

## The Eight Count

By Terin Tashi Miller

Hal slammed the station wagon door shut and checked the latch out of habit before walking up the moonlit drive. He stopped halfway up the drive and looked back, the gym bag pulling the tendon on his arm as he dropped it down over his shoulder and dangled it from its twin straps. Here he was, just off work, his tie still on, standing on the driveway of a warehouse in the Barrio, a block from La Perla's and next door to the Santa Fe yard.

He wondered if he'd locked the car's door. He gave into the doubt and double-checked.

At the warehouse, he turned the knob and opened the heavy metal door and stood in the doorway waiting for his eyes to adjust to the artificial brightness of the florescent lighting inside. The bell went off and as it buzzed, Manuel Rodriguez and the others slammed a thousand fists into the creasing heavy bags while Joe the trainer shouted through the bull horn "that's it, that's it. Work! Work! Work!"

Joe saw Hal enter the warehouse.

"Hey," he said, not getting up from where he sat at the end of the canvas platform of the training ring, "you're back."

"Yeah," Hal said, passing the trainer on the way to the dressing room. "I'm back."

The pounding and rope-jumping and shuffling on canvas of the gym came through the thin walls of the dressing room as Hal undid his tie, took off his shirt and dress slacks and rolled up his belt and placed it all in his gym bag after taking out his shorts, his sweatshirt, his hand wraps, shoes and mouth guard.

He went to the urinal after getting his shirt and shorts on, carrying his gym bag with him -- he'd had \$20 stolen in the dressing room his first day at the gym -- and drank from the fountain before rinsing off and putting in his mouth guard. He took a look at his boots under the bench in the dressing room before walking into the gym and trying to look casual. It was always better looking casual than like you knew what you were doing. Hal had seen what

happened to Anglos who thought they could box.

He took a seat at the old row of movie theater chairs next to the ring, tossing one of his handwraps out in front of him, hanging onto the end, unraveling it.

"Criss-cross," he said to himself, slipping the strap over his thumb, beginning the boxing ritual. He took the bandage-like cotton wrap and moved it over and under with an extra wrap at his knuckles and an extra wrap around his wrist, the way Kenny had showed him -- not too tight, not too loose -- and tied the strings at the end in a square knot, using his teeth to hold one of the strings while tying them off with his free thumb and index finger. He'd not washed the wrap and there were spots on it where he'd skinned his knuckles and dirt from the back of his neck from exercising but, overall, they were in good shape.

He wrapped his left hand, remembering what Kenny had told him about it, smiling a little. Then the bell went off again and he looked up and watched Manuel thud good but obviously tired punches into the swinging heavy bag. He watched the bag and remembered the first time he'd practiced in the ring with the Chicano. He remembered Manuel's brother shouting until he grew hoarse "Viva Mexico," pronouncing the word "Mayheeko," and "Viva Manolo!" He remembered Manuel's jab. He remembered it well.

"You gonna sit there all day and just look pretty?"

The crackle of Joe's bullhorn snapped Hal out of his reverie. He had work to do.

First, he went to the pads on the floor and did his sit-ups in sets of 20, waiting for the rest bell. Then he did the push-ups. Lastly, the rope-jumping. By then, he was breathing hard and sweating and his head was swimming from a lack of oxygen. It felt good. It had been a long time.

"That's it," Joe said, without the bullhorn. He came over and sat on the edge of the ring near Hal. "Work it out of you. The sweat, it feels good, eh?"

Then, in the next breath, scowling and getting up to go back to his bullhorn: "Don't jump so high."

Hal finished his three rounds' worth of jumping and pulled on a worn pair of bag gloves.

He went to the speed bag and saw it would take a while to get the rhythm going again. He rested each time the bell went off. Boxers who didn't know enough to rest didn't last, Joe once said. Joe the trainer knew. He'd been about to turn pro when someone with a truck ran over his arm. Still, he'd managed to get a detached retina as an amateur.

The bell went off, signaling time to start. The sound of Manuel's work out was interfering with Hal's rhythm. He thought again of how Joe said he'd gotten the blow that detached his retina -- "I wasn't payin' attention."

"That guy," Hal thought, hitting the speed bag with left jabs, "is-built-like-a," the bag came forward, "brick," again, a left and a right hook to the words "shit-house."

The bag flopped back and forth from the force of the hook.

The bell went off again and Hal went to the heavy bag, keeping his description of Joe Cervantez as a chant to pace his punches and his breathing. He felt the canvass of the heavy bag skin his knuckles again and hit harder. He hit high and then, when the bell rang and Joe yelled "Work! Work! Work!" with his bull horn, Hal slammed body blows as hard as he could, bending but not creasing the bag, and then practiced a few upper-cuts before resting. He wiped the sweat off his forehead and face with the tail of his sweatshirt.

Joe came up to him, telling him how to turn his wrist, how to lock it so he wouldn't break it. Then he said quietly: "Manuel wants to spar."

Hal looked over at Manuel. The Chicano was grinning through his thin beard and doing extra sit-ups.

"What do you think?"

"It's been a long time, Hal," Joe said. "A long time. He'd kill ya. You ain't even close to bein' ready."

Hal looked at the heavy bag. He knew Joe was right.

"You won't be payin' as much attention as you should. Remember. We ain't got no headgear. That stuff costs money..."

"And Manolo's a head-hunter. Yeah, I remember."

Joe looked at the clock. Hal had been working out for about an hour already.

"Besides," Joe said. "You ain't got nothing left to prove."

Hal smiled at his trainer.

"You old sonofabitch," Hal said. "Slant-eyed, one-armed sonofabitch."

"I noticed it right away. You used to take it off, kiss it and slip it into your sock every time you put on the wraps. I remember your shock that first day when Kenny told you women weren't allowed in here, especially in the mind, and said you couldn't wear that here because you'd tear your finger off just on the bag."

Hal looked at Manuel.

"Maybe next week, eh? You'd kill me today."

Manuel stopped smiling.

Hal took off his gloves, picked up his bag and went back into the dressing room. He took his time taking off his hand wraps, rolling them up, and made a mental note to wash them. For just a second he was about to reach in his sock for his wedding ring, then remembered he wasn't married anymore. There wasn't anyone waiting for him to get home, anymore. Hal took his time getting dressed, and left.

The End

**Terin Tashi Miller bio:** Terin Tashi Miller spent many of his formative years in India, the child of anthropologist parents. Since then, he has lived and worked in a variety of countries in Europe and Asia. His writing has appeared in guide books, international magazines including Time and Geografica Revista, and newspapers including The Wall Street Journal, The Dallas Morning News and The Los Angeles Times. He began his writing career as a part-time reporter for Time magazine, then worked for The Associated Press in India and North Dakota and AP-Dow Jones News Services in Spain and New York, and as a reporter for The Fort Worth Star-Telegram, The Milwaukee Sentinel, Amarillo Daily News and the Hilton Head Island Packet. Born in St. Louis, Mo., and raised in Madison, Wis. and several provinces in India, he currently lives in New Jersey. He has published three novels: Kashi, Down the Low Road, and Sympathy for the Devil. His short stories have appeared in literary magazines such as [www.thewriteplaceatthewritetime.org](http://www.thewriteplaceatthewritetime.org) ; Merida; South Mountain Review, Nomos, and the Journal of Post-Colonial Societies, as well as in anthologies.