

There's a moment just before a fight when the adrenaline kicks in. Your brain tells your body that it's time to either put up your dukes or take a hike, preferably a quick one in any direction that has nothing in the way to trip you up.

For some reason my brain got its wires crossed somewhere down the line as just before a fight I always feel sleepy. Just tired of it all, I guess.

From the locker room I could hear the crowd in the hall getting impatient. The mumbling had taken on a more urgent quality. I was first in the ring tonight, just an appetiser before the main show.

Popeye had wrapped my hands and checked his cut bag for the tenth time. Everything was in there except for an operating table and a bone saw.

I'd warmed up with a bit of half assed skipping and less than a minute of shadow boxing. My heart wasn't in it. I wanted to take a nap.

Popeye was doing his best to gee me up. "He's a good kid, this one." He said. "They reckon he could go far."

"He's gotta get past me first." I said trying to sound mean.

"That's the spirit." Popeye said, "Make him work for it. Test his chin, but not to the point of destruction. Watch his left it's a bit dangerous but you'll know when he's gonna let loose with it, he has a habit of winding back from his hips so there's plenty of warning. But it's hard if it lands so don't open up too much, keep your guard up, let him work for it and don't counter too hard. And he has decent reach so keep on your toes or work inside." Popeye always talked a lot when he got excited. He'd been over and over this already, still he carried on. "It's just a five rounder and we're getting a nice round hundred for it if you don't flatten the kid. So it's a good payday. Ten bucks a piece per round. Not bad going eh?"

"I've had worse nights." I said.

"They're getting him ready for the big time so he needs to look good but don't make it too easy, make him work, but if you feel you've had enough and you wanna go down and be out for the count in say the fourth or the fifth then it won't matter much to anyone."

"It'll matter to me." I said. "I'm never out for the count, especially not tonight."

Popeye was now massaging my shoulders. "What's so special about tonight? You got someone coming?"

"Last fight." I said.

Popeye stopped his rubbing for a second. "You always say that."

"This time I mean it. I've had enough, I'm not enjoying it like I once did and I want out while I still have my brain and my good looks."

"What will you do? Pump gas? Get paid to frighten children with that mug of yours? You can't do nothing else. You can't break up the act. You only know the fight game and it's regular work."

"Too regular." I said. "In less than three years I've had my nose broke too many times to count, I've lost teeth and cracked ribs. The day after a fight I can hardly move. "

"Yeah, but no one's knocked you out yet."

"Yet." I said, "I've had fifty seven fights. I've won less than half of them, drew a handful and lost most. "

"It's not your job to win."

"It's not my job to lose either."

"No, it's your job to make the other guy look good and not just walk out there and lay down like some of the mugs. This is all you have, this is your life, you couldn't do anything else. Besides we're a good team you and me. Haven't I looked after you?"

"You're welcome to swap places if you want. You take the beatings and I'll count the money."

"You know I do more than that." Popeye looked offended.

"I've been thinking a lot lately." I said, "I've had it with getting beat up for a living. I'm never gonna be major league, I'm too old. I'm too slow nowadays, I used to be good I know, but not that good. I'm always gonna be a journeyman until someone scrambles my noodle. I don't wanna end up like those punchy old guys in the bar, which I will before long. So I figured it's time to hang up the gloves. With the bits of door work I get at the clubs, a bit of labouring here and there and you could always use a bit of help at the gym. I don't mind cleaning up or doing a bit of sparring. I could even train one or two of the new kids."

"The gym doesn't make enough to pay me let alone an assistant." He said.

"Plus I've been reading up on it." I said, "I'm thinking of starting my own private detective firm. I just need take the course to get the license to operate, then I'm set. I saw it advertised in the papers. I think I'd be good at it."

Popeye laughed. "You, a private eye?"

"Why not? It can't be that difficult. Lot's of fellas are doing it."

"Well aint you a regular Robert Mitchum?" He said still laughing.

Before I could answer there was a knock on the door. It was time. Popeye slipped a gown over my shoulders picked up my gloves, checked his cut bag one last time and followed me from the locker room towards the noise of the hall. "Come on, Detective." he said, "Let's go make this kid look good." ...

There's a moment right before a fight when your blood gets wise and your gut tells your feet it's time to scam - quick, before some knucklehead rearranges your face for the price of a cheap ticket and a warm beer.

Me, though? I never got that jolt. My wires are crossed somewhere deep. Right before the bell, when a sane man's heart starts tap-dancing in his chest, mine wants to curl up and catch forty winks. Maybe I'm just tired - tired of swinging, tired of bleeding for other people's thrills.

Out in the hall, the crowd was getting restless, their chatter turning sour and sharp. First bout of the night - me, the appetizer before the real meat came out. Popeye was fussing with my hands, wrapping tape like he was packing a porcelain doll for shipping. He'd checked his cut bag ten times already. He had everything in there but a priest and a headstone.

