

*The sun goes down
but it's alright.
Some creatures come alive at night
As night was not designed for sleep...*

Chapter 1 - Blood on the Apron

Tap, tap, tap.

The old man knocked the blade against the discoloured porcelain bowl. Stirring the water, he brought the blade back to the left side of his face, going over an already smooth area. An unfiltered cigarette dangled precariously from his fleshy, sud-framed lips. Steam from the piping hot water had condensed the circular mirror hanging from a darkened chain above the sink, rendering it all but obsolete. He didn't wipe it clear. At his age, he knew his face. Weathered and drawn, loose and long. Old but not decrepit. Not like this room.

Tap, tap, tap.

Balanced on the edge of the bowl was a small notebook, its pages held open by a chewed pencil. The last sentence he'd written on the water specked page read, 'Her legs twitched.' His previous attempt, 'There was some movement from her legs', had been crudely scored out. His left hand felt its way around his face. A minute clump of bristle on the right side of his neck, just under his jaw and once more, the razor returned to his skin.

Tap, tap.

The old man rinsed the blade, wrapped it in a flannel and placed it in the small, brown leather pouch sat on the ledge by the walk-in shower. He took a hand towel from the small stack, patted dry his long bare head and dabbed the water which had flecked his vest.

He dressed. A pale blue gingham, seersucker shirt with navy corduroy slacks. Not contemporary but still stylish. Not like this room. He turned to the bed. Two ties lay across the mattress. One oxblood red, the other, black with three yellow diagonal stripes. Choosing neither, he placed both into a small leather travel bag and pulled on a light tweed jacket. Though it had served its owner well over the years, the jacket still fit his form perfectly. He reached back into the bathroom, where the sound of the leaky cistern plinked and plonked to its own time signature, an atonal free form, and pulled the toggle at the end of the frayed light cord. From the bedside table, he picked up a pair of brown turtle shell glasses and put them on. His eyes widened, adjusting to his strong but familiar prescription.

The small bag was placed inside a larger, matching travel bag. Tightening its red and blue strap, he fastened the dull brass clip and left the ugly motel room without a backward glance. A room so soiled with the funk of stale smoke and illicit sweat, that no amount of scrubbing or fresh air could ever expunge. The kind of room he once loved. In every stain, a story. A lover in each gouge and a devastated cuckold in every scuff mark. Not now. This meant nothing to him. He could not glean anything from it. And besides, there was not enough time tonight to slide back into old ways, even if his body would allow.

He walked down the corridor, past the triptych of frontier mustangs in varying stages of frolic, into the reception area; an ill-conceived, glass extension which would provide little shelter from the harsh northeastern winter. On a curious evening like this though, in the margin between late spring and early summer, it acted as a hothouse. From behind the paper strewn reception desk, an awkward, wistful looking fellow took the old man's key. His once white shirt had noticeable perspiration marks which seemed to spread from under his lank arms as if he was incapable of preventing his own foulness from consuming him.

Though the sun was about to set, the temperature gauge in the lobby still showed sixty-two in the shade.

The raw-boned receptionist asked the old man if he needed a ride.

“No, I’m fine, thank you,” he replied, dusting off the seat of an almost threadbare armchair which backed onto the window.

“There’s only two hotels in the whole of Lewiston,” the receptionist said, dabbing beads of sweat from his brow.

“You don’t say,” said the old man, feigning interest.

“Two hotels and Williams from the Ice Truck told me that six hundred people are crammed into ninety-five rooms. Now, I don’t know if that’s true but if it is...” the receptionist exhaled, impressed by the magnitude of the second-hand statistic.

“And I hear that the Mansion House has been taken over by one of the camps, I don’t know which one but there’s no room at the inn, so to speak. But that’s Lewiston, I guess. I don’t know why they don’t come here to Mechanic Falls. We have plenty of room here and we’re only seventeen miles from the venue, as the crow flies. I can keep this room for you...if you’d like.”

“Thank you but no.”

“So, you’ll be leaving Maine tonight, Mr Valentine?”

Mr Valentine was one of the names he’d use when he didn’t want questions.

Not wishing to be drawn further, he nodded and looked away. Still, the receptionist persisted. The old man checked the time on the wall clock against that of his watch. He picked up a magazine.

“There’s some National Geographic. And a few boxing magazines, if you like the fights. You like the fights? Williams says that this’ll make Lewiston the fight capital of the world. Now I’m no fan of Clay but...”

From behind the receptionist’s desk, a bright light reflected off the mirror. The old man turned to see a pristine black Lincoln pull up directly in front of the motel. Time to go. As he headed towards the exit, the receptionist, unconcerned with the car, continued to talk.

“And those Nation of Islam fellows? I mean, believe in whichever God

you want but I have to draw the line somewhere. That kind of trouble we just don't need at the New Starlit Plains Motel."

The old man smiled.

"Goodbye then."

He walked over to the Lincoln, opened the passenger door and took a seat, his bag tucked between his feet. The car pulled away.

"Nice ride."

