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Suzanne D. Mcwhorter
Cleveland State University

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RING RUST

SUZANNE D. MCWHORTER

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Cleveland State University

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submitted in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree

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We hereby approve this thesis

For

SUZANNE D MCWHORTER

Candidate for the Master of Arts Degree in English

For the department of

ENGLISH

And

CLEVELAND STATE UNIVERSITY'S

College of Graduate Studies

Thesis Chairperson, Imad Rahman

Department and date

Rachel Carnell

Department and date

Michael Geither

Department and date

Student's date of defense
April 15, 2015

RING RUST

SUZANNE D. MCWHORTER

ABSTRACT

The world of professional wrestling, or in the case of *Ring Rust*, semi-professional wrestling, houses its own culture, and its own sense of family and identity. The two chapters presented here are part of the larger work set in this world and told from four perspectives: Brooks “Jack Raptor” Murphy, star of the Rustbelt Wrestling Alliance; Vivian Murphy, his estranged sister; Gunnar “The Swedish Storm” Olsen, whose career is intertwined with Jack’s; and Maxine Hunter, local wrestling blogger.

Though only Brooks and Vivian are represented in this excerpt, the lives of all four of these characters intertwine. The relationship between the siblings affects the choices Jack Raptor makes in the ring, changing the course of Gunnar’s career, and causes Max to reexamine the relationship she has with Jack—a man she never even calls by his real name. The violence, spectacle, and voyeurism seep into each one’s mind as they question their identity and their place in, out, and around the ring.

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CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

This project started life as a single short story without much focus beyond the desire to write something set in the world of professional wrestling. It is the love of that world—the spectacle combined with athleticism—that drove *Ring Rust* from that initial story to the novel-in-progress that it's become. Because wrestling is an entertainment outlet that is fueled primarily by visual and auditory stimulation, putting it on the page and relying on words to invoke those sense was initially an obstacle. That obstacle turned into the most compelling motivator once I realized that there could be a beauty to the underside of this world that could only be realized through words and imagination. The early impulse was to move this story toward the bigger, more grandiose stage of the sport by involving modern popular examples of the industry (Vince McMahon's WWE, for one), and allowing these characters to move quickly into that dream world that ninety percent of wrestler's will never inhabit. It became clear,

however, before the first incarnation of the story was ever finished that the dream world is not where the heart of the story lived.

One of the things that always been the most intriguing about wrestlers is how, over time, their persona becomes inseparable from who they are. In film and television, actors step away from their roles when the cameras stop. But for most fans, Hulk Hogan is the same person in the ring or in the grocery store. When this project became more than one story, the idea of struggling with identity and deciding which world to live in started to weave into the narrative. Tied to the issues of identity are the consequences of the choices these characters make during that struggle, and in turn how that affects the lives of those around them, and the cycle that ensues.

I am fortunate to have a family friend who spent time in small, local wrestling organization, through which passed many performers whose names are familiar to fans of the sport. We had an informal interview about his time with Elyria-based Mega Championship Wrestling, and his insight and stories about everything from in-ring communication, locker room antics, or the level of comradery helped to shape the world that Jack Raptor inhabits. The idea to tell this story started growing from the experience of going to those shows when I was younger and fascinated by the life that existed both between the ropes and behind the curtain. My friend ultimately made that choice that Jack Raptor, and many others who will pass through the pages of this story, was unable to make: he chose to walk away from the ring persona and the crowds chanting his name.

Additionally, there is a sense of community that exists around the world of professional wrestling which I've never experienced with any other sport or pop-culture phenomenon. To watch an event such as the Superbowl, in my experience, often produces a sense of tension between supporters of rival teams. There is often combativeness in the competitive spirit that creates an us-versus-them mentality. I had the pleasure of attending Wrestlemania weekend in New Orleans in 2014, and the closest thing I could compare it to was a 60,000 person family reunion. Regardless of who you cheered for, you delighted in the comradery of the stranger next to you. That's part of what makes this world such an interesting subject, with limitless directions to explore, and I think there is room to explore that on the smaller scale as the narrative progresses.

While there are a number of novels in existence that revolve around the world of professional boxing, there is a void that can certainly be filled by professional wrestling. There are countless autobiographies, many of which have been a wealth of information about things like backstage politics, but a search for fiction, particularly what we'd be willing to consider "literary fiction," turns up few choices. Underground fighting and mixed martial arts also get a share of attention in fiction, but it is surprising that wrestling hasn't had more exposure in literature because the drama that is inherent in its existence begs to be explored.

The themes that are present in the industry— ideas of good versus evil, private versus public self, body image, sexuality and gender, health and well-being—all deserve to be explored in depth, and done so by someone who can be both respectful and

critical of the business and performance aspects. While this has been done to an extent via non-fiction and criticism of the industry, fiction is an important vehicle for this examination for many reasons. First, it allows for a presentation that can be separated from what is already the familiar. It allows for multiple perspectives and what-if situations that are missing from many of the familiar true stories that have been shared for decades. Fictionalizing this world also makes it accessible to readers who may not intentionally seek out wrestling-related material. Identity, familial conflict, and job security are issues that are not unique to the wrestling world, but seeing them presented in that light opens up a new outlook.

Prior to working on *Ring Rust*, much of my literary interest, both in reading and writing, leaned closer to fantasy than realist fiction. When asked about a favorite author, there is no hesitation to say the names Gaiman and King. But the wrestling world held a story that I needed to tell, and through that process thus far and continuing into the future, I have discovered a new appreciation of realism and the grittiness that exists in everyday life. Reading story collections such as Bonnie Jo Campbell's *American Salvage* and Dan Chaon's *Stay Awake* offer examples of capturing situations that may be bleak or dark-natured while injecting a sort of vibrant life into the story.

That's not to say that there isn't a great deal to be learned from writing set in a different kind of reality, which can be applied to realist fiction. Some of the better novels of this kind I've read have utilized sense of place and atmosphere to shape the story. People are often a product of their environment, whether by conformation to that environment or by the desire to rise above it. In either sense, a character is molded

by the world around them, and the way in which they see that world. This is one of the tools I want to use to greater extent as *Ring Rust* continues to evolve. Because the concept of identity is one that has become central to what this novel is about, the world we're in must be vivid and real, not only for Jack Raptor and company, but also for the reader, regardless of their level of familiarity with the world of (semi)professional wrestling. One doesn't need to know how to execute a suplex to identify with the pain that would be felt from it being done incorrectly hours afterward.

This is where a history with fantasy worlds can be useful, in that the story often lies somewhere deeper the basic situation, and whether or not there are aliens or zombies. Those situations can be used as a vehicle to get to the heart. In King's *The Stand*, which I've long considered to be my favorite novel, the situation of post-apocalyptic battle between God and the Devil is a means to lead us to inherent character of man. King has taken a skeleton of good versus evil, God versus the Devil, and pumped through it the blood humanity. While the "evil" has been defeated, we are left with a species capable of creating the means to destroy themselves.

