

# The Greatest Cock That Ever Lived

I was fifteen, it was April and the summer had started early. My mother gave me ten pounds to run to the parade of shops at the bottom of the Oldpark Road to buy two steaks and some mince to fry into burgers for the dog's dinner. Dragging myself away from the television I threw on my trainers, laced up, pocketed the bank note and walked down to the bottom of The Bone. I passed many people, they all knew me. I said hello to them all before suddenly someone was calling my name from outside the Suicide Inn.

'Doug, Doug, Douglas Morgan!' the drunk cried swaying wildly.

I crossed over the road, the windows were boarded up. The bar was called Henry Joy's but the locals called it The Suicide Inn because of the amount of times it had been shot into by loyalist paramilitaries and the fact that you didn't *need* to be suicidal to drink in there but it certainly helped, especially if you sat by the window.

I didn't recognise the man, but his face looked like family. He was. He was my uncle Johnny, my mother's brother. He had been a prize fighter in his youth and took a few too many blows to the melon to be considered a valuable member of society anymore. Sooner or later the critical melon blow comes to us all. As I got within arm's reach he threw a huge arm around me pulling me in for a hug. He had a cockerel under his other arm, and had tied a bandana around its head.

'Doug, how are you? I haven't seen you since you were a little nipper. Where are you guys living?'

Don't tell him, he'll only get drunk and put a window in 'Around Johnny, you know. Top of the street. What's with the bird?'

'Oh this,' he said almost forgetfully 'yeah *this* is Jean-Claude the greatest cock that ever lived.'

'Is that so?'

'You bet your spunk filled beans he is. French bird, prize fighter. I've pitted him against dogs and he's licked every one of them. Where are you going?'

I checked over my shoulders, it didn't do well to have people see you talking to a crazy man with poultry under his arm. They'd all want to talk to you if they saw you'd stop to talk to a crazy man with poultry under his arm.

'Mum sent me out to buy some meat for dinner.'

'I'll sell you this cock,' he said 'how much do you got?'

'She wants steak.'

'This cock is the greatest...'

'Yeah I got that.' I said impatiently.

'Tell you what,' said Johnny 'I'll make a bet with you. You pick the dog, I'll have Jean-Claude fight it and if he wins you give me the money and I'll give you Jean-Claude.'

'And if he loses?'

'He won't.' Johnny insisted, his tone indignant.

'But if he does.'

'If he does then you can keep him and your money.'

'So one way or another you're getting rid of him, I thought you said he was the greatest...'

'I know what I said.' he snapped, waving a boulder sized fist in my face 'He eats grain faster than a priest fucks. I can't keep up with him, I know you'll give him a good home kid.'

I took the bet, but felt bad about putting him up against a dog. Most of the dogs in the neighbourhood were mean old junkyard dogs, the kind of beasts that would rip Jean-Claude's head off and use it as a chew toy. The only dog I thought he could beat was my dog Bosco – but there was always the slim chance that Johnny was telling the truth and I didn't want my sad old mongrel getting hurt.

I pointed to a hobo, a grumpy old bastard of a man with veins sprinting from both of his cheeks, crusty eyes and a big red nose. The kids called him Wilf Tomato Bollocks and when they yelled it at him he yelled back *banana dick!*

'What about Wilf?!' I said.

'What about him?' replied Johnny.

'Could Jean-Claude beat Wilf?'

'Of course he fucking could.'

It took a little convincing but eventually Wilf agreed to duke it out with Jean-Claude the French prize-fighting chicken for the princely purse of two three-litre bottles of White Lightning...if he won. Strolling off behind the wasteland by the Suicide Inn I pitched up on a pallet and lit a cigarette as Johnny placed Jean-Claude three strides from Wilf Tomato Bollocks, explained the rules, and stepped back and called...

'Ding, ding, round one!'

Wilf went to raise his dukes but even then it was too late. Leaping six feet into the air Jean-Claude battered the old drunk with a barrage of rights and lefts sending him reeling backwards. Landing on his spring-like heels the bird advanced before leaping to meet him again only this time with an uppercut that switched Wilf's lights out and had Johnny dancing around gleefully like Don King with a big white hard-on.

