



# The Deluxe

*by Vincent Panella*

## The Deluxe

I don't remember meeting K. She was just there, standing with the other girls at the subway station, all wearing slit skirts and hugging loose leaf notebooks to their chests. They wrote their boyfriends' names in ball point on the canvas covers, the letters blocky and square to follow the weave.

Her father owned a bar on Woodside Avenue called The Seaweed Tavern. He'd been a professional middleweight and fought under the name of Marty Sands. Nobody fucked with Marty. When I asked his permission to marry K he gripped my chin so hard between his thumb and forefinger I thought my jaw would break. He said, "Remember who we are." I was not included in the pronoun.

The name on K's notebook wasn't mine, but that of Rich Campanella. She and Rich were as tight as a drum, yet no two people seemed more incompatible. K was a serious student with plans for college – she and I were alike that way. Rich had been left back so many times that he was sixteen by the time he reached high school. He was expelled before his first year was up.

Rich was also the most vicious kid in the neighborhood. Unlike those of us who romanticized gangsters, imagining them as the owners of long cars and supper clubs or as characters from films, Rich lived the life, even as a teenager. He stole cars and broke into stores. He loaned small amounts of money at high interest rates, and when someone didn't pay he beat him up using a brass contraption wrapped in white tape that fit into his fist and over his knuckles.

Rich's hair was blonde and fine and his skin white and almost transparent. His eyes were pale blue. He was known as "The Albino," but nobody ever called him that to his face. He was a few years older than the rest of us, but even as a teenager he took to wearing suits and a

wide-brimmed hat as though grooming himself for the gangster class. One night he pulled up in front of the candy store in a Chevrolet Super Sport, revved the engine, and waited. Without a word, K got into the car and they took off. The Chevy had glass pack mufflers and we could hear the reverb as it accelerated up the long block, then a pop-pop like gunfire when it slowed for the red light, tail lights glowing. It turned out that the car was stolen, and for that and some store break-ins Rich was sent to reform school for six months.

K was the only neighborhood girl who didn't see her future as a housewife or secretary, the only one with her nose between the covers of a book. It was easy to pull her out of that crowd at the subway station and single her out as mine. She aspired to and achieved a professional life – Hunter College and a teaching career. But that was later, after we were married. When she was a teenager, when she had Rich's name in block letters on her notebook cover, her attraction to him was a mystery.

One night I was sitting alone at a movie theater and K moved into the row and sat next to me. Her hand crept over to mine and squeezed it. I squeezed back. She put her mouth close to my ear. Her breath felt like a hot wind. Next, she covered my ear with her mouth and ran her tongue all over, then into the deepest part. She whispered, "We're different from the others. We're different, but the same." We kissed for a long time.

We'd been sitting in a neighborhood theater called The Deluxe. It was a run down place attended mostly by teenagers, kept in line by a portly matron in a white dress known by her last name only, Cavanaugh, who kept order with a scolding voice and a long flashlight. I'd been watching War and Peace with Audrey Hepburn and Mel Ferrer. Even before K sat down I was emotionally wrought from Napoleon's retreat from Russia and the Cossack attacks on the French.

It was winter then, and we began to meet in The Deluxe on Friday nights. With Rich in reform school we were doing the forbidden, but this made it sweeter. I'd sit alone in the darkest part of the balcony, where Cavanaugh seldom ventured. Then I'd wait, wondering if K would

show up. She always did, but after the movie started, after I worried that whatever we had between us was finished. She would come and sit down and drape her coat over our laps. A feigned reluctance began. Touching fingers, squeezing hands, her breath in my ear. Without turning to her directly I caught the bright gold of her hoop earrings just as her tongue made the first of many runs through the channels of my ear. Soon we had each other's jeans undone under the coat. Pretending to watch the movie, and with an eye out for Cavanaugh, we would bring each other to the end, once, twice, and more, our faces hot with blood, our breathing audible. We stared at the movie screen as if none of this were taking place. When we were done K would pass me a handkerchief and leave the theater before the movie ended. Late to arrive, early to leave, no phone calls, no dates, no conversations other than our whispers of pleasure, that was the game.

One night K confided that she wasn't sure about Rich. She liked him, but since the trouble with burglaries and the stolen car she wanted to leave him.

"But I don't think he'll let me go."

She gave me a letter from Rich and told me to read it and tell her what I thought. I took it into the Men's Room.

Dear K: You'll never know how much I miss you. But I'm different now, different from the Rich you knew, the wise guy with the gangster hat and the one-button suit. This place has changed me. I have new friends, real friends, people who turned me on to books and poetry, to Walt Whitman, for example, maybe you heard of him, and all the things I used to mock in school. I know now to be ashamed of nothing that human beings do or desire. They taught me here that everything comes from God, every cock, hole, mouth, ear and asshole, every nose and armpit and odor, every penetration under the sheets, in the dark, in corners and closets and crannies. This is another world, one of tongues and fluids and holy communion without the wafers, a world that can be ours. I'll be home soon and you won't even know me, Rich

"What do you think?" she whispered.

