



The Sweet Science of Bruising

Audition Sides

PROFESSOR

Ladies and gentlemen. I am very sorry to have to tell you that I shall not be fighting tonight. *(Smiles. A little louder.)* A delicate child, I. Never felt a blow from my fretful parents, except to get the air into my lungs. I was schooled in my sickbed, an early observer of the fisticuffs below my window. How I longed to be down in the streets with them. The sweaty stuff of life right outside whilst I tried to memorize my declensions. The only sweat I shed was in fevered dreams. The only muscle I trained to bulging was my brain - *(Louder, rising to his feet.)* but I have used it since to bring my dreams to life, to put the gutter up onstage and elevate it to an art, a science: The Sweet Science of Bruising! *(Moving around now, surprisingly light on his feet.)* The theory of evolution wrenched into sweat-drenched reality, with each contender fighting to be the best. The personification of progress! And where could be more progressive than Islington? *(Beat.)* Tonight at the Angel Amphitheatre, I, Professor Charlie Sharp, bring you, ladies and gentlemen... ladies. Please welcome them, as they do battle to be named the greatest of them all - the very first, the one and only, Lady Boxing Champion of the World-



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VIOLET/EMILY/AUNT GEORGE

EMILY

I know! I could write a great speech and we'll have one of the actors deliver it. Mr. Swanley would be so moving!

VIOLET

Moving?.. Moving people to what? To clap? Cry?

EMILY

Why not? That's more than a petition ever achieved.

VIOLET

It is men that we have to move. Some scented paper and fragrant wording isn't going to cow them into giving up half their power. It's not enough simply to think and write and speak, we need to do something!

(A stunned pause, then AUNT GEORGE claps, delighted.)

AUNT GEORGE

Bravo, Violet. What exactly had you in mind?

VIOLET

Last night, I was caught in the dissection room. I pretended I was on an errand for Dr Bell, but they saw my notes and had the porters throw me out. One porter confided about another nurse like me, who is studying to be a doctor in Paris. Elisabeth Garrett Anderson- MD. Or she will be soon. Imagine..

EMILY

(startled) Imagine!



VIOLET

Imagine if that was me. If she wasn't dismissible as a one-off, but was the start of something unstoppable. A hurricane instead of a breeze. Everything is changing. Mr. Darwin's book began it, but we need to seize the initiative now. Make men take notice of us instead of monkeys - of where we're going, not where we've been. When I've been to Paris, I can stand as an example, scientific evidence of progress, a living petition to change!

AUNT GEORGE

That's quite an idea, Violet.

VIOLET

So let's make it real. If I put in all my income, I would only need a little extra funding. How much can we spare? (*Silence.*) Surely we can sacrifice a few new dresses?

EMILY

It's not that, Violet. It's just... he'll know.

VIOLET

It's your money.

EMILY

It's not now that I'm married. And besides, any extra funds I have must go towards my research trip. Yes, I know what you think of my novel, but we must each pursue our own paths to achieving change.



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MATTY/GABRIEL

MATTY

What matters are preoccupying you, sir?

GABRIEL

Lots of things.

MATTY

Such as- why you go to the theatre, when you don't even like it?

GABRIEL

I didn't know where else to go. My office is full of tedious cretins, my club is full of odious fools, my home is full of women... I work so hard, day after day, but no one gives me the respect I deserve.

MATTY

I understand that too, believe me.

(He doesn't get her joke, but her manner is disarming, and he feels able to open up a little.)

GABRIEL

I was promised a place on the Board and they passed me over for some idiot who can barely hold a pen, simply because of who his father was. As if my father was no one! As if I am. No one even noticed me leave. I walked along the river for what seemed like miles. I had half a mind to throw myself in.

MATTY

But the thought of the theatre kept you going?

GABRIEL

The thought of finding some life. but it was just the same old charade.



MATTY

I don't reckon you're ready for the Thames yet. You just need a change.

GABRIEL

What do you suggest?

MATTY

Most men would have gone for a beer. For some company. *(She touches his face. He pulls back.)*

GABRIEL

I'm not like those men. And you said you were a lady?

MATTY

I can speak nicely if I choose and I know which knife and fork to use.

GABRIEL

That doesn't make you a lady.

MATTY

It does if you marry a gentleman.

GABRIEL

I'm not marrying you!

MATTY

You might find yourself increasingly compelled to, when you realize I'm the only one who truly understands you - like a lady of leisure never could.

GABRIEL

You never had an aunt, did you?

