

Streetlight Fight Night

By : **Riovocci**

A man learns his cousin is not as weak and defenseless in the city as he thought.



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What kind of mum names their son â Brinley?â Of the men waiting around at the station, none of the bunch looked like a Brinley. Pronouncing the name itself is a cruel soundâ it just paints a picture of complacency. Brinley is the name of my cousin. My dear aunt Lynn, my mumâ s younger sister, lives a quiet life in the countryside. Iâ ve visited her on occasion, and Iâ m sure mum would be pleased that I have kept in contact with her.

Zunzirkiejrñ Abbey is a majestic retreat from the city. The name is as queer as can be though, but what more can you expect from immigrants. â *Jrny*,â for short, is a town of small cottages that overlook rolling vineyards. Air is a mesh of flowers and burning wood. Fields beautifully map the outskirts of the quaint village, with bright chartreuse pastures and farms enriched by the heavy rainfall, walled by clumps of dark green woods and ancient stone fences. Portraits of *Jrny* folded into my mind as my daydream was rudely awakened by the dark machineâ s arrival.

A horn roared between rickety clanking as the train neared the station. Suits and dresses rushed to the platform. Seconds later, hazy images of a train wrapped in steam entered the humid air of the central Trains station, where above all else it was cloudy and noisy, a shade of urban chaos.

Amidst the exhaled steam of the halted train, figures of gentlemen and ladies strolling about the station platform looked etched in coal. *Had clouds fallen on this wretched place on earth?* It appeared so, as figures, arm and arm, tops hats and dresses, disappeared into the steam as others emerged, whereas the hot, dark train was motionless and dense. Scents of grease and hot metal snuck into the heavy air.

One of the engineers climbed down from engine room, sweating as if heâ d steered the train through hell. And that coal, oh yes, that ugly coal that powers the prodigious steam engine, from what I have concluded, is a hellish rock; surely the devils wears coal for opaque jewelry; tis an evil fossil burned in the fiery stoves of violent machines till it is reduced to fantastic black formations in the sinful glow of orange-red heat, producing the desirable energy society so blindly demands. Of course overindulgence is not admirable, and of course, our demand is insatiable, evermore excessive by the minute, and soon, I guarantee, by generation.

Out from the smoke came my cousin Brinley, a country-boy, an idiot, carrying his suitcase like a salesman embarking on a journey to sell sheer idiocy. Heâ d gown taller in three years, taller than I. Perhaps I hadnâ t changed a bit seeing as how quickly he recognized me. Together we escaped the clouded station, finding fresh air, eying the polluted crimson sky fraught with jagged black clouds that I wished would make shadowy mountains by connecting with the unmistakable black skyline of chimney stacks, row-houses, occasional trollies riding up the hills, and the rooftops that you could jump between and move across town faster than by horseback in the growing urban congestion.

Brinleyâ s face blatantly spoke of his silly exhaustion. For all things around us, of a typical bustling evening, the chap I was unfortunately related to was utterly confused. Tellingly, he nervously adjusted his glasses and tripped over curbs as we strode to Barber Street. By then the raggedy clothes and sooty faces had transformed into canes and crisp white shirts, white gloves opening sterling silver cigarette cases with initials engraved quite finely. Exquisite stores lined the street-side. Stars sparkled in the shiny shoes on storefront racks, inflowing out of alleys. Women had peachy blushes and dresses as wide as opened umbrellas. Chimney sweeps worked on the rooftops, little ants from our perspective. Policeman scoured the shop windows and all dark realms that connected to the rich ambiance of the street that linked uptown with the filthy groggery.

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On an uneventful day along the uptown streets, horses tug carriages down the cobblestone boulevard of five and six stories houses in rows with no alleys, passing whitewashed brick and black brick homes, some graced with iron balconies from where green shrubs nest. And by five, shadows of balled trees towering from the park on the opposing side cast distorted images on the boulevard, evening shade that draws musicians and artists. A Romanian duo, a dancing monkey in Union Jack britches and music-box player who doubles as a magician, proved the most pretentious performers that I can attest to.

Someone sang a cheery song in the galleries; a few chaps collected below the window, admiring the lady's voice. We continued walking. I had barely said a word to Brinley other than, "Nice to see you, kid." Old bald men played cards at a Billiards hall. Giant horses trotted down the cobblestone street, tugging along some Lord or Baron in a gold-embellished carriage. A gray wig moved to and fro inside the carriage, perhaps between his wife and mistress, entertaining them both rather cheekily. The wheels ran through a puddle, splashing a man and his wife. The man cursed at the pug-faced driver who seemed nonchalant and certainly unregretful.

