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an excerpt of

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 looks 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*.