'Didn't I tell you Douglas! Didn't I just! He's a god-damn wrecking machine!' sang Johnny, holding the cock aloft.

Walking home I tried to figure out exactly how I was going to break it to the old lady that I had bought a boxing chicken instead of the red meat she was expecting. Sneaking in through the front door I soft footed it to the bottom of the stairs, climbed them on my tip-toes placed Jean-Claude on my bed, grabbed some money from my tin and returned to the shop taking the financial burden of provider for the Morgan family on to my own shoulders.

The next day I put the dog's leash on Jean-Claude and walked him down to the boxing club in the New Lodge. The sound of heavy blows landing on heavy bags boomed out and echoed down the stairs as we climbed the single flight to the gym. The stink of sweat and iron coated every breath of oxygen I sucked in. Inside the gym was cool, Tommy (the owner) kept it cold to keep his fighters *lean and mean* and it worked. The shack had birthed three All Ireland champions in the amateur ranks in recent years. Turning on the spot the flat nosed old man heard me coming.

'Who are you?' he barked.

'I'm Doug, I phoned you this morning about coming down and trying out.'

'Didn't talk to no Doug this morning, talked to a Jean-Claude.'

'No,' I explained sighing 'you talked to me. I was phoning on behalf of Jean-Claude.'

'So where's this Jean-Claude?' Tommy asked.

'He's right here.' pointing to the cockerel on the end of a dog lead.

He laughed, and then stopped seeing the funny side 'Stop wasting my fucking time kid, this is a workhouse not a joke factory.'

'Do jokes come from factories?'

'Don't get short with me.'

'Look, I'll make you a deal. You let Jean-Claude fight one of your boys here and if he wins we organise a bout. A ticketed bout, I get three quarters of the door and if I lose I'll work as kit boy, cleaner, whatever the fuck you need until I turn eighteen.'

'What age are you now?' he asked, his interest spiking.

'Fifteen.'

'Kid,' he laughed 'you're crazier than a shithouse rat in an Indian restaurant *but* you've got yourself a deal. Vinny! Lace up, you and the KFC are going three rounds.'

The entire gym burst into fits, half of them laughing at me; the idiot boy who had just signed away three years of his life being Tommy Buchanan's bottom bitch, half at Vinny who was about to be reduced to fighting a Christmas dinner in some Victorian vaudeville showcase.

Climbing into the ring Vinny's face flashed lightning, he was fixing on killing Jean-Claude; I could tell. I placed the cockerel in the blue corner, Tommy rang the bell, the fight was on. Vinny exploded out of his corner and suddenly realising he'd have to stoop to go toe-to-toe with the bird, froze for a moment; It was all Jean-Claude needed. He leapt to eye level with the shaven-headed fighter and socked him with a clever one-two. He threw lefts, and then rights, he worked the body, and then the head, he faked left and went right, he faked the head and went for the body. As Tommy rang the bell for the end of the round Vinny flopped into his corner, one of the other fighters racing to his side to give him water. Jean-Claude barely looked flustered. The second round was more of the same before Vinny went down in the third and stayed down.

Calling the fight Tommy approached me, wonder in his eyes, a smile like a teenage boy in a brothel. He slapped a powerful hand on my shoulder damn near breaking my back and laughed. The fighters of his club were less enamoured and watched on angrily, I felt a lynching wasn't far away.

'God-damn it, Doug is it?' he roared.

'Yeah.'

'I seen it and I *still* don't believe it. Wait until the world gets a hold of us!'

'Us?'

'Meet Jean-Claude's trainer.' he beamed extending his hand.

The fight was scheduled for a Friday night; all fights worth a damn are scheduled for Friday night. Friday nights are magical, it's the weekend but you still have the rage that comes from selling five more slivers of your soul to the man for minimum wage; so you're ready for a fight. St. Kevin's Hall was packed, four hundred people, £5 a head, I took seventy-five percent of the gate. Good earnings. The posters billed:

EUROPEAN MIDDLEWEIGHT CHAMPION &  
FUTURE WORLD CHAMPION

Kevin 'The Tiger' Taggart

Vs.

