“Again,” Marder yelled. “Come on!” Do it again! Come on!”

The bell rang.

Both men retreated to their corners. Russell put his left hand on the tattered ropes and looked down for a moment. Both men sat in their corners with their gloves resting on their thighs.

\*

A boxing match is a struggle to see who is stronger and smarter, who has, that night, the courage, the persistence, the confidence. A champion boxer, a professional, is willing to fight until he no longer can. A crowd surrounds the ring to see such a man, a winning fighter. The crowd waits for that moment when one man punches the other with so much power that the other man’s knees buckle and his body crashes to the canvas. The crowd knows that the biggest men fall hardest. The crowd waits for the round when only one man is standing, both hands extended towards the sky, because he delivered the worse beating. He fought with more purpose. He was invincible.

Boxing is a violent version of everyday life. It’s about facing the fear of getting hurt and hurting others. A fighter chooses to fight or flee. A fighter punches with the risk that his opponent will punch back harder. The crowd wants to see a man absorb a brutal

punch, a punch that crushes bones and can kill a man. The crowd wants to see blood.

Kolker had never knocked out another fighter. He didn't have that kind of power or technique, and sometimes feared his opponent's retaliation for a powerful punch.

\*

### ROUND THREE

The bell rang.

Russell jabbed Kolker's head twice. The men circled each other before throwing combinations. Kolker crouched as he punched Russell's stomach.

"Come on, Jack" Marder yelled.

Kolker punched as he chased Russell. Russell bounced against the ropes. He didn't want to get hurt. He wanted the fight to end. He wondered why he was even in the ring. Kolker sensed Russell's fear. Gant separated the two men. Kolker lunged forward and aimed first for Russell's stomach and then his head. Russell started to dodge Kolker and bounced off the ropes again. Russell ran from Kolker and swatted Kolker's punches.

The bell rang. The fight was over.

In his corner, Russell leaned over the ropes, gasping for air with his head down and eyes closed. Kolker sat on a stool in the other corner getting his back iced. A minute later, two boxers walked to the middle of the ring where the ref raised the men's hands, high, held them together, and then lowered them. Kolker stood tall while Russell stared at the mat. Then the announcement: Kolker had won the fight. He had won all three rounds. He raised his right fist and mouthed, "Yes!"

Kolker showered and changed into his tan shorts and shirt. He was meeting his family for dinner in a few hours. This was. He thought to himself, his best birthday ever.

Two days later, Kolker started to train for his next fight. He had dreams of fighting as a professional boxer, a true contender, one day.

ANDREA MURAD (andrea.murad@yahoo.com) is a New York-based freelance writer who has worked as an information technology consultant, an economist and, for 10 years, a Wall Street professional at Lehman Brothers and Fitch Ratings. A recent graduate of Columbia Journalism School, she is now pursuing her passion for storytelling.