I'd done a bit of half-hearted skipping, flicked a few lazy jabs at my own shadow. My heart wasn't in it. My body was - my body's always in it - but the rest of me was curled up on a beach somewhere with a cold drink and nobody asking me to bleed for ten bucks a round.

Popeye was doing his usual song and dance, trying to pump life into my veins. "Kid's a comer, this one," he said, pinning my gloves like they'd run off without him. "They got big plans for him."

"He's gotta get through me first," I said, trying to curl my lip like I meant it.

"That's right," Popeye grinned, slapping my shoulder. "Make him work for it. He's got a left that'll make you see tomorrow twice, but you'll see it coming - winds it up from the hip like a hay baler. Keep your guard up, don't swing for the fences. Make him dance, stay close or stay light, but don't get cute. It's five rounds. A nice crisp hundred if you

don't park him on the mat. Ten bucks a round. Not bad money for a night's work, eh?"

"I've had worse nights," I said.

"They're grooming him for the spotlight. He's gotta look good – but not too good. Make him sweat. You feel like lying down in the fourth or the fifth, you do it nice and easy, nobody cries."

"It'll matter to me," I said. "I don't do canvas naps. Not tonight."

Popeye's fingers dug into my shoulders, working the knots like he was mining coal. "What's so special about tonight? You got a girl waiting or something?"

"Last fight," I said.

He stopped kneading me. Just looked at me like I'd sprouted a second head. "You always say that."

"This time I mean it. I'm done. My nose is a roadmap, my ribs click like castanets every time I cough, and my teeth rattle like dice. I'm getting out while I still know my own name."

Popeye snorted. "Yeah? And then what? Sell pencils on Fifth? Hold up liquor stores with that pretty mug? You and me, we're an act. This is what you got – this is who you are. The ring. The lights. The smell of liniment and stale sweat. There's no pension plan out there for mugs like us."

"Too regular for me," I said. "Fifty-seven fights – I've lost more than I've won. I'm nobody's golden boy. I'm the guy they test prospects on – the step before the ladder. One day I won't get back up and that'll be that. I've seen it before – old palookas propping up the bar, telling stories nobody listens to. Not me. Not if I can help it."

"So what then? You gonna mop floors at the gym? That dump can't pay me, let alone you."

"I'll figure something. I got my side gigs – bouncing drunks, hauling crates. And I've been reading up. I'm gonna get my license, open up shop. Private investigations. Missing husbands, cheating wives, that kinda racket."

Popeye barked out a laugh. "You? A dick?"

"Yeah, me. Why not? You think those guys are geniuses? Half of them are washouts who couldn't cut it anywhere else. I figure I'm halfway there already."

"Well, ain't that something. Look at you – regular Bogart." He was still chuckling when there was a knock at the door. Showtime.

Popeye draped the robe over my shoulders, slapped my gloves into my hands, and gave the cut bag one last nervous glance. Then he held the door open, the roar of the hall spilling in like a punch to the gut.

"Come on, Detective," he said, voice dripping with irony. "Let's go make this kid look like the next big thing."

Within a few months I'd got my license and rented some rooms above a grocery store in the East Village. It wasn't much but it was home. I had an office of sorts, well it had a desk, a phone, a couple of chairs and an empty filing cabinet. Leading from that was a tiny kitchen with an icebox and a stove and leading from that a bedroom that was just big enough for a bed and a night stand and leading from that was a bathroom.

Work had been slow and nowhere near as exciting as was promised. Not even a tearful wife wanting me to confirm her husband's infidelities had come for my help.

I was reading yesterday's sports column for maybe the eighth time. DiMaggio had knocked it out of the park for The Yankees and The Giants were storming through the season as usual. 1949 was a good year to be a sports fan in New York City.

The only fly in the ointment was a fellow journeyman boxer from Canada who forgot his part of the script where he was suppose to fall asleep in the second round. Instead The Rock was forced to go the distance for the first time in his career. One or two Italian families from Massachusetts were a little upset. At least the referee remembered which boxer was to be given the nod. The Canadian took the next available boat across the Atlantic.

I threw the newspaper into the wastepaper basket and looked around the office for something to do. The place was in bad need of a coat of paint. It was a depressing shade of drab brown that had been all the fashion back when they were signing the Declaration of Independence. I'd tried to jazz the place up by pinning up a few boxing pictures from my glory days, but they just made me even more depressed. Pride of place on the wall was my license, nicely framed and stategically positioned behind my desk where clients, if I had any, could see it.

Maybe I should get the brushes out and decorate. Make a few changes. Cheer the place up a bit, at least enough to reopen the joint as a funeral parlour.

