The Contender

A heap of tattered clothes smelling of rot pulsated in the middle of the abandoned second-floor room, an unshaven face dripped from one end and pressed against splintered floorboards. Membranes on the inside of his closed eyelids turned the color of a wheat field, the first sign of daylight. Voices that rambled in the caverns of his mind weren't too loud on sunny days; on the most brilliant days they rarely showed up at all. His thick dark lips widened at the sound of chirping. He opened his eyes and outside the window a half-dozen sparrows were perched between pairs of sneakers draped over a telephone wire strung across the alleyway. The fragrance of smoked apple wood and barbequed brisket streamed through the window from the yard below.

He rolled onto his back, shimmied across the floor on his elbows and feet until his head rested against the wall, and then he propped himself into a sitting position. A sad paper bag covered a brown glass bottle next to him, except for its neck peeking out of the top. He unscrewed the cap and raised it toward his lips. An inch from his mouth, he turned his head and rested the bottle on his hairy cheek, lowered his eyes and sobbed.

He spent his days trying to piece together a kinetoscope of images that was his life—blinding lights inside a squared ring, sledge hammers against concrete, ditches eight-feet deep, a beat-up backhoe, a young kid screaming, "Oagie, Oagie," tears flowing down the kid's face.

"Oagie." He looked up at a ripped two-hundred-plus-pound body supporting a head the size of a steer, all framed by a doorway.

"What, Harold?"

"We're getting tired of listenin' to you whimperin' like a little girl up here. It's payday, man. Get your ass downstairs and get something in your belly."

Payday! Oagie dreaded paydays—Friday, the day he prepared for his crusade to survive the weekend. He's strap on the battledress—sword in one hand, shield in the other—to fight his way through to Monday, his favorite day of the week.

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Fifteen years had dissipated since Oagie passed out in the middle of the night and rolled under his beat-up van with PLUMBING painted in crude letters over what once spelled POLICE. A big young brother staggered down the same deserted North Philly street after an all-night card game and saw feet sticking out from under the van. Even through a cheap-wine drunk and cocaine haze, Oagie remembered the surprised expression on the guy's face when he pulled him onto the sidewalk. It was purely coincidental that the feet Harold pulled belonged to an idol in the Philly boxing community, a former contender for the lightweight championship.

A year earlier Oagie had the world by the balls. He was clean, healthy, and devoted to two things: boxing and his beautiful baby girl, the love of his life. Nobody could have predicted that he would climb through the ropes for the last time on his twenty-ninth birthday.

Harold threw Oagie over his shoulder and carried him four blocks to an abandon house, climbed the stairway and laid him reverently on the floor. He covered Oagie with an old coat he found stuffed in a closet so he wouldn't freeze to death.

Later that afternoon, Oagie heard footsteps echoing up the stairwell. A foot slid under his belly and wiggled. "Get up, Mr. Oagie. It's fight night." The sound of *fight night* breathed life into Oagie. Harold helped him to his feet and steadied him before they walked down the stairs and out to his '64 Caddy convertible. They drove around the block and made a left onto Broad

Street. Mist filled Oagie's eyes when the brownstone fortress came into view, the boxing Mecca with heavy oak double doors and thick beveled glass windows—The Blue Horizon, or The Blue to boxing enthusiast.

Harold turned left off of Broad Street, drove around the block and parked on the street behind the auditorium. He got out, and said, "Let's go." Oagie followed him through the alleyway and up a set of concrete stairs. Harold rapped the backdoor with his fist. It cracked open. A bodyguard with a head over Harold looked down at them through slit eyes. He backed against the wall and let the two pass by. They walked through the corridor, crossed the marble floor of the grand hall. Oagie stopped and stared at the ticket booth at the end of the hallway toward Broad Street, once his own payday.

"Come on, Mr. Oagie," shouted Harold. "I gotta get movin'." Harold disappeared into an opening and down a staircase. Oagie shuffled along behind him until Harold pointed to a seat in the bleachers, and said, "Sit here," his lone voice in the auditorium distant. "I'll pick you up after the fight." Harold started down the steps and then slowed, turned and looked up at Oagie. "This one's for you, Mr. Oagie."

