THANKS TO BURT SUGAR, BOXING HISTORIAN, FOR HIS EARLY ENCOURAGEMENT; AND BILLY GILES, MIDDLEWEIGHT, AND JIMMY DUPREE, LIGHT HEAVYWEIGHT, FOR THEIR PATIENCE AND INSIGHTS.

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TO RUDINE SIMS BISHOP IN APPRECIATION
OF HER YEARS OF FRIENDSHIP.

—W.D.M.
Heroes that looked anything like me were hard to come by when I was a kid growing up in Harlem. I remember Sugar Ray Robinson, then the welterweight champion, stopping his flashy Cadillac on our block and sparring with me and the other kids. All the kids on the block loved his playing with us, even the girls. Once in a while I would spot heavyweight champ Joe Louis on 125th Street near the Apollo Theater in New York City and that was always a thrill. But Robinson and Louis were relatively simple men, their brilliance limited to their exploits in the ring. Another Robinson, Jackie, had just integrated major league baseball and became, for me, the most exciting male figure in the African-American community until the Summer Olympics of 1960.

That summer, a young man would stand on the podium, a gold medal around his neck, while the “Star
Spangled Banner” played. A caption on the television screen I watched announced that Cassius Clay had won the gold medal in boxing. It was the first glimpse for most Americans of the man who would come to be known as The Greatest.

In examining the life of Muhammad Ali, there are many vantage points from which to study this remarkable man. Race, politics, religion, and the fight game itself are the arenas in which Ali’s mark was indelible in my mind and, I believe, in the national consciousness as well. Ali’s private life — his three failed marriages, his relationships with children, especially his own — has often been placed under public scrutiny. In his private life, Ali is revealed to be a man of human faults and human weaknesses. I appreciate the “normal” Muhammad Ali, but I choose to write about The Greatest.

And it was as The Greatest that Ali has had the greatest impact on our culture and on the sport of professional boxing. A humbler man would have pleased the sports-writers more. A man who would not mention race would have made many Americans more comfortable.

“As a young black, at times I was ashamed of my color, I was ashamed of my hair,” the baseball great Reggie Jackson once said, “and Ali made me proud.”

At a time when the civil rights movement was noted for its turn-the-other-cheek, nonviolent stance, young black men saw in Ali the possibility of reclaiming their
manhood. For young Americans with growing doubts about the war in Vietnam, he expressed their misgivings.

But Ali was a fighter, the heavyweight champion, in a sport which destroyed its heroes. Joe Louis was severely brain-damaged when he died in 1981. Ray Robinson, my Ray Robinson who had played with us on the streets, suffered from Alzheimer’s disease when he died in 1989. Jerry Quarry, who fought against Ali, is said to have died in a “punch-drunk fog” in 1999. When I contacted Floyd Patterson’s office to gather material for this book, I learned that he, too, suffered from brain damage. I spoke briefly with Joe Frazier at a party in Philadelphia and wondered about his gently slurred speech. This was the game that Ali mastered, and to which he gave so much of himself.

Today, Muhammad Ali suffers from Parkinson’s disease. Was boxing, the scene of his most magnificent triumphs, also the genesis of his toughest challenge? While no one can be sure, I wonder and I worry for Ali and for all of the young men still to enter the fight business. It is the cruelest of sports.

In writing this book, I have decided to look at the public Muhammad Ali, the man who represented so many views, who personified the needs of so many Americans but, most of all, the Muhammad Ali who most touched me. I look upon him as an American, as a fighter, as a seeker of justice, as someone willing to stand up against the odds, no matter how daunting those odds, no matter how big his foe. In
writing this book, I realized that, over the years, I have admired and yes, even loved Muhammad Ali. I still do.

Walter Dean Myers

Jersey City, New Jersey
May 2000
Cassius Marcellus Clay acted like a madman at the weigh-in. He was screaming at the top of his lungs, his eyes rolled wildly, the veins bulged in his neck. The doctor measuring his heart rate noted that it was twice what it usually was: His blood pressure had climbed to 200. It was February 25, 1964, the morning of The Fight in Miami Beach.

“He’s terrified!” a sportswriter announced.