By then, all that was between my apartment and I was a fruit vendor, his wooden cart full of red and orange balls, greenish-yellow crescent moons, shrunken green pumpkins things, of which I asked about.

"What are those?" I asked, pointing. Brinley pulled up beside me as if we were lining up for a photograph. He picked up a spongy orange, examining it as if he were a watchmaker inspecting a final product. His eyes sighed in dissatisfaction. Fittingly, he of all folks in the city would recognize quality produce.

"Bell peppers, they make you smarter, and cure fevers," the western European vendor mumbled. Hidden in the locks of curly black hair were his deceitful eyes—a robust mustache stretched over his mouth, black stubbles popping around his jaw.

"That's bullshit Jepson," Brinley whispered.

"You touch your mum's bosom with those hands, fellow?" The vendor said, glaring at Brinley, irritated because he was touching the fruit. Brinley bought a banana and apple, stuffing them in his suitcase between clothes. After climbing the four staircases up to my apartment, hanging our coats and hats, we sat and finally had to talk. Brinley must have felt like he was sitting in a closet; for a country boy, my apartment was definitely tiny.

"Want some Tea mate?" I cordially asked.

"Please do. Thanks Jepson, I appreciate your hospitality."

I hated hearing him say my name so ignorantly. Around town I'm referred to as Jeppy. Upset and unwilling to show it, I shuffled over to the cupboard and removed some *Ragnaw Tobacco*, then gathered my pipe for a short smoke. I leaned out the window and peered at the harbor as I smoked.

Outside the window was a smoky red grave hovering over the rooftops and hills afar, filled by the vague darkness the city lie shrouded in. Amidst the darkening cityscape found the lurid gold-orange circle we had grown to know, which Brinley had known oh so intimately in the Devonshire countryside, swirling contortedly in a seaward wharf with a throng of black masts and sails, in the midst of calmed-black wakes and surprising sunny gleams.

"Red sky, Black buildings, yellow windows—this is unmistakably the city I imagined," Brinley said as he looked over my shoulder. "Good show, how do you like it—the tobacco I mean?" he asked,

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sitting down.

â With vigor and potency dear friend.â

â I was afraid you were talking about women there for a second.â

â Describing women is easier with gin mate.â

â You donâ t prefer scotch, even the likes of smooth rum?â

It brought to mind an old drinking song. â *With the tip of your chin, only by gulping that ruthless burning sin of gin, can one win such a stupid grin, or accidentally bore kin, with a madam whose nose is but a fin,*â I sang.

We laughed at the last part as it stumbled out of me. I retreated to the window for a dose of fresh air. Lanterns blew yellow bubbles of light over the streets below, casting yellowy ponds of the oily glows. Brinley peered in amazement at all the city lights, fading tinier and tinier into nightâ s fleet; a darkness out there that is as guile as a manâ s face during a game of poker.

â You go to a pub around here Jepson?â Brinley asked.

â Yeah, itâ s a couple blocks from here. The Kingâ s Horsemen Pub.â

â Letâ s have a crack at it shall we. Do you fancy it tonight? â | If itâ s not ostensible that I certainly do, let me say yes.â

Brinleyâ s eyes were childishly eager. If I turned him down it would be like tearing a page of the Bible in front of mum for me, and like a stern â noâ to going to the county fair from the old man, for Brinley. No less than five minutes later we were heading for the pub.

Electric streetlights illuminated the entertainment district, indicating precisely how affluent it is. Along the prominent street, an opera was just letting out. Elegant folks, rich and they knew it, spilled into the street, weaving with carriages and other bystanders. Brinley walked close to my side as we tried to navigate the crowd.

One couples stopped in the middle of the sidewalk. The man grabbed his female counterpart and struck her across the face, â good for nothing wench,â he exclaimed. A scream came from the women, followed by tears as she begged forgiveness.

Brinley squinted at the man through his ghastly glassesâ utterly appalled by what he saw. When the gentlemen noticed Brinley was watching, the situation gravely escalated, vexed by the unwanted attention Brinley didnâ t realize he was unkindly offering.

Farm villages are small and close-knitted. Everyone knows their neighbors, preachers, clerks, bakers, and barbers. That is where Brinley hails from. Here, in the city, we despise one another. Perhaps it is elicited by the intense living conditions, cramped and warm, like residing in your auntâ s stuffy wardrobe closet.

However, to stand there, to stand up, rather, was infectious. His objection suddenly grew on me. Guts are what it took to stand there, glaring at the offender, letting the beaten wife see the sympathy in his eyes, and, Brinley did just that. Never saw the chap as a fighter until he threatened to roll up his sleeves, drop his glasses on the ground, and stomp over to the man, who, likewise, brooded in anger.