Oagie stretched his arms onto the backrest of the chair on either side of him. He closed his eyes and imagined lights brighter than the ones on the runway at Philly International Airport illuminating the ring, could hear the roar of the crowd, even smelled the sweet aroma of cigar smoke. He drifted deeper, now peering out from inside the ring he once ruled, faceless bodies bobbing and shouting unintelligible slurs mixed with encouragement, chants echoed against sharp insults. Sweat, spit and blood splattered sideways staining the shirts of ringside patrons; breath as hot as a bull's, flesh pressing against sweltering flesh until the wiry arms of a referee wedged them apart.

The clang of the bell breathed life back into Oagie; life that had drained from him during the lost days, merciless months, the brutal years since he'd been a contender. Two fighters danced on the balls of their feet to the center of the ring, freshly greased bodies, craning necks from side to side, smiles wrapped around hard rubber teeth guards, ready to decapitate one another. Unable to contain himself, Oagie jumped to his feet and yelled, "Get on with it, boys."

An old man in the seat next to him dressed in Sunday go-to-meeting clothes asked, "Who you for?"

"I'm here for the sport." The old man's expression said he understood. In the first minute of Round One, Oagie added, "The kid with the red shoes will take this one; if not next round, then Round Three. The other guy's green."

The old man nodded his approval. The kid won, as Oagie predicted. The second match went the distance, two gladiators, both deserving the win, but the judges gave it to the kid from North Philly—hometown advantage.

An entourage emerged from the dark caverns under the auditorium. Oagie sized-up a large black-robed body huddled in the middle of a pack of bodyguards, a hood draped over the head, and said, "Heavyweight," to anyone who might be listening. The boxer climbed through the ropes and flipped the hood back with the snap of his neck. Oagie grabbed the old man's arm. "That's my buddy down there—Harold."

The old man snickered. "They call him 'Squash,' son. Harold 'Squash' Williams."

In the corner opposite Harold stood a baby-faced kid with the physique of a stallion. From the opening bell, the kid demonstrated incredibly quick fists and Houdini-like elusiveness. Every time Harold counter-punched it was as if the kid vanished. The kid chipped, chipped, chipped at Harold's chiseled torso, and danced around jabbing every square inch of the older

boxer's body. Oagie could tell the kid was well-coached and admired his discipline. By the end of the first round, Oagie knew Harold would lose if he tried to outbox his young opponent. He studied the kid for another round, and then got up before Round Three, walked down to the floor and over to Harold's corner.

"Hey, Harold."

Strands of blood mixed with spit dripped into a bucket next to Harold's stool. He looked down at Oagie, a 'What the fuck do you want' expression on his face.

"The kid came out and threw a right jab to begin the first and second rounds," Oagie imitated the kid's move, "and left himself wide open. Anticipate that jab when you go out next round. When he dips," Oagie lowered his left shoulder, and then threw a right into the air, "come across with an uppercut through the center of his chest. His chin will be waiting." Oagie couldn't have sounded any more certain if he'd told Harold that he lost the first two rounds. Harold never heard Oagie say, "He'll be on the canvass before I get back to my seat," when he walked away.

Harold stared at Oagie until the bell rang, and then stood, tapped his gloves together and walked to center ring. The kid hadn't positioned his feet properly when he threw the right jab. Harold ducked his left shoulder like Oagie showed him, came across with a right uppercut that connected with the kid's chin and lifted him six inches off the mat. He was unconscious before his back hit the canvass.

The crowd roared. Oagie turned toward the ring, cupped his hands to his mouth, and screamed, "Squash!"

Oagie was a strategist in the ring. Back in the day he'd fight guys half his age and beat them on technique to compensate for only average quickness, but he didn't have an answer for Cruiser Brower's left that put him in Einstein Hospital on his twenty-ninth birthday. His manager

rode to the hospital in the back of the ambulance with him, saw the distant look in his eyes and pleaded with him to quit, a word that wasn't in Oagie's vocabulary.