Jean-Claude Morgan (He's a chicken)

When we entered the hall the house went silent. Not many people had taken the poster seriously and outrage was building faster than waves in Hawaii. Tommy went first, he held the ropes open and I climbed through, then Jean-Claude climbed through and we took our position. And we waited. Five minutes went by, I got the eyes from a tall man in a bomber jacket. The eyes that say *so and so needs a word*. I climbed from the ring and went with him. In the corridor he closed the door gently before leaning in with menace. He was an IRA man.

'The bird needs to take a fall tonight, we'll pay you two hundred.'

'He won't go for that.' I said 'He's not that kind of fighter.'

'Look kid, you've had your fun. The cock goes *down*. Kevin here is in line for a title fight, do you know what losing to a bird is going to do to his ranking?'

I pondered the politics of pugilism and suddenly the sport made me a little more cynical about the world.

'If he's as good as the rankings say,' I replied 'he won't have a problem.'

'Take the deal, nobody wants to be licking their fingers in a few hours' time but if we have to...'

When I returned to the ring Tommy could tell by my face what the conversation was about and his face dropped, filled with disillusion and was fit to burst until I told him there was no deal. If Jean-Claude lost he'd lose honest. That made him shine.

The music hit, *dun dun dun you're simply the best, dun, dun, dun, better than all the rest*. Kevin 'The Tiger' Taggart entered in a tiger skin gown, one of his entourage parading the European title behind him, the crowd cheered for the first time that entire night. Stepping into the ring Kevin shadow boxed his way from corner to corner sending the beer soaked working class folk of North Belfast batshit crazy. Taking off his gown he was tight, ripped, not an ounce that didn't need to be there. The referee explained the rules, asked for a *good clean fight*, a moment of realisation hit him when he looked from Kevin to the opposing side and saw a cockerel in a bandana and he almost laughed. The fighters retreated to their corners, the bell went and they came out.

Kevin danced a bit, entertained the crowd did his chicken walk. It insulted Jean-Claude but he didn't move in, not yet, he watched The Tiger's footwork, how he moved, how he balanced his weight. Then he struck. He bounded into the air and came in heavy catching the Middleweight Champ with a right hook. It must have stung worse than dipping your mushroom in vinegar because he dropped his guard and shook his head. Jean-Claude overdid his walk mocking Kevin and a few people laughed, though most booed. Kevin brought his guard up, came in light-footed, ducking in and out throwing rabbit punches and jabs, the occasional hook. A one-two combination caught Jean-Claude right on the beak but he was unfazed. He came in heavy double-tapping Kevin on the chin, working the body, a couple of rabbit shots to the kidneys that the ref warned him about but otherwise was opening up his opponent nicely.

In the second round Taggart was bullish, he tried keeping Jean-Claude at arm's reach, tapping him here and there on the beak, scoring points and whipping the crowd into a frenzy. If it went to points we were done for, nobody beats a dog in his own back yard through judges. I poured water into Jean-Claude's mouth. Tommy massaged his wings.

'You need to get inside J.C, he keeps you at length and he'll pick you off all day long.'

Jean-Claude clucked in agreement.

'Get out there and make it count.' Tommy added, sending our boy out to battle.

Top of the third and Jean-Claude ducked inside a hook finding an open body. He jabbed left and right until Kevin brought his guard down to protect himself, Jean-Claude came up strong with an uppercut followed by a powerhouse of a left hook and put Kevin to the ground. The ref counted, confident at first then reluctant as he got to *8, 9... 10 you're out!*

The bell rang. Kevin was cold. The crowd was hot. They screamed, they threw beer bottles into the ring, they tossed chairs. They yelled:

*This is an abomination!*

*Disgusting!*

*What is this freak show?!*

*This is not right!*

*Boxing for humans!*

We raced to Tommy's car leaving our stuff in the dressing room, leaving my take behind.