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They exchanged words as more onlookers encircled the scene, hopeful theyâd see a fight for free. Men and women alike climbed old fire escapes to get a better view. Windows opened abruptly in the foggy night. Store owners vaulted their counters, ignoring long lines, and ran outside.

It was the turning point of something. I must have looked stupid with my mouth taking in the tension it was so open in surprise. I hoped Brinley would later forgive me for construing him as so helpless within the urban fortification I thought I understood. I feared disrupting the cohesion I had gained by doing anything, especially with regards to beliefs, except blend.

Aristocratic trophies surrounded the fight. Gray and black door handles for mustaches on the men, framing un-emotive feelings. Eyeglasses peered at the swirling anger, magnifying only the hate in the makeshift ring. Women fanned themselves quietly, faces shrouded in unease and sympathy. Whereas the men were unforgiving, viewing the scene as a result of misfortune, of Godâs irreversible will thrust on the vulnerable poor who were destined to act savagely. Violence, for those who do not actively partake, is inextricably beguiling. Admission there, at that curb, consisted solely of the unspoken love for that violence, that wooed folks, that enthralled, that lured them from their posts, their lives, to that disagreeing scene.

Who would swing first? I watched nervously. Brinley handed me his coat while the other man shoved his wife in the street, allowing the crowd to hold her back. Brinley rolled up his sleeves silently. The other man jibed at him, calling him a servant to his mother. Brinley and the man orbited around with their fists, moving like boxers do, in the yellow room of the streetlight, with dark faces completing the wallpaper eager to see twisted flesh, red gashes, purple-green bruises. Cheering began immediately, egging the two to throw the first punch. Already the sight had the semblance of a dream, but now the anticipation was palatable. *Had Brinley fought before?*

Amongst the developing furor, a lady standing beside me struck a match and smoked just as the wife-beater finally threw his fist punch, swinging and missing. Brinley avoided the jab rather easily. To cheers, he artfully dodged and ducked the yellow air to show off his versatility. Then, with a slick approach, Brinley lunged at the wife-beater and clocked him right in the chin as the crowd, both stunned and stirred, hollered for more. Dazed, the clobbered man shook it off and approached aggressively, swinging weakly, missing pathetically. His wife fainted into the arms of a burly man watching amidst the dark ring of bodily silhouettes. Suddenly the wife-beater looked back at his wife, eyes as if they were pleading with her to rescue him, to comfort his wound.

Right then, Brinley had a chance to sucker punch him, but refused in the midst of boos by the uproarious onlookers who screamed for blood they would neither spill nor clean themselves. Momentarily, it seemed a solace had arrived and the fight was over. Out of nowhere a riot of Policemen whistled from an alley, hurried down the street and dispelled the human ring. Yet, Brinley and I were gone. All that was left was a spot of gummy blood by a mailbox.

We scrambled back to the apartment and locked the door as if an angry mob had tailed us. Outside the window we recognized the pitch black cloak dulling the outlines of neighborhoods and face of the city, glowing yellow freckles for windows, chimneys as thin as eyelashesâhurling gray billows into the skyâobscuring stars and the weakened moon, but there was calm at last.

Of course Brinley and I were tired, but the escape riled us up. I cracked the liquor cabinet and poured Brinley some genuine scotch. His hair was frazzled and forehead caked with a sweaty film, cheeks blushed, and face solemn. He hadnât spoken yet and I sat looking at him, expecting he would open up and explain himself.

â Did your mum tell you I used to Box?â Brinley asked, breathing hard.

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“No, she bloody well didn’t,” I said, equally out of breath.

“You didn’t notice my clumsiness then? I’ve taken a number of shots to the head. Why the hell do you think I wear glasses?” Brinley posed.

“Speaking of glasses, did you grab them?”

“I can see much better without them anyway.”

“How about we drink to boxing then?” I insisted.

“Cheers.”

I stared at the newspaper the following morning. *“Ghost Glasses Rebel fights with perfect vision, leaves a mark on Walter Marbley!”* it read. Walter Marbley is heir to the Marbley family’s Brick Throne, referring to the series of Brick factories they own. Black ink had never been so addicting on the eyes. I absorbed line after line of the details. Apparently the skirmish had been highly attended by locals, and word of mouth stretched the popularity across town. An account of the beaten wife made it in there, prompting a local women’s rights group to go on strike at the Brick Factory Marbley owns on the south side.

Next thing we knew the chap was gone, just his glasses remained on the mailbox. “By Jove, the fella hit like a hammer and swerved like a stallion,” a witness was quoted, describing the fight.

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