Later that night, Oagie's girlfriend visited him in the hospital with his daughter who had made him a birthday card with painted stars and flowers, a rainbow, and a spotted pony. Oagie smiled at the card, and then looked down at her from his hospital bed with a confused expression. He reached out and hugged her. "Thank you," he said, holding her close, his eyes painfully searching the room. His voice cracked, "My Little Bird."

Without saying a word, his daughter was able to do what his manager couldn't. Oagie never stepped into the ring again.

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Disposed from the refuge of the ring, Oagie needed a means to make a living, pay the rent, child support. The owner of The Blue hooked him up with a general contractor and Oagie found solace in digging ditches, brazing pipe, and sweating joints. He put his heart and soul into plumbing, but he never stopped following the sport he loved. He knew boxing better than the athletes inside the square ring, and shared everything he learned over the years with a big kid from the neighborhood named Harold.

Oagie outworked his competition the same way he outworked opponents in the ring, and earned enough money to buy a used backhoe. He began digging trenches and laying sewer pipe and water mains for developers. By the age of forty-five, he mostly supervised workers that he had hired, except for on the day of the accident.

The pain killers they fed him in the hospital didn't relieve the burning inside his leg as effectively as crack did, and the street was a dispensary for illicit drugs, crack as easy to buy as

candy. It ravaged his already fragile mind, controlled every impulse. He craved more and more, and his business suffered.

Fifteen years after he retired from the ring, Oagie had gone from successful businessman to panhandler to small-time thief. Cold-hearted criminal wasn't his nature until the day an old woman walked in front of him on Fairmont Avenue with her pocketbook swinging at her side. He ran up alongside of her and grabbed it, her grip just tight enough to jolt her face-first into a fireplug. He started to run but the sound of crunching teeth, the image of deep crimson dripping against peeling orange paint forced his feet to dissent. He stopped, turned, saw the pleading eyes of a little girl that reminded him of his Little Bird standing in a doorway crying. Oagie dropped the pocketbook and walked back to help the woman. Before he knew it handcuffs strangled his wrists; penance that did nothing to ease the guilt.

Oagie got clean serving time in the joint, taught plumbing to fellow-inmates in shop class, and got his sentenced reduced on good behavior. Once he left prison, he got by working odd jobs—handyman, collecting scrap metal. He missed the structure of prison life, and found balance with the combination of malt liquor and weed, but maintaining that balance became his fiercest struggle. Harold would threaten young pushers to stay away from Oagie with the hard shit, told them the former contender had enough to contend with.

Oagie would sleep as late as he could on the weekends, though most times he'd stumble out in the afternoon and roam the neighborhood, wander to a community garden to pick vegetables and fruit, scour the street gutters looking for aluminum cans and scrap metal. He'd sit on a bench at Broad and Fairmont and watch the circus—old women pushing wire carts with wobbly wheels, helmetless young guys screaming up and down the street on crotch rockets, dealers in Escalades, hipsters strolling, thin wires dangling from ear buds. The majestic Divine

Lorraine towered into the heavens across the street, captive in a chain-link fence and graffiti'd-up. Oagie would romanticize about its glory days when wealthy folks lived there, before Father Divine took over and transformed it into the city's first racially integrated hotel.

One day an old maroon Olds pulled up to the curb, the window rolled down. "Hey brother, wanna go for a ride?"

Oagie's stomach churned. The lost years haunted him, the unaccounted period of his life. "Leave me alone, man. I'm comfortable." The lure was stronger than he was. The next thing he remembered he was in the backseat of a floating crack house. Smoke swirled through his brain before the pipe ever touched his lips. His impulses throbbed and he leaned over the front seat, eyes bulging for a hit, its absence a mirage. Oagie's lungs filled with the sweet, stinging burn. The Olds made a right onto a side street. Oagie inhaled deeper and the car made another right onto a narrow passage that climbed up into the Himalayas, Everest. Oagie followed Sherpa, bundles strapped onto yaks, ascending to the Promised Land.

