

FIGHT OR FLIGHT

by

Jerod Brennen

323.863.6398

[jerod.brennen@gmail.com](mailto:jerod.brennen@gmail.com)

FADE IN:

INT. GYM - EARLY MORNING

An AGED HAND flicks a group of switches. Fluorescent lights FLICKER to life overhead.

Duct-taped HEAVY BAGS and well-worn SPEED BAGS line either wall, hanging still and silent.

The MAN by the light switch shuffles past a series of faded, yellowing POSTERS of boxing matches decades in the record books. In one poster, TWO YOUNG BOXERS face off.

The MAN turns slightly and gazes into the ring, revealing a MUCH OLDER FACE of one of the men from the poster. The WRINKLES are new, but the WRY SMILE is the same.

This was SAMMY "STAY DOWN" ELLISON (60's), but now everyone just calls him POPS. Retired or not, Pops looks like he could still kick some ass in the ring.

Pops takes a seat on an empty bench. He pulls HAND WRAP TAPE from his DUFFEL BAG and preps his hands, then digs one hand into the bag and produces a SMARTPHONE.

A few swipes at the screen, and the opening riff from Stevie Ray Vaughan's PRIDE AND JOY blasts from the tiny speakers.

Pops sets the phone on the bench and starts working the heavy bag. It isn't long before SWEAT is POURING from his brow. The man's a machine.

The music fades to silence in the middle of the track, replaced by a RINGTONE.

Pops FURROWS his brow. He lays off the bag, glances down at the phone. The caller ID reads DANIEL.

Pops' furrowed brow gives way to an full-on FROWN as his lips purse. You'd think he just bit into a dog turd.

He lets the call go to voicemail.

Stevie Ray returns to his guitar, and Pops returns to the heavy bag, but it's no use. He's distracted now.

He glances down at the phone. A POP-UP indicates that he has a new message. Pops picks up the phone, still wearing that dog turd expression.

He swipes to the voicemail screen. Instead of listening to the message, he swipes left. The word DELETE appears on the right, white letters against a red background.

(CONTINUED)

Pops' fingers hover over the word, but he changes his mind. He puts the message on SPEAKER and clicks PLAY.

DANIEL (O.S.)

(fumbling)

Hey, Pops. It's me. Uh, Daniel. Look, uh, Cass was thinking, it's been a long time since, you know, since we saw you, since you saw Ava, and we were wondering if, I mean, if maybe you didn't have anything going on tonight... (beat) if maybe you could swing by and have dinner at our place?

The look of INCREDULITY on Pops' face is matched by the silence on the voicemail, as if Daniel is as surprised that he said those words as Pops is that he heard them.

DANIEL (O.S.)

So, uh, call me back. Thanks.

The message ends. Pops just keeps staring at the phone.

POPS

I'll be god damned...

EXT. SUBURBAN STREET - NIGHT

Pops rolls to a stop in a CONVERTIBLE that was new the last time he stepped in the ring for a professional bout. Hell, it looks like the car may have gone a few rounds itself.

Pops stares at the McMansion across the street. The FRONT PORCH LIGHTS are ON.

His fingers FLEX on the steering wheel. His expression is a far cry from the pure joy that he wore in the gym earlier.

Pops' eyes flit to the end of the street. Maybe he should throw the car into gear and roll away, ignore the message.

But since when does Sammie "Stay Down" Ellison run from a fight?

He kills the engine and climbs out of his car.

EXT. SUBURBAN HOUSE - FRONT PORCH - NIGHT

Standing on the porch, Pops eyes the doorbell, imagines himself in the ring. It would be easier for him to knock out an opponent than to ring that doorbell.

When Pops throws in the towel and turns to leave, the door opens behind him. CASS (30's) stands in the doorway, illuminated by the light from inside the house.

CASS  
I'm not letting you give up that  
easy, Pops.

Cass smiles at Pops. He can't help but smile back.

POPS  
How've you been, beautiful?

They embrace.

CASS  
Doing alright. Wasn't sure whether  
or not you were coming.

POPS  
Me neither.

Pops steps back, spies the little rugrat clinging to Cass' leg. This is AVA (3). Pops looks back to Cass, astonished.

POPS  
That can't be little Ava...

Cass nods. Pops squats down, his knees POPPING. He waves to Ava.

Ava grins up at him. She waves back, then runs into the house, squealing with delight.

CASS  
It's been too long, Pops. Get in  
here.

Cass takes Pops by the arm and they disappear inside.

INT. SUBURBAN HOUSE - FOYER - NIGHT

Pops stands in the foyer, taking in the furnishings. Daniel has certainly done well for himself, for his family.

DANIEL (30's) stands at the far end of the foyer. He looks almost exactly like the man from the boxing poster, a younger version of Pops.

(CONTINUED)

DANIEL

Hey, Pops.

POPS

Daniel.

No hug. Not even a handshake. An awkward silence settles between the two men, but Cass doesn't let it linger.

CASS

Dinner's ready, Pops, and I, for one, am starving. Less talking, more eating.