My goal is to capture that sort of otherworldly atmosphere for a world that is as realistic as exists. There is a darkness to realm these characters inhabit that lends itself to playing on their fears and inner demons, and as this work evolves, that is something that needs to be utilized. Ultimately, there may not be any demons, vampires, or ghosts in this world, but I want to create a world where a character can walk down an alley, around a corner, or look up into a window, and even if only for a moment, not be so sure that those creatures don't exist.

The decision to turn this into a full-fledged novel, as opposed to a novel-in-stories, was a difficult one. The use of smaller individual stories seemed like an easier project to tackle, with the narrow focus of one individual at a time. However, the interconnectedness of this world and the way that each person's life is irrevocably changed by the decisions of others begged for their lives to be pulled together in one cohesive piece. Though the finished product will be on a larger scale than I initially intended, it is still only a small representation of the wrestling world, a world that has been omnipresent throughout my life. I can only hope that the finished product is one that looks at this sport, this art, and its performance with critical reverence, and using that to speak to something larger.

II

Ring Rust

When Brooks hit the brakes on the deserted street, a two-day-old French fry slid off the passenger seat and landed on the Rustbelt Wrestling Alliance poster advertising Jack Raptor versus Alec “Steelyard” Arlington in a hardcore match in the main event. Despite the assorted pain pills he’d been given after the match, he still felt every shot Alec had given his alter ego with a chair, along with ring steps, the guardrail, and everything else they could get their hands on. And the crowd sucked up every second. They’d fought for a packed house, as packed as a meeting hall can get, and enjoyed the take from ticket sales finally coming outside their normal area of operation as the RWA received more widespread recognition. Jack Raptor had flown high that night, but the farther north into the heart of Ohio he drove, the more Jack disappeared from Brooks’ mind. There were a hundred other ways to get from Zanesville to the Michigan/Ohio border without passing through his hometown, and he’d considered each one of them

as OH-586 turned into 13, and eventually the open road became the familiar grid of streets from his youth.

Brooks pulled down a beat-up memo pad from the visor, flipped it open and studied the address written on the front page. He glanced from the note to the building outside the passenger window and back again. The hand-written numbers on the window of the door matched the ones he'd had to argue to get, though he checked again, hoping he was wrong. He hadn't seen his sister in nearly a year; hadn't spoken to her in six months. Vivian had only agreed to give him the address in case of emergency though she was quick to add that she couldn't imagine what kind of emergency that might be.

The branch of tree smacked against the side of the crumbling brick structure, its leaves more suited to the death of winter than the current early March sun that tried to shine. Brooks shifted the car back into drive, determined to leave, and then back into park as he cut off the engine. There was no lock on the main door, or security of any kind, and Brooks cringed at the idea being exposed in this neighborhood. Once inside, that tension did not ease. The hallway of the building was nothing he wanted to imagine his only family living in. The burnt out lights, sticky floors, and walls alive with the stains of a thousand sad stories all created a decrepit showcase.

Brooks knocked on door six for several minutes before the occupant of door five intervened. "Hey man, you lookin' for Viv?"

Brooks studied the man who sounded too familiar with his sister: with his bloodshot eyes, torn clothes, and gaunt body, this guy was the breathing stereotype of everything Brooks had worried about Vivian finding, “Yeah. You know where I can find her?”

“Probably down on Rowe at Josh’s. If you see her, tell her to hit me up later.” Apartment five disappeared behind his door before Brooks responded. He shoved his black hair – longer than it had ever been – off his forehead and made his way back to the old car waiting for him out front.

It was a five minute drive to Rowe Avenue, and though Brooks didn’t know who Josh was, the house was easy enough to find; Vivian was draped across the front porch rail, staring down at the unkempt flowerbed below. He couldn’t see her clearly from across the street where he stopped, but he knew it was her. He got out of the car and started across the street. Not sure if his visit would be welcome or wanted, he kept his approach slow and as calm as he could. Brooks made it all the way on to the porch before anyone noticed his presence. A board in the structure creaked under his foot and Vivian turned around lethargically and stared at him.

“Hello, sis.”

Vivian blinked makeup-less eyes at him with no response. A strand of her hair – still as black as his but now short, stringy, and uneven – caught in her lashes in the process remained unmoved.

“Viv? You okay?” He took a cautious step toward her.

“What are you doing here, Brooks?” Her body was still motionless, but her eyes darted to the front door and back again.

Brooks stopped to process her question. He had become so unaccustomed to hearing himself called by his given name, that for a moment he had to remind himself of who he was, who he would always be here. “I was driving up through town and though I’d stop and see you. You didn’t answer my question, Vivian.” Brooks took another step toward her but this time she retreated in kind. “Vivian, talk to me.”

Before she gave any response, the screen door squeaked open and Brooks met a pale and scarred face, “You’re on my porch.”

There was a hostility in the other man’s voice that was unmistakable. Brooks didn’t know what sort of situation he’d walked into, so he tried to ignore it and remain civil. “Sorry, man. Just wanted to visit my sister. Her neighbor said I could find her here, so I stopped by. No disrespect intended.”

“I don’t like surprise visitors. Leave.” With his last word, the man, who Brooks assumed to be Josh stepped in front of Vivian with a posture that looked more possessive than protective.

“Like I said, I’m sorry. Now just let me talk to Vivian for a minute. I’ll leave your porch, we can just walk over to my car.”

“Vivian doesn’t want to go with you.” Josh moved close enough that Brooks could taste his breath, “Now go.”

Brooks didn't know who he was up against. Josh was shorter than him by a few inches and lighter by at least thirty pounds, but Brooks was smart enough to know that he—and most likely his sister—was on something; he just didn't know what. And that made Josh unpredictable. Brooks was used to his fights being scripted. In the ring, there was a necessary degree of trust to go along with training that made a wrestling match work. Not that he couldn't handle himself as the occasional bar brawl was not uncommon. But opponents whose motives and tactics are unknown, that was out of Brooks' realm. He thought about making one last verbal plea, but was stopped short by Josh's hand shoving him back a step. When Josh took a swing, it was slow and off target, and Brooks ducked it easily. He took that opportunity to put Josh behind him and reach for Vivian's hand. He was so focused on getting her out of there that he didn't notice the garden trowel she put in his side until she'd already released the handle and it clanged against the wood floor.

Everyone stopped at the sight of the bright red spreading across the pale blue t-shirt. Brooks was grateful in that moment that Vivian was not stronger than she looked, and she didn't get the trowel deep enough to puncture anything important. He searched her face for signs of remorse, but her brows drew together, eyes black and narrowed, and top lip curled into a sneer. He had never seen his sister so savage, and he couldn't stand to look at her anymore.

After a few seconds, the initial shock wore off and Brooks' attention snapped to the blood dripping down his torso beneath his clothes, and the pain that went with it. He put his hand over the wound and turned his back on Vivian and the shocked-looking

Josh. He got in the car, and because he assumed that cops still made frequent rounds in this neighborhood, he fought the urge to peel out and floor the gas pedal.