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A steady rain blew through the window and splattered against Oagie's face, the splintered floor planks beneath him the only dry spot in the dank, musty room. He woke and watched large sections of paint that had peeled from the walls flapping in the breeze, an empty light bulb socket off-centered in the ceiling stared down at him. He tried to close the window before he lay down at dawn, but it was frozen with crud and filth and neglect. It didn't matter; the glass had been broken for years. He heard school kids outside waiting for the bus. *Ah ha! Monday, my favorite day of the week.*

He pulled his hoodie over his face and closed his eyes, but the pattering rain had already woken those characters inside his head—Nautical Newt, Stewbum and Mack the Knife. A dozen

more wandered aimlessly and chatted restlessly, searching for a place to settle in, but once they woke it was impossible for Oagie to get any peace. Bad weather tormented his demons.

Oagie's real name was lost among the clutter in his brain. From time to time he'd make a futile attempt to find it, but the harder he tried the more elusive it became. Concentration never came easy to him. Oagie was easy. He liked the sound of its syllables, short and soft. Oagie, Oagie, Oagie he'd say over and over to himself, and then he'd smile; sometimes even laugh.

He gave up trying to figure out why everyone took care of him. He remembered breaking concrete and digging ditches when his years in the ring ended, saving enough money to buy the beat-up wreck of a backhoe that his mechanic-turned-heroin-addict buddy got running for one hundred bucks. Things got foggy after that, except for the recurring nightmare—a kid behind the controls operating the backhoe; Oagie trapped in a ditch with a soil pipe next to his noggin; screaming, blood, darkness. He didn't remember that he was just trying to help the kid out, teach him a trade, turn the tide—give the kid the chance in life nobody ever gave him. That was Oagie's way.

The nightmare is countered by a persistent dream that gives him purpose in life—to return to work, get self-sufficient, provide for his Little Bird. He sees images of himself at the controls again digging long narrow trenches for Street Department workers to fix water mains and run service from city streets to row homes and businesses. A couple jackhammers, picks, shovels and his prize backhoe that's been collecting rust in a dilapidated garage—not bad for a kid who flunked out of high school his junior year, and then fought his way to fame.

Oagie's stomach rumbled. He crawled over and propped himself against the wall, reached into his empty pockets. He looked down at the uneven floor board, and pried it up with his fingers; a ten-spot—jackpot. He stood and looked out the window; kids gone off to school,

nobody at the grill or on the corner waiting for the bus to go to work, just people milling around talking shit, hanging out smoking dope, drinking wine. *Must be around noon*.

Rapid-fire thoughts raced through his brain whenever his stomach was barren—starving, gotta fill the void, get something into the pit. *Pete's! Shit, I owe Pete.* Pete would let him slide, of course. The PBJ Cheeseburger sounded too good for Oagie to pass up, and a forty ouncer to go. He could see it when he closed his eyes, smell it. *That'll fix me for the rest of the day, maybe tomorrow too*.

Oagie limped into the hallway and over to the top of the steps, got dizzy when he looked down the narrow stairwell with no railing. The front door took some muscle to open—rusty hinges, trash, buckled floorboards. The rain had turned to a mist. The sky cracked and a sliver of sunshine glistened in Oagie's eyes. *A PBJ Cheeseburger, forty, then I'll hop on my wheels and peddle over to the Penn, see what they be hustlin' today*.

Oagie loved Mondays.

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"What's happening, Oagie?" asked Pete, the owner, cook, bouncer and counselor.

"Can't get that PBJ Cheese out of my head; been wanting it since before I woke." Oagie reached into his pocket and pulled out the ten, raised his arm for Pete to see.

Pete shook his head and smiled. "Put that back where you got it. You worry about this here PBJ Cheese," he said as he turned to the grill.

It'd been years since Pete's drains belched and oozing sludge flooded his business, his grill, fridge and livelihood almost wiped out. Oagie walked outside, put his palms on the sidewalk, and lowered his ear to the pavement with the instincts of a seismologist. His eyes widened when he heard unusual movement in rhythm of the underworld—water and sewer pipes

chugging, gas hissing, the hum of electrical current. He smacked his hand on the sidewalk where he sensed disruption, the uneven flow of water, urine and shit; and then a miracle—he detected the exact spot the soil pipe had caved in.