She walks toward the dining room. Her eyes flit to her husband's for an instant. Daniel offers Pops a weak smile.

DANIEL

I'll, uh, get the drinks. Beer?

Pops nods once. Daniel follows Cass into the kitchen.

Pops takes a deep breath, steeling himself. He steps toward the dining room, a fighter stepping into the ring.

INT. SUBURBAN HOUSE - DINING ROOM - NIGHT

Cass has prepped one helluva spread. Money aside, she knows how to lay out some good old-fashioned comfort food.

Cass and Daniel sip from glasses of red wine. Pops nurses a bottle of beer, while Ava nurses her sippy cup.

CASS

How are things at the gym, Pops?

POPS

Good. Real good. Membership's up. A lot of kids stop by wanting to learn that MMA bullshit-

His eyes shoot to Ava, then back to Cass. Cass just smiles.

POPS

Sorry. Anyway, they come in all cock-of-the-walk, so I have 'em step in the ring with me. We go one round, maybe two, before I put 'em on their ass... uh, rear. The ones who don't head for the door, all embarrassed at getting laid out by an old man, they stay on. We work on their attitude first. Respect. Everything else comes after.

(CONTINUED)

Cass listens with rapt attention. Daniel busies himself with his plate.

CASS

Daniel's had a pretty good run at his job, too. Haven't you, sweetheart?

DANIEL

(distracted)

What? Oh, yeah, just got promoted. Regional Manager. On the road more than I'd like, but it's really helped out here at home.

Pops nods, takes a swig of his beer.

That awkward silence threatens to return. Again, Cass refuses to let it.

CASS

And Ava here refuses to stop growing, no matter how many times I tell her to slow down.

AVA

I have to grow, Mommy. That's what kids do.

All three adults laugh, the tension immediately broken.

POPS

You in school yet, sweetheart?

Ava shakes her head. Pops doesn't notice the look that passes between Daniel and Cass.

CASS

She's a little young yet for kindergarten.

DANIEL

We want to get Ava into preschool.

POPS

Preschool? You didn't go to preschool, and you did alright for yourself.

DANIEL

Things are different now, Pops. The right preschool puts her ahead when she starts kindergarten, which

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

DANIEL (cont'd)  
helps her have an advantage as she  
gets older.

Pops leans back.

POPS  
The right preschool?

DANIEL  
There's a new preschool opening  
next month, One Step Ahead, and  
it's perfect for Ava, Pops.  
Perfect. We've got our name on the  
waiting list, but it doesn't look  
like we'll get in. (beat) We were  
hoping...

Here we go. The hook that Pops was waiting for.

POPS  
Out with it.

DANIEL  
The owner... he's a big boxing fan.  
He saw you fight back in the day.  
We got to talking about you, and...

Daniel stops, embarrassed. Pops keeps his eyes fixed on his  
son, refuses to let him off.

DANIEL  
He said that if you'd come to the  
grand opening, he'd bump Ava's name  
to the top of the list. All you'd  
have to do is smile for the camera,  
sign a few autographs... you know.

Cass looks to Pops, hopeful. Daniel can't make eye contact.

Pops looks at Ava. She's all sunshine and smiles, oblivious  
to the conversation.

Pops finishes his beer, stands.

POPS  
(to Cass)  
Thank you for a delicious meal.

Pops kisses Ava on the forehead, then leaves without another  
word. Cass and Daniel exchange a distraught look.

EXT. SUBURBAN STREET - NIGHT

Pops climbs in his car, turns the key, shifts into drive. The car moves a few feet and THUMP. Pops hits the brakes.

Daniel stands in front of Pops' car, his hands on the hood.

DANIEL

What the hell, Pops?

POPS

Don't you "what the hell" me, boy. Your the one with your damn hands on my car.

DANIEL

(sarcastic)

Afraid I'll scratch the paint?

Pops throws his car into park, climbs out. He's PISSED.

POPS

This car reminds me of where I came from. She helps me remember how goddamn hard I worked to put food on your plate, to put you through school, to help you get where you are.

DANIEL

I'm trying to provide for my daughter.

POPS

You think you're helping her by luring an old man into your house, making him think you actually wanted to spend time with him, and then guiltting him into pulling strings to get her into some fancy preschool? You're teaching her to think that the world owes her something, that someone will swoop in and fight her fights for her.

DANIEL

Fight her fights for her? Christ, Pops. She's only three years old!

POPS

You're crippling her, that's what you're doing. You're gonna turn her into-

(CONTINUED)

He cuts himself off, trying to reign in his temper. Daniel's fuming now, clenching his FISTS.

DANIEL

What, Pops? What am I going to turn her into?

POPS

You're gonna turn her into a weak, conniving piece of shit, just like her old man.

Daniel THROWS A SWING at Pops, but Pops is ready for it. He dodges, countering with a LEFT HOOK to the gut that sends Daniel to the pavement.

On his knees, Daniel clutches his gut and gasps for air. Pops stands over him, forces himself to unclench his fists.