Brooks stayed off the highway and made it ten miles out of town before he stopped to address his bleeding situation. He pulled into the almost-empty parking lot of a convenience store and reached in his bag for a shirt that passed for clean. The only person inside was the clerk, but Brooks kept his eye on the door for more visitors; he didn't feel like answering any questioning looks. He bought a first aid kit, some sewing needles, fishing line, rubbing alcohol, and a gallon of purified water. Having chosen a career that doesn't provide substantial income or health insurance, this wasn't the first time he'd stitched himself up after a fight. But each pull of the needle this time around stung a little more than usual. With the bleeding stopped and the county line behind him, he headed north toward home, with no intention of going to Michigan.

§

Brooks squinted in the dim light of the dusty old gym that most of the RWA performers called home. Although he hadn't set foot inside a ring or the gym in over a month, he knew there was a show booked for that night in western Pennsylvania, which meant he could get back to his routine in relative peace. He flipped only the light switch that activated the center lighting column and examined the practice ring under the glow.

Without an apron around it, the gym ring, already shorter, harsher than the one used for shows, glowered like an aged sentry in the middle of a shadowed army. Brooks

slid under the bottom rope and jumped to his feet. The layers of padding and plywood under the canvas, worn from use and in need of replacement, bounced under his landing with a snap that seeped into the cinderblock walls. He ran from one side of the ring to the other, bouncing off each set of ropes a dozen times, and stopped in the middle of the ring. The muscles in his legs, unstretched and unwarmed, already ached. The half-healed scar on his side itched. Knees shook in protest.

Brooks eyed the top turnbuckle across the ring and wondered if he was ready to fly. He climbed to the top and stood staring at the mat while he debated his next move. It had only been a month since but he knew there were certain moves a body doesn't forgive not matter how in shape and trained. He could drop a flying elbow in his sleep, but his Swan Song was another story. He rubbed his hand into the muscles of his left shoulder, where the head of the silhouetted peregrine falcon that spanned his back bobbed with each movement under the fabric of his shirt.

There was an old tree stump in the yard of the house he and Vivian had grown up in. Three feet tall, all that remained of a giant elm that had to be cut down a few months after they'd moved in. It became the center of his world. The kid that used that old wood as his top rope would never hesitate to jump. Brooks thought he might still have pieces of bark embedded in his shins and forearms from the backyard matches he had with his friends whenever weather permitted. At thirteen years old, he executed his first moonsault in that yard, and once Matty Anderson finished helping him pop his shoulder back into place, they celebrated like he'd just become world champion.

Brooks rubbed his hand into the muscles in his shoulder and tested the bounce in the ropes and his legs. His shadow stretched across the center of the ring, prone and waiting for the Raptor to strike. Before he could launch himself, a slow and deliberate applause sounded from a darkened corner.

“Well. Funny seeing you here, Murphy.” Bill Summers emerged from his concealed corner and into Brooks’ view. “Thought your wings might’ve been clipped for good.”

Brooks stayed perched on the top rope and said nothing. He’d never called RWA’s promoter to say he’d be taking some time off. Never left a letter or an email. He just went home. There were no windows in the old gym but the sound of new rain pinged against the roof, a shaky metronome for the pulse he could feel in his temples.

“You still have your gym key, I guess. You gonna come down?”

The local blogs and dirt sheets had all covered the mysterious disappearance of Jack Raptor. Brooks tried not to read them, but no performer could ever completely resist. The reports of Bill’s reaction ranged from quiet simmering anger to full blown violent screaming outburst in the locker room.

“Jack?”

The sound of his ring name relaxed Brooks enough to climb down and out of the ring to the floor. “You’re not in PA.”

“How’s that leg? You were favoring it a bit back in Zanesville.”

“Better. Bit stiff.”

“See Keven when the guys get back in town. You’re a little shaky, but I guess that’s expected.”

“I’ll be back in shape.”

“How much time do you need?”

“Not sure. Not too much, I think.”

“Can you be ready for Mansfield?”

Brooks paused knowing there was no good answer for that question. “Yeah. Sure. Next month, right?”

“Right. Lock up when you’re done.”

Without a partner in the ring, there wasn’t much left for him to do other than a little cardio and strength training. He didn’t know how the guys would feel about him coming back, either, but that was something to worry about when it happened. Brooks ran the ropes a few more times, each bounce back stinging more the previous one, and decided to call it a day. He gathered up his things, including an orange bottle by his back that wasn’t there when he came in, and headed out into the drizzling rain.

On days like this when they were kids, Brooks and Vivian would spend hours hiding in the attic, dreaming up the crazy and fantastical lives they’d lead when they grew up. There was a formula to that town, the children who were products of it sometimes nothing more than walking stereotypes; alcoholic father, mother who tried

the best she could but failed anyway and eventually gave up, the lack of direction and little evidence of any way out. Brooks found wrestling when he was young and Vivian followed along with nothing better to do. It was his escape. Even as a child, imitating “Macho Man” Randy Savage as he stood at the foot of his bed, careful not to slip on his battered Batman bedspread, he would stare down at an imagined opponent that represented everything he didn’t want to become. Vivian would play along, standing in the corner to cheer him on, occasionally jumping in the “ring” to be the referee for a moment and count to three so they could celebrate another victory.

One year for Halloween, when he was twelve and she was seven, they made up their own tag team, the Marvelous Murphys, and pieced together their costumes from the old clothes lying around the basement in garbage bags. There was a gaudy orange and yellow sequined dress in one bag, and they cut it in half, both of them getting a piece to sew to the back of a button down shirt for a robe that would have made Ric Flair proud. Dad found what got left behind and it was the last year they went trick-or-treating.

Brooks ducked into a corner gas station convenience store when the rain intensified. The girl behind the counter watched him as he wandered the small store. She didn’t have the look of suspicion on her face as she followed his moves. It was more like familiarity. The smell of precooked hotdogs and boxes of frozen pizza reminded him he hadn’t eaten, and though it wasn’t the best food for keeping a body in shape, it was better than the two eggs and bottle of hot sauce in his refrigerator. He picked up a giant frozen burrito from one display and looked at the back. The ingredients list blurred

together in a puddle of black-on-red and Brooks wondered whether it was being thirty or getting hit with one too many chairs that was making him old.

The girl at the counter, Charley according to the cracked name tag, continued to stare when he reached the counter. He smiled to try to ease the tension and her eyes widened in return. When he looked down toward the counter and pushed his food and bottle of water closer to her, he noticed the tattoo on her wrist—three ring ropes with turnbuckle pads—and he sighed. He pushed the items forward and put a five on the counter. He knew her type.

Though Brooks never went without sex when he wanted it, he was one of the few who refused the offers of the girls who threw themselves at any wrestler who looked at them. He'd made the mistake after his first match with RWA. He was still young then, and his adrenaline had him vibrating inside his own skin when the show was over. The flimsy Four Horsemen shirt that she'd ripped to shreds in strategic places hugged the curve of her breasts and flaunted a blue ring bell tattoo on her collarbone. He only lasted three minutes once they got inside her apartment, but the girl didn't care. For six months straight, she followed him to every show they put on, sometimes driving a hundred miles each way. She fucked him, and every other performer in other local promotions she could seduce, until the wife of some guy from Pittsburgh found her and slit her throat in the locker room.