"What were you expecting? A station wagon?" replied the driver, a black man in his early thirties, immaculate in a tailored dark suit with a white shirt and matching pocket square. "The motel. Anything I need to know?"

"Nothing whatsoever. It was perfect."

The driver handed the old man a ticket.

"You're about six rows back. Not quite press but still close enough to make contact."

"Just the one?"

"Don't worry. I'll be there. Just not right beside you. We need distance in case of..."

"Of course."

Distance. Of course. They headed east, through the almost deserted centre of town. Aside from two teenagers riding bikes, the main street was empty. The mixture of the old and new, with tree lined, sparsely populated avenues branching deeper into a suburb where not a single blade of grass was out of line. I can see why people buy this, he thought, but it was an American ideal he didn't share.

"Is there anything I should be looking out for? You know, like..."

The younger man detected a sense of nervousness from the old man.

"Don't worry. There shouldn't...there won't be any hiccups."

The old man sighed, his foot tapping at the plate. He was not convinced.

"You might want to look in the glove compartment."

The old man twisted the catch and the compartment door fell open.

Sitting atop some papers was a snub-nosed revolver.

“Will I be needing this?” he asked.

“Call it insurance.”

The old man picked up the weapon, gripping it, turning it and feeling its weight on the palm of his hand. He detached the barrel and removed the bullets, placing them in the right pocket of his jacket. The gun he placed in the other.

“If you’re stopped and searched,” the younger man said, “remember that it is your constitutional right to bear arms against aggressors.”

“And if they don’t buy it?”

“Blame Malcolm X.”

Out of town, they took the almost deserted 121 past Mt. Apatite to the north, now barely visible in the final light of the day. Before long, they crossed over the Androscoggin River into Lewiston itself. Ahead of them, a queue of similarly detailed cars formed.

“It might be best to get off the main track.”

Over the bridge, the young man pulled away to the right, parking the Lincoln in the street beside the Basilica.

“It’s only a couple of blocks from here but I can get closer, if you’d like?” asked the younger man.

“I can handle a couple of blocks.”

The old man opened the car door, wincing as he pulled himself up and out.

They walked slowly down Plender Avenue towards the venue. To the old man, the arena appeared small and unimpressive.

“*This* is St Dominic’s?” he asked.

“No, that burned down a few years ago. It’s St Nicholas’ now.”

The sign read...

‘THE CENTRAL MAINE YOUTH CENTER’

“You wouldn’t believe the strings we had to pull...”

“I can imagine,” replied the old man.

“Remember the drill. Make contact and get confirmation, however long it takes. You must not leave the area until you get the nod that we’re good. Do you understand?”

“I got it,” replied the old man, breathing heavily.

The younger man looked at him with genuine concern.

“Are you sure you’re up for this?”

“I love the fights,” he said defiantly.

At the entrance to the Center’s parking lot, between two concession stalls, a noisy demonstration by a group of suited men was taking place. A brigade of police officers with batons drawn, stood close by.

“We will not be intimidated by the forces of evil. For the Prophet Elijah Muhammad has foretold of ...”

“You *will* leave or we shall be compelled to remove you from the vicinity,” shouted the Captain through a loud hailer, like an amplified bee in a tin. The body language of the officers lined up behind him suggested that they were keen to follow his orders, each and every one of them straining at the bit for a chance, under the cloak of *legitimacy*, to beat up on some black men.

As the conflict intensified, the old man, detached, observed. To the side of the men was a small collection of women, dressed head to toe in starched, sober garments, steadfast in support of the protestors. Catching his eye was one particular devotee, her flawless, unadorned beauty, proud and unafraid, stopping him cold.

“Keep moving,” said the younger man as he ushered him towards the arena. Still, the old man couldn’t help but look over his shoulder, fixated on the fervently devout young woman.

Outside turnstile fifteen, the lines that led into the Center split, then slowed to a crawl. A heavy-set police officer, too slovenly to be chosen for head cracking duties, leant against one side of the gate, randomly checking the queuing patrons. The old man presented his ticket and was

ushered through to the turnstile itself. He handed it over to the operative who pressed down on the pedal and released the mechanism. Once through, he looked back to see that the younger man had been stopped and searched. The old man reminded himself of the job he had to do. He must not be caught up in any miscarriages of justice, major or minor.

Passing the wood panelled thoroughfare, he checked the remaining portion of his ticket. Down the five-step, narrow staircase to the courtside, he found his spot; Section 104, Row E, Seat 19. The old man scanned the crowd for his colleague to no avail. The final fight on the undercard was approaching its conclusion but most in attendance appeared uninterested.

This should be close enough.

The bell sounded and the lights went up. Gasping for air, cut and bruised, the combatants were brought to the centre of the ring. Their seconds towelled the sweat from their glistening, battered bodies. An epic contest had just taken place but for the crowd, growing by the minute, the efforts of both men seemed insignificant. Dressed entirely in white, a frail, elderly man had begun to mop a hundred tiny pools of blood that during the last hour, exploded from the lacerated brows and pummelled noses of those underappreciated warriors. From above, the white canvas was stained pink.

The old man checked his watch. It was already time.