POPS

I raised you better than that.

He climbs in his car and drives away, leaving Daniel alone and beaten in the middle of the street.

INT. GYM - NIGHT

Pops works the heavy bag without mercy, taking out his anger and frustration.

A rage builds within him as he hits the bag again and again and again, a rage that eventually climaxes with a crippling blow and an ANGRY SCREAM.

Pops sits down on the bench, head between his legs, and catches his breath. He reaches into his bag and grabs his smartphone. He opens the web browser and types in: ONE STEP AHEAD PRESCHOOL.

Pops absently browses the website, his mind somewhere else. The tiny smartphone weighs heavy in the old man's hands.

INT. SUBURBAN HOUSE - FAMILY ROOM - DAY

Daniel, talks into his smartphone, agitated. Cass watches from the doorway, a sympathetic expression on her face.

DANIEL

What if I could talk him into making a special appearance a few months down the road? (beat) Are you sure you can't- (beat) No. I understand.

(CONTINUED)

He hangs up.

CASS  
We can get her into another  
preschool, Daniel.

DANIEL  
I want her to go to this one.

CASS  
Maybe you could call Pops and  
apologize, tell him-

DANIEL  
(angry)  
Apologize?

CASS  
You hadn't talked to him in three  
years, Daniel.

DANIEL  
Did you see him make any effort to  
call me? Any effort at all? He  
couldn't put his god damned pride  
aside for five minutes, Cass. Five  
minutes! Not even to help out his  
granddaughter.

CASS  
Yeah, it can be a real bitch trying  
to talk to someone who's too proud  
to listen, can't it?

Ouch.

Daniel considers his next words, decides on action instead.  
He brushes past Cass on his way up the stairs.

CASS  
Where are you going?

DANIEL  
I'm going to give that old bastard  
exactly what he wants.

INT. GYM - DAY

A handful of BOXERS and TRAINERS are scattered throughout  
the gym, working out.

Pops stands on the edge of the ring, talking on his  
smartphone. He hangs up, then turns his attention to the  
kids sparring in the ring.

(CONTINUED)

POPS

I swear to God, if I have to tell  
you to keep your hands up one more  
time-

A DUFFEL BAG lands in the ring. The boys stop sparring to stare at the man who threw it. Pops follows their gaze.

Daniel stalks toward the ring. He glares at Pops.

POPS

What the hell are you doing here?

Daniel climbs into the ring, digs into the bag, and pulls out a roll of HAND WRAP TAPE.

DANIEL

Get in the ring, old man.

Everyone in the gym has stopped what they're doing to watch the action. Pops nods to himself, steps down, and walks to his own duffel bag.

INT. GYM - LATER

A bell RINGS.

Pops and Daniel square off against one another.

DANIEL

You're gonna call that school and  
tell them you'll do it.

Daniel takes a swing. Pops dodges easily.

POPS

Or what?

Pops swings, but Daniel's ready for it. He dodges, counters with a left hook of his own. You can't be a boxer's son without learning a thing or two.

DANIEL

Or I'll put you on your ass.

POPS

Let's see what you've got.

The two men dance around the ring, trading blows. No one mans the bell. This round doesn't end until only one boxer remains standing.

(CONTINUED)

Pops lets Daniel throw a few punches, landing one here and there, before he turns on the juice. He lands a hook to the jaw, followed by a pair of body punches, then an uppercut.

Daniel staggers into the ropes.

POPS

We done here?

Daniel lunges, throwing one haymaker after another. Pops may be the better fighter, but Daniel is a man possessed.

Pops sees an opening, takes it. He lands a blow to Daniel's ribcage, but the punch leaves him open. Daniel lands a blow to the side of Pops' head.

Pops goes to the mat. He shakes his head to clear it, gets to his feet. Daniel nurses his ribcage, panting.

POPS

You made your point. Go home.

Daniel isn't listening to anything but his own anger. He moves in, swinging, but Pops lets his fighter instincts take over. He lays into his son so hard and fast that it makes the spectators flinch.

Daniel falls to his knees. He VOMITS on the mat.

POPS

Jesus...

Daniel wipes at his mouth, leaving a SMEAR of BLOOD across glove and skin. He staggers to his feet, brings his arms up.

DANIEL

I'm not leaving until you call.

Daniel lunges at Pops, throws a weak swing. Pops wraps his arms around Daniel, brings him in close.

POPS

I called the guy fifteen minutes ago.

Daniel's expression says it all: WHAT THE HELL?

POPS

It's been a long time since we stepped into the ring together. I just wanted to see if you still had any fight in you.

Daniel smiles, then his face goes white. He turns and PUKES on the mat. Again.

Pops notices the expression of disgust on the faces of the two fighters who were sparring earlier.

POPS

What the hell are you two doing  
just standing there? Get a bucket  
and clean this shit up.

They jump to work, afraid of what might happen if Pops has to tell them twice.

Pops leads his son out of the ring. His WRY SMILE is back.

FADE TO BLACK.