Charley finally rang his transaction and he hurried out of the store, no longer concerned about walking in the rain. Fucking ringrats.

There was a cane and a handmade sign that read “Caution: Disabled Occupant” leaning against locker number 37, and Brooks pressed his head against the cool metal, relieved. He shoved his bag inside, grabbed a bottle of water, and went out into the gym. He hit the ring without fanfare and locked up with Gunnar and prepared to take his first real bump in months. Mansfield was a week out and Bill was going to take it easy on him. Some local kid hoping for a tryout would job to Jack Raptor, making his triumphant return.

After a few minutes of chain wrestling, in which Brooks realized his timing was a beat off, Gunnar caught him with a fallaway slam and let him catch his breath on the mat. “We missed you around here, Raptor.”

“I’m guessing probably not that much. Who’d you fight in Michigan?”

“Alec. Crowd wasn’t into it, but it was clean.”

“We’ll finish what we started soon enough. Get my timing back and we’ll steal the show.”

“That’s a nasty new scar you’ve got going there.” Gunnar looked down at Brooks’ side with narrowed eyes.

“It’s not so bad. Who’s this kid I’m facing? You know him?”

“Nah, not really. Guess Bill saw him work some local show, backyard kind of shit, and thought he might have something. I don’t know though.”

“There’s a place for backyard guys around here.”

“But some of ‘em are all crazy, no heart, Jack. Some of ‘em lose their nerve.”

Gunnar helped Brooks off the mat and they slid out of the ring for the next two guys to take it over.

Jack Raptor was born from the grass and dirt around that old elm stump. Once Brooks started high school and found a group of guys who shared his love of wrestling, both the sport and spectacle aspects of it, they started their own show. Garage sales and libraries provided old VHS tapes of events, both big and small scale, from around the country, and they studied them like information from the hand of God. Bones were broken and muscles sprained, countless cuts and bruises worn like armor.

Neighborhood kids would stop by to watch. Vivian would stand on the sidelines.

The older Brooks got, the more his love of wrestling grew to passion and obsession and his sister shrunk in that shadow. He always wondered if that was where he lost her. He had found his way out, knew he could moonsault his way into something better and not look back. Three days before his high school graduation, he defeated his best friend for their world championship. He hoisted the belt—an old pizza box cut into circles, spray painted metallic gold and super-glued to the face of one of his dad’s old belts that fit him a lifetime of six packs ago—above his head and looked out to the crowd of broken cars, overgrown weeds, and future-former friends. He looked for her, once his biggest fan, but she was gone.

Brooks hoped the kid in Mansfield could take move calls on the fly. Even though he knew he could get a decent match out of almost anyone, he hated working blind. He tapped Gunnar on the shoulder, “Catch a ride with you down to the show this weekend?”

“Pick you up at noon.”

Brooks nodded, got his stuff, and left. On the walk back to his apartment, he dialed his sister’s number. After the seventh ring, a generic voice told him to leave a message, and he hung up without a word.

§

Jack Raptor was perched to fly. Crouched on the top rope, hand splayed across the turnbuckle between two black and neon green boots, eyes on the local kid, a cruiserweight if he weighed a pound, lying prone on the mat below; Jack Raptor was ready to perform his aerial magic, and pick up the emotional victory—what would be his tenth straight. But once Jack, once Brooks, caught sight of the crowd in his peripheral vision, heard them screaming Jack’s name, he froze.

The kid on the mat twitched and Brooks looked down at him again. The twisted position where he’d left the kid—Brooks thought his name might have been Nick—when he dropped him had all the angles and awkward directions of the way his sister slept when they were kids. He never figured out how she could be comfortable, or how she could stay in that position for hours. This kid was giving her competition in the duration department. He wondered if she ever still slept that way.

Brooks rose from his crouched position, years of training and instinct keeping him balanced and steady on the rope. His hand brushed against the scar on his side and it pounded like his heart had moved and haunted that spot out of spite. Faces around the ring, expressions ranging from confused to excited to ripe with anticipation, blurred into a palpitating mass. The referee started his ten-count, like he should have done when Brooks first climbed the ropes. The ref knew who was supposed to win, and he counted much slower than usual.

The lights of the Richland County fairgrounds hall were blinding, and when Brooks squinted through them, the only face that emerged clear was Bill Summers, who paced, furious, by the doorway to the backstage area. Brooks knew Jack Raptor was the golden boy of the Rustbelt Wrestling Alliance, and a darling of the indie world and internet wrestling community. It was the reason Bill didn't say a word about the spontaneous leave of absence Brooks had taken. It was the reason he was right back in the main event. This match, his triumphant return—in his hometown, no less—was supposed to put the RWA brand, and his brand, in the spotlight.

When the referee's count reached eight, he gave Brooks a pleading look, begged him to jump, one quick shooting star press, and finish the match, but Brooks didn't move. The bell rang at ten and the local kid was announce winner via count out. Brooks climbed down the ropes and headed toward the back with is head bent low.

He'd dialed Vivian's number fourteen times since he'd gotten into town, all with the same result. He'd mailed a copy of the event post to her apartment. Every time they were in a rest hold during the match, he'd scanned the crowd to look for her.

He didn't make it three feet past the other side of the curtain that separated worlds before Bill caught up to him. "Murphy! What the fuck just happened out there?"

"Just made that kid's night, Bill. He had skill, you should keep him around." Brooks gave his answer without stopping or turning around.

"My ass, Murphy. Dammit, look at me." Bill grabbed Brooks by the arm and pushed his back against the wall. "Now I'm usually a patient man, especially with you. But do you know what we charged those people to see you tonight? Twenty bucks. Twenty bucks for the return of the great Jack Raptor. You just made an ass out of me. You think when this gets around, the people back home are gonna pay in two weeks?"

"They'll pay, Bill. You'll find a way to make them. I guess *Jack* just wasn't ready to come back yet." Brooks stared up at Bill, who stood an inch or two above his on six foot two, the amber of Brooks' eyes obscured by expanding pupils.

"Jesus, kid, tell me this isn't about what I think it's about. You might think I'm an idiot, but that bitch—" Bill was cut off by Brooks' hand across his mouth as Brooks spun and flipped their positions, pinning Bill against the wall with his head pushed hard against the cement block structure. Brooks' skin quivered in his anger, the black wings on his back coming to life in the effort to maintain composure.

“Listen to me. I am your superstar, your golden fucking ticket to TV, pay-per-view, merchandise, and that comfy little life you want so bad. If you ever think about opening your mouth about her again, I will walk for good. Do you understand me?” Brooks waited for Bill to nod his head, hesitated for a moment, and then released him.

Brooks turned and headed for the dressing room. He knew Bill wouldn't be dumb enough to follow him, but he heard him call after him. “I better fucking see Jack Raptor in Cleveland.”

The dressing area they'd converted to a locker room was empty. Most of the performers were doing meet-and-greets in the hall, peddling self-designed merchandise and judging the quality of the local 'rats. He wanted to be gone before they all came back. Before the questions that would be half-asked, and the unspoken accusations. Brooks pulled on jeans over his trunks and boots, threw a t-shirt over his head, and stuffed everything else he had into his bag. As he pulled the zipper shut, he felt a hand on his shoulder, too gentle to be Bill and too firm to be a fan. He turned around to find Gunnar's face with a neutral expression. “What do you want, Gunnar?”