There was talk that the fight shouldn’t be allowed to go on. Cassius Clay would be too terrified, the old-timers said, to be effective. Sonny Liston would kill him. Clay’s handlers tried to calm him as he lunged around the room.

“Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee!” Clay shouted into the face of his buddy Drew “Bundini” Brown. Angelo Dundee, Clay’s white trainer, stood to the side, watching with amazement.

“Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee!” they yelled at each
other at close range as busy photographers recorded the strange goings-on. “Rumble, young man, rumble!”

Sonny Liston, the thirty-one-year-old champion, looked across the room at Clay and shook his head. His mind went back to the previous July just before his fight in Las Vegas. He had been losing money in the casino, and the young fighter Clay had taunted him from the sideline. Liston had walked over to Clay, stood face-to-face with him, and told him that if he didn’t get away from him in ten seconds, he was going to rip his tongue out of his mouth and shove it somewhere. Clay shut up instantly and quickly moved away.

“I think you got his attention,” a friend of Liston’s said.

“I got more than that,” Liston growled. “I got the punk’s heart.”

And it sure seemed that way at the weigh-in. Clay, who had just reached his twenty-second birthday, seemed close to collapsing from nervousness. Photographers shot dozens of pictures, and sportswriters were busily taking notes. The young man from Louisville, Kentucky, was a seven-to-one underdog, and some were wondering if he would even show up later for the fight.

Sonny Liston was the world heavyweight champion and one of the most feared fighters in America. He had faced Floyd Patterson for the championship in 1962 and had knocked him out in the first round. He had faced Patterson a second time in 1963 and again had knocked him out in the first round.

A fearsome puncher, Liston had been an enforcer for organized crime, or the Mob, before turning pro, making sure that
Mob-protected businesses had no labor trouble. If you wanted someone hurt, if you wanted someone intimidated, you sent for Sonny Liston. He had served time for armed robbery and had been arrested for fighting a cop, for assault, and for drunkenness. He had long, heavily muscled arms and could knock a man out with a jab. He had destroyed good fighters on his way to the championship, and now he was going to face a twenty-two-year-old who had never fought a major heavyweight.

At fight time, the betting odds overwhelmingly favored Liston. As they entered the ring, the physical differences between the two men were immediately obvious. Liston was a hulk of a man with huge arms and legs and a face that sent shivers up the spine. He had the face of a thug. He glowered at Clay. It was the same look he had used when he collected debts for the Mob. It was the stare that made seasoned fighters look away.

Clay, on the other hand, was handsome, almost pretty. At six feet three, he was two inches taller than Liston, and at 210 pounds, he was eight pounds lighter. His breathing seemed shallow as he listened to the referee’s pre-fight instructions.

The referee told the two men to shake hands and come out fighting.

Clay came out of his corner and instantly started moving from side to side. Liston, his biceps and shoulders glistening with sweat, came after him. Clay threw a quick jab into Liston’s face, and Liston threw a hard right. It hit nothing but air as Clay danced lightly away.
Liston’s jab was a heavy, punishing blow, and he threw it once, twice. Each time it was short of the mark. Clay jabbed again, connected, and followed it with two quick blows to the heavyweight champion’s face.

Liston swung furiously, missing again. The ring was small, but Liston knew he had to make it even smaller. As Clay moved to the champ’s left, Liston tried to cut him off. Too slow. Clay hit him — once, twice, three times — and then moved away. At the end of the round, Clay went back to his corner and sat down heavily. He was breathing hard. Was he tired? Nervous? The crowd didn’t yet know what to make of the young challenger.

Round two. Clay was moving again, bouncing from side to side, moving just out of the reach of Liston’s punches. He was embarrassing the champ. Liston started a jab and then stopped it. He started a right hand, realized that he wasn’t going to hit Clay with it, and stopped it in midair. Clay threw two quick jabs and a hard right.

At ringside the spectators were wondering what they were seeing. Clay looked like a master boxer, and Liston the champion looked slow and plodding. Could Clay actually dance away from Liston for the whole fight?