MATTY

You never believed me, did you? Deep down you knew - I'm why you went to the Haymarket, working up the courage to approach one of us and not quite managing it. But luckily I'm braver than you and I knew - I'm what you need. *(She touches his face again. A connection between them.)*



GABRIEL

I should go.

MATTY

Where? Office, club, home? Or somewhere else, for a change? *(He doesn't move. She has him, mesmerized.)* I spend every afternoon at the matinees, every night at The Times, and every morning minding someone's brat until the matinee. Every high day and holiday, I have to see the fiancé, which is the same as work, but without the play or the pay. So you say, I am trapped in my routine just as you are trapped in yours. But perhaps we can help each other to break out a little. What do you say, sir? *(He's still mesmerized except on one small point -)*

GABRIEL

Did you mean - The Times newspaper?

MATTY

(laughs) Told you I had class. It's a shame that typesetting pays a pittance, steals my sleep and leaves me with the fingerprints - see? *(She pulls her gloves off to show him her ink-stained fingertips.)* Stained black as my heart. It's all right, you don't have to act like a gentleman. *(He looks around, and then, touches her hands.)*



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ANNA/NANCY

ANNA

Did you see them, Nancy?

NANCY

Yes, my lady.

ANNA

Have you ever seen women like that?

NANCY

Yes, my lady.

ANNA

I thought I might faint - I thought I really ought to faint - but then I stopped thinking and realized - I didn't feel like fainting at all. I felt like - like them!

NANCY

Have you seen enough, my lady? We'd better be getting back home.

ANNA

I need you to speak to that man who was in the ring. Who is he?

NANCY

(wary) The referee - and landlord. Why would I need to speak to him?

ANNA

To ask how I might get to do it. *(Beat - her sense of release at saying it aloud, and Nancy's horror.)*

NANCY

You can't - you'll get killed. I'd never tell, but the master's bound to find out.



ANNA

That's why I need to learn to fight. You think if I do nothing, he'll treat me better? Everything will be *nice*?

NANCY

No, but - together we can manage.

ANNA

You think you hear everything, Nancy? How can you hear when my face is pressed into a pillow?

(A different kind of horror. And fear.)

NANCY

We shouldn't be speaking of this.

ANNA.

I used to think that he loved me so much, he couldn't help it. That I loved him so much, I could bear it. And if I died, that would be the most romantic ending there could be. But that's not love, is it?

NANCY

I wouldn't know about that.

ANNA

You're lucky. You can work for a living and marry who you choose and be - exactly who you are.

NANCY

There's nothing romantic about my life, I promise you. And nothing romantic about you getting into that ring.

ANNA

Good. Because I've had it with romance. Those flowers are already dead when you put them in water. They don't want to be picked and arranged and left to slowly rot. They want to live. *(The light is back in her eyes.)*



NANCY

(shakes her head) That still sounds pretty romantic, the way you put it.

ANNA

Perhaps. Will you speak to the referee, Nancy, or shall I?



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MATTY

MATTY

Gentlemen, welcome! No ladies allowed. Except me - for this is my story - the tragic tale of a poor Irish girl, born into squalor and wronged by the squire. *(She poses as if acting in a burlesque tableau, a damsel succumbing to her seducer.)* A pretty penniless young mother, forced to give away her beloved baby. *(Poses, clutching a baby bundle to her heaving cleavage, then distressed, letting it go.)* But she doesn't give up. She teaches herself to read and write - and to fight! *(A triumph-over-tragedy pose, fist raised like Scarlett O'Hara, skirt raised for a flash of flesh.)* She fights her way to fame and fortune. Matilda Blackwell, the one and only Lady Boxing Champion of the World! Everybody loves her. and hates her. *(She reveals more skin beneath her shawl and skirts- she's covered in bruises. She beams.)* But she lives happily ever after - thanks in particular to her ability to separate body and mind. So she can enjoy these flights of fancy, while her clients do whatever they fancy to her. I can take it. I deserve it. *(To the baby bundle.)* Don't I, baby?... Sometimes it's better not to feel anything at all. *(She unwraps the baby bundle. Inside is a bottle of whisky. She opens it and drinks, finished.)*



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VIOLET/AUNT GEORGE

VIOLET

I thought you never wanted to watch me again. Or is it different when I win? Did you see me - *(Notices blood on AUNT GEORGE's lip.)* Are you bleeding?