"I think he's the same as he always was."

“Don’t worry,” she said, her lips covering my ear.

In anticipation of Rich’s release I began pumping iron in the furnace room of our apartment building. We called it The Big Room because it had two levels and a catwalk around the upper perimeter. I worked out with a friend who added a medicine ball and dumbbells to my collection of weights.

Every day we pressed, curled, squatted, thrust, and bent, hoping to see results as lumped masses of muscle. I pushed my arms and legs to soreness, never letting up, watching muscles rebuild and grow. Every day we flexed our stomach muscles and dropped or slammed the medicine ball into our mid-sections. We finished by sparring with boxing gloves and head protectors and then punching a heavy bag made from an army duffel filled with bricks wrapped in sheets and towels.

My apprehension about Rich did nothing to cool my desire for K, and our meetings at The Deluxe continued. I would sit in the same place and K would appear, a study in black, black jeans, black coat, a black cotton top, black hair in curls, the earrings in contrast. She would sidle into the aisle and sit, not speaking, both of us watching the screen like secret agents in a spy film. Slowly, starting with our feet – this was well-practiced by now – we pressed against each other, our bodies in contact all along their lengths except for those parts touching the armrest between us. Then more waiting, more anticipation. The movies we watched were chopped up narratives starring John Wayne, Marlon Brando, Deborah Kerr, Kim Novak, the kings and queens of their day. K knew exactly what I longed for, her head slowly bowing to mine, her mouth first grazing my ear, then kissing it, withdrawing whenever Cavanaugh took the trouble to seek us out. “Watch the movie!” the matron would bark, flashing the light in our eyes. As soon as she went away our hands were busy under the coat, and it always seemed that K was more skillful with hers than I with mine.

Our meetings continued even as the day of Rich’s return approached. I had no illusions about him, despite the talk about God and poetry. Anyone who could steal cars and beat

people up wasn't about to become a saint. And rather than be the target for Rich at a time and place of his own choosing, I decided to tell him myself.

When I told K my decision, whispering it into her ear at The Deluxe, she pulled away.

"Don't do that!" she said. "Don't say a word!"

"Why not?"

"I love you," she said. "I don't want anyone else."

"All the more reason."

"He'll make me pay for this. He'll make both of us pay."

"It's better if I tell him."

As I walked home that night under the Roosevelt Avenue el – a great steel millipede stretching from Flushing to Long Island City – the bleak landscape reflected my feelings. At school we were reading the Romantic poets, and that night I sat up in bed, acutely aware of competing with Rich's literary ability. I composed poems to K that to my eternal relief she never saw, sappy and full of sex. When I'd written myself out, nearly daylight then, I tuned my radio to the all night jazz station, the sax players and torch singers breathing my torment through the radio waves.

I think of K only in the context of betrayal. She betrayed Rich for me. She betrayed me to Rich even while we were petting hot and heavy in The Deluxe. There was no need for me to tell him about it. K had been writing to him while he was in reform school.

"What did you think?" he asked. "Did you think there was nothing between us?" He was removing the tape covered brass contraption from his right fist after fracturing my jaw. The blow and Rich had come out of nowhere. That night I'd gone to the theater but K didn't show up. I sat through two movies, and on the way home a car pulled up and he jumped out. I was down on one knee, holding my jaw, which could now move to the left and right.

"She's a cunt," he said, tossing the device back into the car where the driver caught it. "You don't understand that yet, but she's a cunt. She never learned to do without it, and if she doesn't get it from you or me, she'll get it from somebody else."

Then you're going to be busy, I thought.

Rich smoothed his hair back with both hands. He wasn't wearing the wide-brimmed hat. Maybe it was the reflection of light from so many surfaces that night, but his hair didn't look blonde any more. It was silvery white. I remembered stories of anguished men who'd gone to sleep and woke up with white hair. I wondered if that had happened to Rich in reform school.

"I'm in love with her," he said. "I'm going to spend the rest of my life with her, and if I have to put her on a leash, I'll do that too."

I spent the next five weeks with my jaw wired together. In the fall I went away to college and K started at Hunter. In an unexpected turnaround, Rich earned a high school diploma, and after he enrolled in city college K broke off their relationship. We began to date, but our subsequent marriage didn't end my jealousy over the erotic life I imagined they once had. I believed it led to a deeper love.

I repeatedly said to K, "I want what you had with him."

"But you have it!" she protested. "You have everything you ask for!"

Acts of love, words, deeds, K denied me nothing, and there were mornings when I woke up replaying images of what we'd done the night before, and had I been a practicing Catholic I would have rushed off to see a priest. One day I came home and heard her on the phone with Rich. When I entered the room she whispered into the mouthpiece and hung up. He'd been calling. "How many times?" I asked. "He's just a friend," she answered. "How many times?" I asked again. "I said, he's just a friend." I realized that I could never trust her. We argued constantly and eventually divorced. By then Marty Sands was dead, and those jaw gripping fingers no longer held me to the daughter I never possessed.