“I saw you bolt. Wasn't sure where you were going.” Gunnar took a step back toward the door and his six-foot-seven frame blocked the way. Brooks wasn't sure if it was to prevent wandering eyes from seeing in or Brooks from going out.

“Just need to get out, get some air.”

“I'm your ride, remember.”

“I’ll catch a cab. I’m probably not the company you want to keep right now.”

Gunnar sighed and shook his head. When he smiled he looked like a poster boy for Swedish tourism, but there was a hardness in the look he gave Brooks that filled him with more trepidation and regret than Bill’s screaming would ever would. Finally his face softened and he stepped away from the door. “Just try not to be an idiot.”

“I’ll do my best.” Brooks grabbed his back and head for the door as quick as he could without running.

Outside the back entrance of the hall, Brooks pulled out his phone and dialed the local cab company—a number he’d dialed countless times in his misspent youth. When the dispatcher told him that a car was nearby and someone would be there in a few minutes, he disconnected and then pressed his first speed dial. He waited for the now-familiar computer generated voice when the phone picked up after two rings. There were no words on either side of the line, just the sound of blood and breath that rose and fell and beat in unison.

When Brooks left Mansfield for good, Vivian was in her sophomore year of high school. He’d held out a full twelve months after his own graduation before the barbed wire of the prison crept closer and closer, the abandoned factories no longer able to contain all the ghosts who needed something to haunt. RWA was barely bigger than a backyard game then, hardcore matches and buckets of blood were the only things bringing in a crowd. He wore the success of the business in every muscle and joint, swallowed his un-prescribed dues with whiskey and water.

Vivian never graduated. The first time he'd gone back to town since he'd left was for her graduation, and until that moment, when the names across the stage when straight from Murdoch to Nash, he had no idea she'd dropped out. Or that their parents had separated and left town. Or that his childhood friend Matty, who always helped Brooks out when he dislocated some limb and didn't want to tell anyone, hung himself in the basement of his brother's ex-girlfriend's house.

The sound of the cab driver laying on his horn pulled Brooks out of unwelcomed memory and he put away the phone that had disconnected on the other end of the line. He started toward the bright yellow car. A lone bolt of lightning streaked through the clouds overhead as he readjusted the strap of his duffel bag. The hotel he'd booked for the night was only two miles away, he could get a full night of sleep. He be on the road with Gunnar, if Gunnar would still have him, in the morning and then home to his bed by ten. A bullet of May rain hit his hand as he opened the cab's back door. Brooks tossed his bag in back and slid into the seat, pulling the door closed with a slam.

"Where ya headed, kid?" The driver looked back at him, something close to familiarity in his eyes.

Brooks looked straight ahead and didn't meet his gaze. "Rowe Avenue."

He squinted against the blur of oncoming traffic that had nowhere better to be as they travelled down Park Avenue. Neon signs filled the windows of overcrowded dive bars, whose parking lots fused with those of the well-marked adult stores. Then the street lights grew dimmer and less frequent the farther the cab traveled from the main

strip. The street became in indiscernible haze in the glare of the headlights, save for the voids of long-forgotten potholes, which the driver sped over without notice or ceremony. Illumination had all but disappeared by the time they reached Rowe Avenue.

Even in the dampened darkness, Brooks recognized without fail the house he'd come fore, which looked somehow more foreboding than it had on his last visit. It was a fickle storm they were in the middle of, and the rain had lightened to a mist that clung to his skin like sweat as he paid the driver and stepped out of the car.

The driver rolled down his window and flipped off his meter. "You want me to wait, kid?"

Brooks took in the look on the man's face. There was that same familiarity he'd noticed when he got in the car, but there was also now a sense of concern. The man's eyebrows were raised, his posture alert in response to their surroundings. His demeanor weakened Brooks' resolve for a moment and he considered the man's offer. Then a light flipped on in a lower window of the house. "No, thanks. I got a way home."

Brooks half-expected the man to argue, but instead he rolled up his window and pulled away with visible haste. Brooks blinked against the web of moisture that collected in his lashes as he crossed the street. Vivian's car sat in front of the house. He ran his hand along the side of the blue Ford, more rusted than it had been four years ago when he'd given it to her for her birthday. They'd still had a relationship back then, still felt like family. Though only a shell of the bond they'd shared as kids, she'd accepted his gift with genuine gratitude. She'd taken a Greyhound to Cleveland to visit

and see him wrestle that weekend. It was the first time RWA had drawn a crowd over two hundred and a payday for the performers that reached triple digits. They went out to dinner and he asked to see her return ticket home. When he tore it up and handed her the keys to the car, she pretended like she wasn't crying. It was the last time he saw genuine emotion in her face.

There was motion through the window of the lit-up room. The shadow through the curtain—which from the outside looked more like a re-purposed bed sheet—was small and slender, the movements slow and hesitant. The figure appeared to be pouring something, so Brooks assumed it was the kitchen, and he was almost certain it was his sister he was looking at. He had planned no part of this visit, though in hindsight, he knew it had been inevitable. Knocking on the front door didn't feel appropriate after the way their last encounter had ended. Without thought, he put his hand to that spot on his side. Brooks also knew he couldn't simply bust through the front door

While he tried to decide what to do, the shadow in the room was joined by another; larger, faster, masculine, and from his memory, too large to be Josh. The slender figure—Vivian, as he decided for certain that this was her—grabbed something from what must have been a table. She handed it to the man, who continued to hold out his hand for something more. When Vivian made no other move, the man struck her across the face. Brooks couldn't move. He wanted to throw himself through the window, but he stood motionless and watched his sister take it without defense in front

of the window of a lit room. When the man did not strike again and turned away from her, Brooks released the breath he didn't know he was holding.

He hoped the man would leave through the front and figured it was his only chance to get in without commotion. He moved to the porch. A flash of memory preceded a crack of thunder, and he crouched beside the door. When it opened, the man exited, oblivious to the presence of anyone else in the area, and Brooks slid his hand over to prevent the door from latching. He slipped inside and eased the door shut behind him.

Silence dripped down the walls. There was an archway to the right that led to the only lit room. Brooks no longer cared about being seen. He stared into the room he had correctly guessed was the kitchen. An empty manila folder and an envelope with cash peeking out sat on a card table and flapped under the lazy spin of a ceiling fan. Vivian stood at the kitchen sink, staring out a window into the blackness of the yard. If she knew he was there, she made no move to indicate so. She was barely dressed, a camisole with no bra and torn pajama shorts that revealed scratches and bruises down the length of her legs, which looked dulled and yellow against the white linoleum floor. A bright red handprint on her cheek was the only color to her face.

Brooks watched as Vivian picked up a half-smoked cigarette from an ashtray on the counter. She held it without relighting, the circumference a fraction smaller than her fingers.

“Hello Vivian.” Brooks moved into the light of the room, more dull than it had seemed when he stood in the dark.