AUNT GEORGE

Oh- no- it's from you, my dear. *(AUNT GEORGE dabs her mouth and then pretends to dab VIOLET's face. VIOLET bats her away.)*

VIOLET

It's fine - I can't feel it. Turns out winning is the greatest cure for anything!

AUNT GEORGE

I came because I wanted to see you, Violet.

VIOLET

Did you hear me out there? It's like Emily's idea with the actors, except that I'm real, and talking to real people, showing them real change.

AUNT GEORGE

I heard you say that you'll manage yourself. So you're making money?

VIOLET

Just a butter dish so far - *(The trophy)* but it'll get better and until then I can give up work at the surgery and manage on what you give me.

AUNT GEORGE

That's why I wanted to see you... I miss you. I want you to come back and - look after me. *(She's vulnerable. Her defenses go up as VIOLET laughs.)*

VIOLET

Is that all you think I'm good for? Trailing around to lunches and bad plays?



AUNT GEORGE

I'm sorry you feel that's all we achieved.

VIOLET

It's the fight - gives you a taste for stripping away all the niceties. The lies. I'm grateful for your support, Aunt George, but this is what I'm meant to do. This is everything we talked about, put into action.

AUNT GEORGE

We don't have to be like them, Violet.

VIOLET

Why not - don't you want equality?

AUNT GEORGE

Is this equality? For one to be the best and all the rest to get beaten? That's not my idea of a better world. Our strength is in collaboration, helping each other.

VIOLET

No one collaborates for anything other than self-interest, not in the real world.

AUNT GEORGE

I've done nothing but try to help you.

VIOLET

And I'm trying to help you see - I want women to take control of their own destinies. Like it is in the ring. Total control. Over yourself, your opponent, the crowd, even time. When that bell rings, your life is entirely in your hands.

AUNT GEORGE

I don't think you really care about anyone else's destiny. I think you're too blinded by that spotlight, too deafened by that crowd. This has to stop, Violet, or I can no longer support you.

VIOLET

What are you saying, Aunt George? That you'll cut me off?



AUNT GEORGE

If you won't give this up... You've left me no choice. (*VIOLET stares at her. AUNT GEORGE holds her stare, steely, unflinching.*)

VIOLET

I'm not in control, am I? You are- you have been, my whole life. No wonder you hate seeing me break free.

AUNT GEORGE

That's not true. If it was anything else -

VIOLET

You didn't want me to go to Paris either. Or to marry James.

AUNT GEORGE

You don't want to marry James.

VIOLET

I'd rather that than be married to you!

AUNT GEORGE

You always were a selfish little girl.

VIOLET

And you're a selfish old woman. Keep your money. I'll look after myself.



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ANNA/GABRIEL/NANCY

GABRIEL

Please, don't hide from me any more, Anna. I want to understand why you'd do something like this - when you have everything you could possibly want?

ANNA

If you really want to know. At first I went to defend myself. Then I learned to attack. And the power that came with that... The pleasure... The release. Somehow, I began to enjoy it. I had to go back and do it again - and again.

GABRIEL

So it's a kind of compulsion? Something seizes you and you cannot stop?

ANNA

You must understand that, surely? If you remember the Spring Ball - beneath the mask, I wasn't so beautiful. You made sure of that. Do you really want to understand? Or do you just not want someone else to hit me?

GABRIEL

I don't understand why a mother would want her children to grow up without her.

ANNA

That wouldn't happen. I'm careful. I'm good at it. *(A smile of pride passes across her face.)*

GABRIEL

But is it worth it? Risking everything we have?

ANNA

I didn't feel I really had anything. Not of my own.

(NANCY enters without knocking.)



NANCY

It's all ready, my lady – *(She stops as she sees GABRIEL. The mask. He takes in her reaction. Beat.)*

GABRIEL

What's ready, Nancy?

NANCY

The girls are ready for bed, fi my lady would like to see them now?

GABRIEL

My lady won't be seeing the girls, now or later, thank you, Nancy.

NANCY

Very good, sir. *(She glances at ANNA - and goes. ANNA stares at GABRIEL.)*

ANNA

You can't, Gabriel. Not that.

GABRIEL

You're not safe to be around children. Who knows what you could do?

ANNA

I can stop. I can do anything you want, but please - not that. *(She's tearful. He relents, wipes her eyes.)*

GABRIEL

You know I hate it when you cry, angel. I never want to hurt you.

ANNA

Whatever you want, I promise -

GABRIEL

Your promises are pointless. You can't help yourself, can you? *(ANNA shakes her head, defeated.)* Do you want my help?



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POLLY/PAUL

POLLY

So, do you want to do it now?