Contractors gave Pete estimates in the thousands of dollars, and they couldn't get to it for weeks, by that time he'd be out of business. Oagie sent his helper to steal a length of soil pipe from a construction site a few blocks away while he began to break concrete and dig up the sidewalk with the backhoe. The kid returned with the pipe and Oagie put him at the controls; he climbed into the ditch with the pipe. It wasn't the first time the kid operated the backhoe, but he wasn't experienced enough to operate it in close quarters with another human being. The kid froze, watched in horror as the hydraulic arm rose and the teeth of the bucket descended and ripped through Oagie's leg from the hamstring all the way down to his calf. Oagie screamed in agony, blood and spit flying from his mouth. His life was never the same.

Oagie orchestrated operations from his hospital bed and the kid finished the job with the help of neighbors. The luncheonette was back in business in forty-eight hours. Oagie hadn't worked since. Work, cherished work—his barrier from boredom, distraction from alcohol and drugs, distance from wayward friends. Days without work became months that turned into years. It was a matter of time—Oagie never charged Pete a dime.

Oagie wiped the grease from his beard, slid the ten under his plate and walked toward the door.

"Hey, Oagie!"

Oagie let go the doorknob and turned around.

"You forgot something." Pete crumpled the bill and threw it across the room. It bounced off Oagie's forehead and tumbled to the floor.

Oagie bent over, picked it up and shoved it back into his pocket. “Love you, my man,” he said, and walked out the door.

He limped around the corner of the building to the vacant lot and pulled out his wheels, a rusty old bike with two nearly-flat tires, and peddled slowly down the avenue to the Penn, his favorite place on earth. The Penn reminded him of the Impressionist paintings he loved as a child when his mother would take him to the Art Museum—bright colors bubbling on common cityscapes, illuminating a metropolis to glorification. He smiled at the idea of an outdoor market as he cruised over, waving to elderly women dragging their metal shopping carts with their wobbly, squeaky wheels behind them. Strung-out druggies, eyes devoid of the life returned Oagie’s nod with a sinister grin.

Ten minutes later he pulled over and leaned his bike against the wooden fence outside the Penn. The sun pushed through an opening in the clouds revealing the bazaar in all of its splendor—a marvel, an illusion, a sensory smorgasbord. It seemed impossible that hundreds of vendors could squeeze into the single, compact triangular city lot. Wooden tables defied gravity, sagging but never collapsing, under the strain of every conceivable item ever made or grown or imagined, on display to be sold, hawked or bartered—some of it legal. Every few steps the music migrated from genre to genre—Oriental to Sinatra, Arcade Fire to jazz, Natalie Cole to My Morning Jacket; the chatter of the United Nations kept a background beat—Hunan, Brooklyn, Cambodian, South Philly, Jamaican. To the left were hibachis, designer pocketbooks, comic books, Lenox, and tie-die shirts; to the right cut leaf maple trees, used golf balls $2.50/dozen, clubs - $5/each, children’s books, silk underwear, jewelry, nightgowns, tattoo artists. Straight ahead were prescription glasses, sun glasses—rainbow frames, or leopard skin, red, black and clear. The scent of cologne and fragranced candles; and of veggies and herbs—tomatoes, basil,

peppers and thyme, Mexican, Thai, bratwurst, hot sausage, pierogi, popcorn; and snacks—spiced nuts, spiced pretzels, soft pretzels, cheese pretzels. Oagie closed his eyes and drew a deep breath, like he was hovering over a bong trying to inhale every last molecule of tantalizing incense. Hidden in a corner, a table with beach towels—Snoopy, SpongeBob, Big Bird, Bert & Ernie, The Hulk; curbside tables with stacks of tee shirts—Three Stooges, Spiderman, naked women, one that read, "Forecast for today, hot with plenty of beer." Above flew wind chimes and weather vanes. Outdoor furnishings sprawled—gazeboes, Adirondack chairs, railroad ties, imitation rocks, real rocks, rocking chairs. Propped against a van were huge oil paintings of horses grazing—Arabian, Quarter, Pony, Morgan, Dale. A flag pole rose in the center of the fair with flags—five, ten and twenty-feet long—fluttering in the wind.