“What do you want?” She turned only her head to look at him. He tried to find surprise in her expression, but it was as blank as it had been the last time they met.

“I called you. A lot.”

“I know.”

“Who was that?”

“Who was who?”

“That man. The hand on your face.”

Vivian turned back to her window. The rain had all but stopped and her eyes followed each stray drop that tricked down the panes. The bones of her shoulders rose and fell like hinges in a dying machine with each deliberate breath she took before answering. “Work.”

“Work doesn’t leave bruises.”

“Yours does.”

Brooks could feel the resentment in her words circle him like a straightjacket. He knew she wasn’t wrong, in what she said or felt, but those words stuck on the roof of his mouth and wouldn’t let go. He said instead, “I was just thinking the other day about Halloween.”

Silence.

“You remember the one with the robes. The Marvelous Murphys.”

“What do you want, Brooks?”

“Come to Cleveland.”

“No.”

“This isn’t a life, Viv.”

“It’s mine.”

“It doesn’t have to be.”

“Go home, Brooks.”

“I not leaving you here. Not for that.”

“Again.”

“What?”

“You mean you’re not leaving me here again.”

Brooks would never admit that she was right about that, but he’d already decided he wouldn’t leave her here. Vivian picked up a glass of vodka that tried to pass for water and took a long drink. Brooks looked around the room to get a better sense of his surroundings. A purse dangled off the back of one of the kitchen chairs; a familiar set of keys hung on a hook to his right. Vivian set the glass down on the edge of the

counter and the bottom rim dangled unattended over the floor. She turned to him and looked him in the eye for the first time in years. "I'm going to bed."

"No. You're not." Brooks already hated himself for things he knew he would do. For a moment, he thought he knew what to say next in route to a better end to the night. But the floorboards above his head shifted and creaked, and a door banged a wall as it opened. There were no more words.

Brooks reached for her hand, and when she pulled away, he grabbed her by the upper arm instead, his fingers closed around skin and bone. She struggled and opened her mouth to yell, but he covered it and spun her around. His arm wrapped around her neck. Years of training on how to apply a headlock without making his opponent pass out had also taught him the way to ensure that they did. He only needed a few seconds before her body went limp and he whispered, "Go to sleep, sis."

Brooks picked her up, her head rested against his shoulder, then grabbed the keys to the car, and the purse he hoped was hers. The car doors were all unlocked and he slid her into the back seat. Lights flipped on in the upstairs window as he got in the driver's seat, started the car, and drove into the rain.

Brooks had watched Vivian wake up in the back seat around halfway home. He waited for her to scream, try to throw herself out of the car, or to attack him. She did none of those things. When he stopped for gas soon after that, he watched for her to run. She never left the car. It was after midnight when they reached his apartment, which occupied the second floor of an old building. The first floor was unoccupied on

one half. The other half was a bar whose name never stayed the same, run by the building's owner, and where Brooks worked occasionally, pouring beer or mopping floors, or whatever came up to cover the dead spots in the RWA calendar. All for cash and off the record. He pulled down the alley and around back and into the only parking spot behind the building. The only way up was the rusted metal staircase with no handrail on the upper half.

Brooks got out and stood at the base of the steps. Vivian exited and stood next to the car. Half-naked, barefoot, pale, she looked feral in the dim light that the drifted back from the street. When she started toward him, he spoke for the first time since the house, "Are you done fighting me?"

"Tonight."

The crunch of a can underfoot caused both siblings to snap their heads to the alley with the same sharp motion.

"That you, Murphy?"

Brooks recognized the voice of the bar owner/landlord Jim, who stopped at the corner of the building and stayed in the shadow. The familiarity was not enough to ease Brooks' tension. "Yeah, Jim, it's me."

"Figured. Can you cover the bar for a few hours Sunday? I'll take it off the rent I'm sure you planned on giving me just as soon as you got back in town."

"Yeah. Sunday."

The same can crumpled on his way back, and Brooks walked carefully up the stairs and unlocked the door, and Vivian followed him into the apartment. He flipped the switch for the single, unshaded, overhead bulb that serviced the whole room. Sixty watts stretched across beige walls and carpet, brightest over the worn grey three cushion couch in the middle of the room. Vivian looked at the sofa and down at herself. Brooks could tell she didn't want to talk, and he was too tired to argue. He went into his bedroom and grabbed the blanket off his bed, as well as a t-shirt from his drawer for her to sleep in. She took the shirt into the bathroom. He didn't wait for her to come out before he went to bed. He knew she wouldn't still be there in the morning.

He'd forgotten he still had his ring gear on under his clothes. Each layer was peeled off with increased haste until he'd stripped to nothing. His body ached from ring rust. He found a new bruise on his right knee, most likely from a ring post, another on his chest from a punch that wasn't pulled. Four scratches on his forearm from his only family. And for a second, he swore he felt his side start to bleed.

III

FALL

Mile marker 195, rust starting to spread from a bent-up bottom corner, caught the glare of the headlights and flashed to life for a transient moment, then faded back to darkness. Nineteen more miles before the Mansfield Exit. Traffic was light for a Saturday. Brooks held steady in the middle lane, cruise control set on the rental he couldn't afford to avoid another ticket he wouldn't be able to pay, local radio station turned up loud enough to keep him awake.

He was headed south anyway for a Sunday night show in Columbus. Rumors had tickled ears around the gym for weeks: some important people with connections would be at this show, and they had a couple people in mind for big things down the road. Brooks knew he was one of those people. The name Jack Raptor had made its way outside world of Rustbelt Wrestling. There were a few guys he wouldn't mind taking with him. The images of his future danced around the periphery of the car, but Brooks' mind fixed on the article he'd stared at for hours the night before. It had come attached

to an email from a local wrestling blogger he almost considered a friend. No subject line, no message, just a generic article title as a hyperlink at the bottom: "*Body of Girl Still Unidentified.*"

§

A thin trail of moonlight filtered through a dirt-streaked window pane and bounced off the long white scar on Wes's chest while Vivian ran a finger from its starting point on his sternum across his right pectoral and down to his side. The scar, three shades lighter than his already-pale skin, was her favorite part of him, making his look vulnerable, slightly broken. Vivian didn't know what it was from, though she often speculated to herself, some of her theories more adventurous than others. A deep breath skimmed the pillow case and his eyelids twitched as Vivian lay over him.

"Wes? You still asleep?" Vivian waited for an answer, and after several seconds of silence, realized she hadn't woken him. She ran her hand across his chest one more time, then sat up and eased herself off the bed. There were not enough windows to light the whole studio apartment at night, and Vivian had to feel across the exposed brick wall to keep from tripping over the duffel bag and plastic crates she knew were scattered around the floor. The red glow of the clock revealed her clothes as she pulled on ripped jeans and a black t-shirt without a sound. She grabbed a messenger bag from under the bed, kissed Wes on the temple, and eased out the door.

Heavy late summer air stuck to her skin and matted strands of short, black hair to her forehead as she left the building and cut down the side alley. She looked around,

checking for people lining the shadows, and for cars or objects that were out of place, before she moved forward. Unoccupied buildings smothered the few others that still housed functioning businesses in her two square mile part of town. Exterior walls stood marred with graffiti and the aftermath of violence. Though the neighborhood was still new to her, the scene was not.