PAUL

Bit tired to be honest, Poll.

POLLY

Fair enough. You did really well.

PAUL.

Thanks.

POLLY

That right hook at the end of the first. I thought you had him.

PAUL

Me too.

POLLY

You can try again. I bet you'd win.

PAUL

We'll never know, will we? *(He gets another beer. POLLY watches, worried.)*

POLLY

Before you have any more, I've got you something to soak it up. *(She goes off. He starts the beer. She comes back with a homemade cake.)*

PAUL

What's that?



POLLY

I made it. (*Puts it down.*) Can you imagine?

PAUL

What's it for?

POLLY

To celebrate the start of our new life together. You can hang up your gloves now, do whatever you want.

PAUL

I wanted the title. I've never wanted nothing else.

POLLY

Charming! I'll have this - (*The cake*) myself then, shall I?

PAUL

Yeah you have it. You enjoy it, Poll. You're the champion after all.

POLLY

That's got nothing to do with this.

PAUL

Course it has. It's all your fault.

POLLY

Cos we did it the other night?

PAUL

Cos he laughed at me, Pol. Cos he knew. Everyone knew.

POLLY

Knew what?

PAUL

That you beat me.



POLLY

(laughs) That's just daft.

PAUL

Yeah - hilarious! Especially as you're right there all the time, yelling at me from the crowd. Telling me what to do.

POLLY

I was supporting you.

PAUL

He was pissing his sides.

POLLY

You should have got angry then. Shut him up.

PAUL

You should shut up! Telling me if I can have a beer or not. It's my home.

POLLY

It's our home.

PAUL

It's never been your home. You pushed your way in from the first and took everything ever since. My home, my family, my fight, my heart, my balls. I can hear them all - "He can never be the champion, he got beaten by a girl."

POLLY

(She can't help herself- another nervous giggle.) You're just imagining it – *(He hits her, knocking her to the floor.)*

PAUL

Don't you laugh at me, don't you dare! *(After several seconds of stillness, she picks herself up.)*

POLLY

Well you can tell them now. You beat me back. You can be champion.



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Audition Sides

POLLY/PROFESSOR

POLLY

Sorry to keep you waiting, Professor. I'm ready now, to start training again. *(She summons a hopeful smile. He's cold, hard.)*

PROFESSOR

Well, well, Polly Stokes, I thought I caught the stench of a bad penny. Or have you been back in the gutters where you belong?

POLLY

Are you jealous? I heard that you go skulking through the rookeries, on the lookout for new talent. I kept hoping you'd come by and spot me, but after a couple of weeks I'd had enough. Swallowed my pride, so here I am. *(She coughs. He looks her up and down and turns away.)*

PROFESSOR

You're well past your best. No use to me.

POLLY

I was a sickly child too, but without your medicine and featherbeds. It flares up now and again, but it's nothing a few nights sleeping indoors won't fix.

PROFESSOR

So go and sleep indoors with that 'brother' of yours. That's what you chose, after everything I did for you. *(A flash of his hurt - and hers. POLLY takes it.)*

POLLY

I'm sorry, Professor. Will you let me make it up to you?

PROFESSOR

You're too late. Everywhere has their Lady Boxing Champion except here. I've lost them all along with my punters and a substantial sum of money. I shall have to sell the Angel.



POLLY

You can't!

PROFESSOR

The science has evolved beyond me. Natural selection. I am obsolete.

POLLY

Not now I'm back.

PROFESSOR

Violet took your title and ran away with it. You're nothing to anyone, Polly. And nothing to me but an extra mouth to feed. The last thing I need!

POLLY

So what - you're just going to leave me on the street, like everyone else has? I don't know why I expected any better from you - but I did. I do. Come on – (She raises her fists as if sparring with him. Throws a punch. He backs off.)

PROFESSOR

Have you lost your mind?

POLLY

If we've lost, we've got nothing to lose. Come on, put them up! (She throws another punch. He blocks her. She moves around, making him defend himself.)

PROFESSOR

What are you trying to prove? That you can beat up an old man?

POLLY

That you are a champion - my champion - and us champions never give up. We get up and keep going, don't we? (They're properly sparring now. He has no choice, and he's good at it.) You see- we're a great match. You train me and I'll make us both a fortune, take the title back from whoever reckons they have a claim to it - And put this place back on the map. The proper home of the sweet science! *(They're both exhausted, coughing and clinging onto each other.)*

PROFESSOR

Dear Lord... look at the pair of us!