Oagie moseyed over to a table near the fence, nonchalantly slipped a few bills into a Tupperware container and got a hug from Kate, the cutest redhead on the planet who sold cacti every Thursday year round regardless how shitty the weather. Kate had a warm smile and loved to press her firm body against Oagie's and plant a kiss on his straggly, bearded cheek. She was the highlight of the Penn fair, but not of his day. That was yet to come. She handed him the tiny bag with the stash that she always gave him, and he accepted graciously, gave her a peck on her forehead, and then walked back out to his wheels. Oagie peddled away to his most cherished appointment of the week.

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Steering up the avenue, Oagie nodded to the men playing cards outside The Castaway Bar and waived to little kids that just got off a school bus. He veered onto the sidewalk, propped the bike against the wall of a condemned building and sat on the concrete steps. He pulled a tiny pot from the bag and placed it behind a brick next to the steps, and then took out a small plastic bag and

shoved it into his pocket as he watched a bus cross Broad Street. At the corner two blocks away a plump elderly woman got off and wobbled when she hit the pavement, then steadied herself and was on her way. *Just one more stop*. His eyes glistened.

The bus slowed and stopped at the corner. Oagie smiled when he saw the back of her head as she made her way down the aisle, long curly black locks falling down over her shoulders. She watched her footing as she stepped down onto the curbside. She looked up and their eyes met; a deep, genuine, pained smile on her face. They stared at one another for a moment and then she wrapped her arms around his neck, hugged him tenderly and buried her head into the side of his face.

Oagie stroked her beautiful locks and said, "Want some sunflower seeds?"

She leaned back, looked into his eyes. "Sure."

He pulled the bag from his pocket and opened it. She stuck her hand inside. "Want to go for a walk?" he asked.

"Of course." She slid her arm through his and they walked down the avenue. After a few blocks they turned left, a slight variation from their weekly routine. He held the bag of seeds lazily between them so they could both pick from them. "I love sunflower seeds," she said.

"You do." Oagie knew the combination to the vault, the one that unlocked a sparkle in her eyes so bright it could change the world. It changed his, kept him going day to day, year to year. The glimmer in her eye infused hope in his soul. It unleashed promise so powerful that he believed he would one day wake to find the past ten years had been a bad dream. She worried about him, but he assured her there was nothing to worry about, that someone was watching over him. She believed him because he was there every week, smiling, happy, always with a surprise for her. He knew her better than anyone. Oagie was an enigma—a saint.

"How are things?" she asked.

"They're improving, every day. I moved into a new second-floor apartment. Good view, airy, bright. Not big, just enough space for me to get my work done. I like it. I'm happy. How about you?"

"I graduate next month. I was hoping you could come. I would be so happy for you to watch me get my diploma." She knew it would never happen.

"Let me check my calendar. If I don't have any appointments, I'll keep it clear." There was no reason for Oagie to ask the date, because he wouldn't show up at a public ceremony unkempt in the only clothes he owned, holes in his shoes. He wouldn't burden the light of his life, the one person who gave him hope he could once again be a contender, if not in the ring, then in life. They rounded the block and made their way back to the avenue.

She reached into her purse, pulled out a twenty and slid it into the pocket of his hoodie. "The bus will be coming soon."

"I'm so happy you came to visit. You are my sun," he said.

The bus slowed at the corner. "Here, honey. I have something for you." Oagie leaned over, pulled her present from behind a brick next to the steps and gave it to her. She smiled at the tiny potted cactus. Her apartment was full of them. It had become a desert.

The bus door opened and they embraced. She kissed his cheek. "I love you, Daddy."

"I love you too, my Little Bird."

Oagie watched the bus until it disappeared on the other side of Broad Street, tears streaming down his smiling face.

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