Without even noticing I'd taken the license from the wall. I was holding it, maybe ready to smash it to pieces. Who knows? I laid it for safe keeping with the newspaper in the wastepaper basket.

The AC was on the fritz so the one sash window was fully open but not much air wafted in, just the sounds of the traffic from 5th Street and The Avenue.

I decided to give it another half hour and if there was still nothing doing I'd get a cold beer and sit under a tree in Tompson Square Park. Maybe share a pastrami sandwich with some pigeons.

I could already taste the suds so was about to pack it in for the day when predictably there was a knock on the office door.

I let out a long breath then with what I hoped sounded friendly I called, "Come in."

The door opened. She stood there for a moment, tall, slim, she wore a little straw hat with a strawberry pink ribbon that almost matched her purse.

Her face was flushed and shiny from the cloying humidity. She had defined cheek bones, not sharp and pointed but kinda rounded like the top of a rosy red apple. Her almond shape nut-brown eyes quickly scanned the room and took in everything at a glance. Her nose was as cute as a berry and she wore cherry red lipstick. It was a face that reminded me of a bowl of fruit I once knew. I wondered what it would taste like with a dollop of cream.

She wore a cotton summer dress with a blue floral print affair going on and it clung to all the places it should. By the way she held herself I figured her for a dancer or model or something from one of the reviews on 42nd Street. She was a looker and she knew it. Movie star beautiful. Maybe not Warner Brothers but definitely good enough for R.K.O. She had on flat pump shoes. She must have walked here.

"Mister Brennan?" She asked stepping into the office.

"Depends who's asking." I said giving her my best William Holden.

She offered me her hand. I took it. "Connie, Connie Labarde." She said.

And I'm Arnie Krankengurgle, I thought.

"What can I do for you, Miss Labarde?" Her hand felt soft, delicate, cool. I gave it back before I broke it. I pointed to a chair on the opposite side of my desk and invited her to sit down. She sat. I kissed goodbye to the cold beer and pastrami sandwich.

After a moment she plucked up the courage to speak again. "What are you like at finding people?"

"It all depends on how anxious they are to be found." I said. "Someone flown the coup? Husband skipped town?"

"No, nothing like that. Well not exactly. I share an apartment with a girlfriend and she's disappeared. We work together too. We tread the boards at The Chesney. The place is a fleapit but the show's not bad if you ever fancy a night out."

"I'll give it some thought." I said.

She opened her purse pulled out a photograph and handed it to me across the desk. As I took it her fingers brushed mine for the briefest of seconds. They gave out an electric current that reached all the way to the pocket I usually reserved for small change.

"This is Blanche, Blanche Steiger." She had a way of saying first names twice that was kind of endearing.

"So, she's wandered off?" I said. I studied the photograph. It was a snapshot showing a girl of about twenty. It had been taken at Coney Island, you could just make out the rides in the background of the picture. She wore a spotted blouse that was rolled up and knotted so it showed her bare midriff. She was holding an ice cream and was laughing at the person pointing the camera.

"She wouldn't have gone anywhere without telling me. Not just like that." She delved into her purse some more. "I have this picture too, it's more recent." She passed across another snap. This one was a studio shot with the photographer's idea of Hollywood lighting.

Blanche Steiger looked a lot different in this pose. Mousey blonde hair all coifed and curled at the fringe and tied up at the back so it showed off her neck line. Makeup immaculate, not a single smudge. Half smiling she was looking away from the camera with her manicured fingers held in front of her throat. She wore a collared dress and a single strand of pearls that were probably the property of the photo studio's. Printed at the bottom of the snap were the words 'Blanche Steiger.' Then under that 'Foyle and Co. Theatrical Agency.' I flipped the snap over. Printed on the back,

"Alphonse Pidd." And under that "Photographer to the stars." I turned it back over and placed it neatly next to the other one on my desk.

I leaned back in my chair. "Listen, lady, I see this sort of thing every day of the week. A good looking dame meets a meal ticket at the stage door and spends a week or so on a trip to Niagara. When she's rinsed the poor sap for everything he has, she comes back with a new hat and some fine jewellery then moves on to the next sucker. As I said, I see this sort of thing every day of the week."

"Not this time. Blanche isn't that kind of girl." She said.

"What kind of girl is she?" I asked.

"Oh, you know, she likes to have a bit of fun once in a while, don't we all?"

"Depends upon your idea of fun." I said.

Connie Labarde leant forward and fixed me again with those peepers of hers. "I'm sure we all sing from the same hymn sheet there, Mr Brennan." Then she gave me a smile. Reached across the desk and lightly touched my hand.

I wasn't going to fall for that baloney, well not completely in any case. I put my hand somewhere out of reach. "You were telling me what kind of girl she is."