Another quick survey of the arena proved fruitless. Not that his colleague's whereabouts mattered. None of this did. The old man just needed to know one thing. Nothing else.

The lights dimmed again, and through the arena, there was a swell of something approaching excitement. Everyone, bar the old man, was on their feet. An electric burst of applause rang out. *This* was the main event.

A group of soldiers in their dress uniforms carried the Stars and Stripes into the ring and were joined by some familiar names from the pugilistic past; Willie Pep, James Braddock and Joe Louis. As the old man stood, curiosity piqued, to get a better view, the Challenger arrived, heading towards the centre of the arena. The applause was generous. One well-wisher patted the name on the back of the fighter's white towelling robe

but an attempt to engage further ended abruptly as the Challenger's seconds firmly pushed him back into the crowd. None of this affected the fighter. His face was a study in menace. The closer he got to the ring, the more flashbulbs were activated. The back and forth of the applause, the catcalling and the spark and crunch of discarded cubes of glass only added to the intimidating atmosphere. This was not Lewiston, Maine, thought the old man. Here stood ancient Rome, and the untamed circus of the malevolent.

A murmur and everyone turned to look towards the east of the ring. It was the Champion. A decade younger than his opponent, he bounded towards the centre of the hall with the purpose of an upright cheetah, travelling at such speed that his team struggled to follow. He reached the apron of the ring only to find that his access was blocked. But he kept moving, his small contingent of seconds reduced to the role of hapless onlookers. Everyone watched the Champion. Except the old man. He only had eyes for the Challenger. Some sort of sign. He was close enough to see the steam rise from his head. Just then, another thought crossed his mind; this would be the first time that he'd seen the Challenger in his workplace.

It took three men to lift the scales over the ropes and into the ring. Very unusual. The weigh in would normally take place elsewhere, and usually the day prior to the contest. This, he thought, was no ordinary event.

"215 and a quarter to 206!"

"It's going to be a bloodbath," shouted a fellow through his stogie-clenching teeth.

Once the soldiers departed, the scales were removed and the audience was seated. But not for long. An aborted effort at the national anthem was attempted but public address problems would render Robert Goulet even more unlistenable than normal. Despite the difficulties and the impatient crowd, the man from Massachusetts persisted gamely.

"Go back to Canada, ya bum," shouted the Stogieman.

The timekeeper called it. The bell sounded for round one.

And as quickly as it had begun, it was over.

The Champion had barely connected with a hook and a cross but for some reason, the Challenger couldn't - or didn't want to - live with it. He was back on his feet but even the referee, Jersey Joe Walcott, himself a former champion, struggled to comprehend what had just happened.

"Fake!!! Fake!!!!"

Beer bottles, apple cores and hot dogs rained down on the ring as the short-changed spectators showed their displeasure.

The old man pushed his way through the angry crowd. His youthful associate reappeared, assisting him towards the corner of the ring. On the opposite side, as a confused Champion took the plaudits, the defeated Challenger, seated on his stool, looked down at a ring which magnetically drew his gaze towards its rough, stained grip.

"I need to get closer!" the older man shouted over the din. Behind him, the security custodians struggled to keep the angry spectators back.

Leaning against the ring, the young man cupped his hands, creating a makeshift stirrup. The old man quickly climbed onto the apron. Gripping tightly to the thick top rope, he stood, silently urging the fallen Challenger to notice him. He didn't want to call out. Being so close to the cameras, he was already in jeopardy. It was a risk however, he felt compelled to take.

Just then, as chaos enveloped him, the Challenger turned his head and caught a glimpse of a familiar face. Seeing the old man, he snorted. At the moment of this most abject public failure, the slightest trace of a smile appeared on his face. The old man looked back at him, struggling not to reciprocate.

"Is it safe?" he mouthed.

The fighter, reading his lips, nodded slowly.

The old man's eyes closed. A deep sigh of relief emitted from his body.

"See you around Charlie," he whispered.

"See you around, Val."

Tugging at the old man's jacket, the young man spoke.

“We need to go.”

He took the old man by the arm and led him up the stairs, past scores of people still unsure as to what they'd witnessed.

As the defeated fighter was led out of the ring, the chorus of boos inside the Central Maine Youth Center reached a crescendo. The old man turned back to see the Challenger, his head shrouded and his once fearsome sixteen inch fists hanging by his side, redundant.

“You're a fucking bum, Liston!” roared a spectator. “Fifty bucks on you and you throw the fight? You no good fucking bum!”

The old man stopped and made a grab for the spectator.

“Shut your goddamn mouth!” he said, “You know nothing.”

“I know that he's a fucking bum who has just cost me fifty bucks.”

“None of you fucking assholes are fit to lace his gloves.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. Blow it out your ass, Grandpa.”

The old man reached into his pocket but his younger companion's tight grip prevented him from drawing the weapon.

“You've got to let it go,” he said, quietly but forcefully. “And we've got to keep moving.”

The old man breathed deeply but fury continued to cloud his eyes. He turned his back to the crowd, still throwing bottles and spitting vitriol.

You know nothing.