Somewhere, a few blocks away, the crack of a poorly muffled shot broke through the air, vaulted around corners of buildings, and dissolved the humid space around Vivian's head. A new case to go unsolved. So many went unnamed, and she thought about the faces she turned away from every day, and whether they had friends or family, whether they were somebody's lover. Someone's brother.

Vivian glanced back up at her building, her window still dark save for the faint red glow of the alarm clock. She'd lived in that apartment for a four months and shared her body with the man in the bed for almost as long. She leaned against the side of the old brick building next to her, and ran her hand across a bullet-hole before she pushed on through the dim, throbbing lights of downtown.

The orange neon sign of the pool hall was the brightest on the block, and its glow reached around the corner and into the alley where Vivian stopped and knocked twice on the windowless side door. Jim the security man opened the door without surprise or fanfare, and she walked into the dim and hazy room. Jim pulled the door shut behind them, and the hinges of both man and steel groaned with the effort.

Twelve billiard tables filled the main room of the building; only two were in use. Business was slow, even for a Tuesday, and Vivian grazed a hand across the top of an unoccupied table, her fingernail catching in a snag on the scuffed green surface. Light from an un-shaded and yellowed sixty watt bulb spilled out of the back office and cast shadows around the cur-thin man leaning against its doorframe.

As Vivian walked toward his motioning hand, a man, inebriated and dirty, left the table where he'd been poking at the cue ball alone, and cut off her path. The drunk reached a hand for her left breast, quick but shaky, and encased her flesh in his grip. Vivian grabbed that arm. It was a move she'd seen a thousand times. A simple hammerlock. She twisted the arm up and behind his back before slamming his head into the nearest table. All other activity in the room stopped as the other patrons, Jim, and the bartender turned to watch. The man in the doorway never moved. She released the drunk and finished the cross to the back room where the man stepped aside to let her pass and pulled the door shut behind them.

Vivian stayed in the corner by the door while he propped against the edge of a wobbling metal desk. "I sent that text an hour ago."

"I'm sorry, Pete. I had something to finish. What do you need me to do?" The crash of a cue ball against a racked set broke through the stillness that lingered outside the office and made Eve jump in the pause between question and answer.

“Something to finish? That’s a shit excuse, Viv.” Pete pulled out a cigarette, his fingertips blending into the yellow-tipped filter end, and lit it with a match. “I call, you come. That’s how this works.”

“I said I was sorry. What do you need from me?”

“That new guy, right? That stuff you had to finish? Wes, isn’t it? Works down at that bar on Payne.” Vivian’s head snapped up, and she met Pete’s eyes for the first time. “Don’t look so surprised. You sure didn’t waste time finding a replacement after—what was the last one’s name? Josh?—after Josh, did you? Hope your judgment is better this time around.”

“Pete...?”

“What, you think I wouldn’t notice if you get serious with someone? Especially after how the other one ended. He starts hanging around your place all the time, of course I’m going to look into it. He seems like a good kid though.”

Vivian fought not to close her eyes and see the flashing lights of the last night she spent with her ex-boyfriend. A large fly buzzed past the light bulb and spread its shadow over the room. “What do you need from me?”

“I have a—” Pete paused, took a drag from his cigarette, and exhaled to the fly who’d landed on the wall beside him, “a friend coming to town for a couple of days. I would just like you to keep him busy for one evening.”

Vivian's stared into the blades of a whining fan across from her. She'd tried to convince herself that she'd spent the years since becoming a high school dropout actively seeking legitimate employment. There were creative ways of saying "handy with a needle" or "good aim with a kitchen knife" that wouldn't make eyebrows raise. There way ways of making money that could actually be taken to a bank. But the list of places she was willing to be a slave to dwindled each time she pictured herself in a hairnet or apron. Hesitation and fear, combined with the seven mile radius she'd stuck to her whole life, thinned her options until they were no longer discernable in a city where prisons and prostitution were the only moderately successful business ventures. When Vivian met Pete while leaning against the railing of a rundown bar, he was the first person to offer her a job instead of a twenty.

She blinked away dryness from the fan's stale stream that fused with Pete's exhale from another drag. She needed air. Instead, Vivian focused on a framed print on the wall over his shoulder—a smoky room, shadowed figures, abstract billiard table. Art and life. Vivian sighed.

"Not like that. I promised I wouldn't ask that again and I keep my promises." Pete's words were tangible, but they dissipated in the marsh that swallowed her brain. He pushed himself from the desk and put his hand on her arm, sliding it down until her skin was no long protected by cotton from his cold, tacky touch. Vivian shuddered at the thought of a strong familiar arm around her neck.

"Who is he?"

“You’ll meet him in a couple days. Just be here around nine.” Vivian wriggled out from under his hand without responding. The latch of the office door jammed in its place, and the unsupported walls shook when she jerked it free. An ancient jukebox filled the space with an old Alabama song, and another game of eight-ball started in the corner. The drunk was gone. Jim sat in a stool by the side door, chin lolling toward his chest. He didn’t stir when she slid out.

Back in the alley, Vivian choked on the stench of garbage in the air. A car rolled by, slow and deliberate, with the bass of the stereo cranked to its max. The vibrating beat of the hip hop track bobbed under the trickle of country that leaked through the windows of the pool hall; the soundtrack of the city. Vivian wasn’t ready to go home. She watched the sporadic headlights that plunged in the potholes of Main Street, one car every few minutes, and turned out of the alley to follow one.

Past scattered empty storefronts—some closed, some deserted—Vivian glimpsed a familiar scene as she continued toward the heart of downtown. In a narrow walkway between buildings, beside a hole-in-the-wall bar, a man fastened his pants and then reached into his pocket for a folded up bill. He walked away with a look far more satisfied than that of the girl he left standing against the wall. Vivian kept walking.

She kept walking until she reached Carrousel Park, which at midnight was devoid of children’s voices and cheerful organ music. In an area that had seen revitalization and demise more times than anyone could keep track of, the carousel stood as a bright spot for over two decades. Outside, the building remained free of graffiti, clean and

polished. Inside the wood-and-glass walls, the menagerie was always at attention, ready to act as a two-minute getaway driver. At the main entrance, she walked between the two sculpted guardian horses. Three police cruisers raced down Park Avenue, the sound of the sirens struggling to keep up with the pursuit. Vivian sat down in the cool, damp grass beneath a small tree, its trunk just strong enough to support her back as she leaned against it and closed her eyes. She hadn't been to the carousel in years. The first time was just before she turned seven.

She never asked her brother where the money for their adventure had come from. Seven year olds don't care about monetary issues. Brooks slipped a wire coat hanger through the space between the bedroom door and its frame to open the hook-and-eye lock he'd installed for her. It took three minutes of shaking her and saying her name to wake her and get her up from her mound of pillows and sheets on the floor. When she opened her eyes, there was a soft package wrapped in the comics section beside her. Brooks told her to get dressed and meet him outside. He later told her that the whole neighborhood heard her squeal when she opened the bundle, an early birthday present, to find the Shawn Michaels t-shirt she never thought she'd get.