Connie Labarde thought for a second. "She's bright, pretty, can dance, sing and has that certain Ginger Rogers about her. She's good with her hands too, makes things."

"Sounds quite the package."

"She is. She's nice with it too. Cares. You know what I mean? With the right break she'd go far."

"So why'd she run off?"

"That's why I'm here, Mr Brennan. I need to know where she is and why she's there, and you're the only one who can help."

"Really? The only one eh? Don't you have a phone directory? It's full of guys like me. And there's even the police department if you're that desperate, so why me?"

"You come highly recommended."

"Who by?"

"He asked me not to say. Besides I like you, Mr Brennan. I like your face. It's a face I can trust."

Now I knew she was joking. My face looked like it had been through the war several times. I had a face that was born with a frown. My mother, bless her, would always tell me not to scowl all the time especially when I was having my picture taken. Then a few years of boxing had flattened my nose like

a blind cobbler's thumb and the pummelling my eyes had got brought my brows down even further. Fighting the Big One did nothing to enhance my looks much neither. And she liked my face?

"You like my face?" I said.

"Certainly I do. It has...character."

"It has that alright."

"And you have kind eyes. That's important." She said.

"Gee, thanks."

"Where d'you get that nose?"

"Playing tennis." I said. "Can we get back to business?"

"Sure." Connie LaBarde leant forward in her chair. I got a faint scent of her cologne. Maybe it was jasmine, maybe lily of the valley, it was something floral. Those brown eyes again. She knew how to work them. "So, Mr Brennan, can I hire you?"

My mouth went very dry very quickly. I tried to swallow but it got stuck. I settled for a cough. "You haven't heard my terms yet." I said trying to maintain eye contact while stopping my voice from reverting to the pitch it was back in the day when I sang in the choir at St. Michael's. "I charge ten dollars a day plus expenses. If I'm successful I charge a further twenty upon completion."

"That's very reasonable, Mr Brennan. But I'm sure we can think of a better completion bonus than that." She was playing me and I was loving it. "When can you start, I am so worried about Blanche."

I wasn't buying the concerned roomy routine but she was determined for some reason or another to find Blanche Steiger, so what the hell. I pulled out a note pad and pencil from my top drawer. I opened the pad and licked the end of the pencil. "I've started." I said. "The meter's already running, I'm gonna need some background information, a couple of snapshots isn't enough to go on, this is a big city."

"Fire away, Mr Brennan. What would you like to know?"

"Tell me more about this theatre job you're on at the Chesney. Isn't that a little low rent?"

"Well it ain't the Carnegie Hall that's for sure, but it can hold it's own. And since most of the theatres have changed into picture houses work's getting a little more difficult to get. So you have to do what you have to do. A girl's gotta pay the rent."

"We all do." I said.

"The show is a revue, a few sketches a couple of dance numbers and a song at the end. Me and Blanche have a few speaking parts and we take turns to understudy the leading lady."

"Is there ever any problems with the customers, any stage door Johnnies over stepping the mark, anything like that?"

"Not so much, why d'you ask?"

"Well I was wondering if Miss Steiger could have run off with one of them."

"No, not Blanche. She may have had an after show drink or dinner with one or two of them, but they're always known guys. And as I said, a girl's gotta pay the rent."

"Did she have a regular dinner companion?"

"No one special."

"Irregular then?"

"How do you mean?"

"You know someone who breezes into town every once in a while. The sort of guy that she'd drop everything for"

"I don't think so."

"She never mentioned anyone in particular?"

"Not that I can think of."

I looked at my pad. It had nothing but a doodle on the page. It was time to change tack. "What about her things in your apartment? Anything missing?"

"Not that I could see. That's what worrying me most. If she was planning a trip, surely she would have taken some of her things with her."

"Maybe I should take a look. What's the address?"

"Why Mr Brennan, do you always invite yourself to a lady's apartment?"

She was back on the flirty trail again.

"Only in the line of my enquiries." I said. She gave me the address, it was on a little street just off Lafayette.

"I have to leave for the theatre at seven, but I'm home by midnight and would be very happy to show you everything then." I bet she would, I thought.

"So, shall we call it six thirty?" I said. "And talking of paying the rent..."

"Of course, I almost forgot." She reached into her purse and took out a money clip. She peeled off five ten dollar bills and handed them across "Will this be enough to get you started?"

"I'm sure it will be, Miss Labarde." I laid the money on the desk next to the snapshots. "So later then. Six thirty."

"Or after midnight, Mr Brennan. The choice is yours." She stood extended her hand. I shook it for a second time. Then Connie Labarde tuned and left the office. Leaving me with two pictures, fifty dollars, a silly grin and wishing I'd put on a clean shirt that morning.