Suddenly, Liston caught Clay on the ropes. Clay pulled Liston’s head toward him and down. Liston was inches from the “punk” he had wanted to shut up. He threw a flurry of savage punches into Clay’s body. Clay got off the ropes, and Liston rushed after him. Again, the lightning jabs from Clay, punching down at Liston. A quick right hand
stopped Liston in his tracks, and suddenly he was backing up from Clay.

Liston tried to dance, to show that he could move. But his movements were nothing compared with Clay’s, who had promised he would “Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee!”

By the end of the second round the spectators in Miami Beach were stunned. Liston was cut under his left eye! He looked tired. But he hadn’t really tagged Clay yet. Just wait, they thought. Sooner or later Liston would catch up with the brash young fighter and knock him out.

The start of the third round had Clay again dancing around his slower opponent. Clay would lean back, allowing Liston’s punches to miss by less than an inch, then counterpunch sharply. Liston was lunging. He tried to push Clay into a corner. Clay, surprisingly strong, again grabbed Liston and pushed his head down. Clay took Liston’s body punches until he could move away. But the body punches didn’t seem to do much harm.

Round four. The two fighters were in close, and suddenly Clay was blinking furiously. He was backpedaling, rubbing his eyes. What was wrong? He stopped jabbing and looked close to panic. Liston threw one heavy punch after another.

At the end of the round, Clay’s eyes were closed.

“Cut them off! Cut them off!” Clay said, referring to the gloves. “I can’t see! I can’t see!”

Angelo Dundee, Clay’s trainer, looked at his fighter’s eyes. They were red and tearing. Dundee thought perhaps some astringent from Liston’s face had gotten into Clay’s eyes and tried to wash them out. Clay kept blinking.
“I can’t see!” Clay said again.

“They’ll clear up,” Dundee said.

“I can’t fight if I can’t see!” Clay protested.

“If you can’t fight, run,” Dundee shouted.

The rest time was up, and Dundee pulled Clay to his feet for the fifth round. The young fighter went to the middle of the ring, still blinking furiously, trying to find Liston through the tears. Liston came across the ring like a mad bull, putting everything he had in every punch. Clay pushed him away, leaned back, and let Liston hit him in the body. Liston threw overhand rights and left hooks that just missed Clay’s chin.

The crowd was going wild. It was clear that Clay was in trouble. But still, Liston couldn’t finish him off. The round ended, and Clay stumbled back to his corner. His cornermen worked feverishly on his eyes, trying to wash out whatever it was that was blinding Clay.

Dundee was frantic, trying to get his fighter back into the ring.

“This is the big one,” he pleaded, knowing that if Clay quit, the young fighter might never get another chance for the title. “You’re fighting for the championship!”

By the middle of the sixth round, the stinging in Clay’s eyes had subsided. So far he had survived half-blind in the ring with the man who had crushed some of the best heavyweights in the country. As Clay’s vision cleared, his confidence grew. Everything he had learned in his brief ring career, from the neighborhood gym in Louisville to his training as a pro, all
came together. Suddenly it was Clay who was the master, the
toreador, and Liston the clumsy buffoon.

The sixth round found Liston puffing heavily. Few of his
fights had ever gone that far — he usually knocked his oppo-
nent out within three rounds. Clay moved expertly around
the ring, arms down by his sides, leaning just out of the way
of Liston’s punches. Liston’s face was puffy and bleeding where
Clay’s stinging punches found their mark.

At the end of the sixth round Dundee was reassuring his
fighter, telling him just to continue to do what he was doing:
Keep on floating like a butterfly, keep on stinging like a bee.

Clay looked across the ring at Liston, who was slumped on
his stool. Then, suddenly, Clay stood up and raised both arms
over his head. He started skipping around the ring. He had
seen Sonny Liston spitting out his mouth protector.

The fight world was stunned. Liston, the champ, had
quit. Cassius Marcellus Clay was now the world heavyweight
champion.

What had happened? Some people said that there had
been a fix.

In Clay’s dressing room there was pandemonium. Reporters
were trying to get in, calling out their questions. An exuberant
Clay was screaming to the world that he was the king.

In Liston’s dressing room his handlers tried to stop the
bleeding from the cut on his face. The cut was real. So was
the sweat and the blood and the pain. This was not what
Liston, or anyone else, for that matter, had expected.

“Who is this guy?” he wondered aloud.