In the morning I went to the shop and bought the Belfast Telegraph. The front page carried a photograph of the fight with the headline:

#### CHAMP IN FOWL FORM!

When I got home Mum was holding the phone towards me, her hand over the speaker and she was mouthing something I couldn't figure out. Taking the phone I dragged it into the kitchen, closing the door.

'Hello, who's this?' I asked.

'Are you Douglas Morgan?' the voice countered.

'Yeah, who wants to know?'

'The same Douglas Morgan who manages Jean-Claude Morgan the boxing cockerel? The boxing cockerel that just floored Kevin 'The Tiger' Taggart?'

'That's me. So that's two questions of yours I've answered, how about you answer one of mine?'

'Sure.'

'Who the fuck is this?'

'It's Frank D. Schuman, the boxing promoter, you must have heard of me.'

'Yeah, I've heard of you. How can I help you Frank D. Schuman the boxing promoter?'

'Jean-Claude is making waves kid, he's in line for a title fight but I want to put him in the ring with one of my guys before I push to have it made. I don't want to be made a fool, I want to see him fight with my own two eyes.'

Three eggs hit the kitchen window sending a bang through the house and waking Bosco from his slumber. Outside I could see a crowd emerging, they were shouting *K-K-KFC!*

'Ok,' I conceded 'but it *needs* to be outside of Belfast. People are pissed, they're not very tolerant and I don't want anything happening to my old lady's home.'

'We'll do it in London.'

And we did. And Jean-Claude won by a TKO. Frank D. Schuman held a press conference after the fight. Some of the journalists called it a publicity stunt, some called it a fix, some went as far as to call in the RSPCA who checked Jean-Claude over and said he was perfectly fine and had one hell of a right on him. Most of all people just didn't like the idea.

'But what if their bloods mix,' I heard a woman shrill in a café 'fighters bleed all the time, what happens if they both get cut? What happens if that bird's blood...oh!' she said with a shudder 'It just *doesn't* bear thinking about.'

Quickly signs started going all over the place, in every restaurant, in every café and bar and club:

WE SERVE POULTRY  
WE DON'T *SERVE* POULTRY

As it started to get to Jean-Claude I could see the intolerance and fear build every time we stepped outside. Schuman phoned, we were boarding at the Ritz. He had arranged a fight in Las Vegas. Jean-Claude Morgan was going to get his shot against the Middleweight Champion of the World Titus Ali.

'I'm still working on the governing bodies agreeing to it being a title fight but don't worry it's bank baby, we'll have it.'

When we got the news Tommy flew out to join us. His gym had been burned down by a band of masked men dressed like Colonel Sanders and the death threats to his house had become so bad he had to move. He trained Jean-Claude hard, six hours a day, six days a week cutting down to two hours in the weeks leading into the fight.

The curtain was pulled back. It was weigh-in day and the world's press had come to Caesar's Palace to get an eye of Titus Ali and Jean-Claude Morgan. After the weigh-in, the banter, the clucking and the flash photography there was a statement from the boxing board that as Jean-Claude could not make the weight required to compete in the Middleweight division they could not sanction a title bout. They were pulling the bout from the card.

'He's just a bird.' was the last line in their official statement.

The plane touched down at Belfast International, only Mum was there to greet us. The controversy over Jean-Claude had passed, the small minds had moved on to something else, it might have been flags. I unpacked and climbed into bed, my lids stung, my eyes felt like lead and as sure as anything jet lag took over. When I woke it was morning again and Jean-Claude was gone.

## Author Biography

Belfast native David Loudon is the author of the roman á clef neo-beat novels *Lost Angeles* and *Bone Idol [bohn ahyd-I]* chronicling the life of his alter-ego Doug Morgan. His major influences in literature have been cited as Charles Bukowski, John Fante, William S. Burroughs and Brendan Behan. Reoccurring themes in his work include alcohol & drug abuse, death, sex and catholicism.

At present Loudon is developing a Noir project for television set in Belfast which he hopes will go into pre-production within the year.

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