Dressed in her new favorite shirt and pink princess sandals, she raced downstairs and they walked the two miles downtown. Brooks, with all the pride a twelve year old could muster, bought ten ride tickets and a bag of popcorn. The ostrich was her favorite, and she circled her arms around its long neck like a lasso while her big brother watched from the steed behind her. When the tickets and popcorn were gone, they

trekked back home and watch a worn-out VHS of WrestleMania IV, and they stayed awake long enough to watch Hulk Hogan save the day again.

Vivian scratched her back against the bark of the tree as distance bolts of lightning shot from one cloud to another. No other birthday had compared to that one, and as she started for home, the unnerving realization hit that her life may have peaked at seven. The clouds continued to gather over her and sky took on the deep purples and faint yellows of a blooming bruise.

§

Mile marker 192. The lack of clouds in the sky felt wrong. The sense of openness, the severity of the midnight blue and the red-orange tint of the moon, created an expanse of universe that swallowed Brooks with its possibility. Too much space. Too many options. What was the opposite of claustrophobia? Suffocation by life.

“Mansfield police have yet to identify the body of a girl found early Thursday morning in an alley off Park Ave. She is described as early to mid-20s, dark hair, hazel eyes, small build. Anyone with information should contact the Police department.” The description fit a thousand girls in that city. It also fit one. Brooks memorized the forty-two word painting of the ruined life that might have belonged to his sister.

§

Vivian looked up to her window on the second story—the only one in the building illuminated—before she went inside. Wes was sitting on the bed with a shoebox full of something that fascinated him as he smiled like a little boy. He looked up at her with eyes magnified behind thick black frames that made his bare skin glow in comparison. “Little late for a walk.”

Vivian sighed. He had been sleeping at her place two or three night a week for months. This was the second time she’d left in the middle of the night while he was there, and it was the first time he was awake when she got back. She shrugged in response, turned the deadbolt and the door knob lock, and slid the chain lock into place. “What do you have there?”

“This was in the closet by the bathroom. You’re out of toilet paper.” Vivian crawled onto the bed and leaned back against Wes. The box was one she didn’t remember packing in her rushed move from her old place. She picked up a trading card featuring Jake “The Snake” Roberts and his python, Damien. Wes laughed and said, “There’s a guy I haven’t seen in a while. I never took you for a wrestling fan.”

Vivian hadn’t called herself a fan for more than a decade. The spectacle of the sport, a soap opera played out in ring, had been an escape for two kids who didn’t know that they were just trying to find a sense of justness in their world. They found it in the good guys who always prevailed. They lived it. When that façade of good over evil wore off, Brooks found his calling. Backyard sessions with his friends turned to hardcore style rules. Vivian spent an hour scrubbing blood from the tree stump in their yard after

Brooks split his head open for the first time. When Brooks found her outside, scrubbing at a blade of grass, he laughed and ruffled her hair. There was a quote he'd found somewhere that he recited any time he needed to feel either smart or profound, and he as he picked her up off the ground, he projected it in his most authoritative voice.

“The art of living is more like wrestling than dancing, in so far as it stands ready against the accidental and the unforeseen, and is not apt to fall¹.”

“What’s that from?” Wes’s voice vibrated from his throat against her cheek and startled her. She hadn’t planned on saying that out loud.

“It just something...I don’t know. I haven’t been for a while.” She put down Jake “The Snake” and poked through the other paper odes to old grapplers that used to serve as posters on the wall of her cardboard Barbie house.

“Haven’t been what?”

“A wrestling fan.” Vivian spread her fingers across Wes’s chest, winding her fingers in and around the indented track of his scar, as she’d done many times once the sun went down. Some nights she envisioned how much blood must have come from a wound that severe. She wondered if he ever felt phantom pools of it gathering in the surface beneath him. Sometimes when she woke, her fingers felt wet and warm with the imagined memory of holding him together. Sometimes that comforted her.

¹ Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*

Most of their relationship had been spent in the confines of her apartment. Vivian told him when they met that she wasn't the dating kind. He'd chased after her outside a coffee shop when their drinks were mixed up and only agreed to give her back her black coffee if she'd sit down and drink it with him. When he worked, he worked late, and their routine of take out, sex, and sleep was a welcomed opposite of the disaster that had been her previous love life. She didn't know where Josh ended up. She didn't want to.

Wes yawned, his face contorted and childlike, put the top back on the box and lightly tossed it to the floor. The first drops of rain hit the roof with a steady, muted rhythm. "At least you made it back before the downpour."

"I'm sorry if I woke you." Vivian untangled herself from his arms and stood to undress while Wes spread back out over top of the covers, and another yawn took over his face.

"Don't worry about it. I haven't slept much lately anyway."

"Is something going on?"

"No, just thinking about a lot of stuff. My lease on my place is up soon, and I don't want to stay there. Need to figure something out." A dying bulb flickered overhead and the strobe effect highlighted the question that died before he spoke it. "I'm off tomorrow. Do you have anywhere to be in the morning?"

Wes never asked about her job the same way she never asked about his scar. The first time she saw it, she couldn't hide her surprise. She hesitated to touch him until he laughed and took her hand and guided her finger down and around. When they'd met, she told him she was an independent contractor. It took three weeks before she had to cancel plans with for a job, and when he asked what sort of independent contractor had to work at eleven at night on a Sunday, she hung up on him. He never asked again.

"No, I'm free tomorrow. Maybe we can go out for lunch." She took off the rest of her clothes, turned off the light, and climbed into his arms.

Vivian settled into a position that was now familiar. A crack of thunder rattled a loose window pane and a cool storm-breeze flowed through an open window across the room. She closed her eyes and was twelve again. They were held together by fraying ring ropes and crumbling turnbuckles. Her small, bare feet, calloused from exploring naked earth, stood on the elm stump—the temple of their childhood. A rival distraction called her back to grass, and skin scraped across bark, leaving bits of rage, of disappointment, of resignation that with each new nick and cut thieved the prudence of her future self. Vivian sat on the warm ground, doors to the inside, to confinement, left unopened, when Brooks and company ran out and the show started. She watched the bodies in motion as feet, shoulder's width apart, fought back against the solid stump and fired a hundred years of weathered storms and history through calves, knees, and legs, and exploded human mass through the universe in perfect rotation. Gravity was forgotten for a moment so the starts could have one more shining comrade. A

moonsault for her entertainment and education. The stump, jagged and worn, bore the weight of their innocence shed. Small, bare feet grew longer, grew weary. Salted tears and the stench of stale beer were sopped up in the old wood and grass and the legacy of their yard was an age where little sisters got to play referee and ring announcer and wear pretty dresses; when superheroes did moonsaults.

§

Mile marker 183 and the gas tank was still three-quarters full. Plenty of fuel to make it the rest of the way to Columbus without another stop. He was booked against Gunnar in the main event. The show itself was a collaboration with another small promotion. To headline the whole thing was the type of push some guys could only hope for, and the crowd was expected to top a thousand. He and Gunnar had worked out the match, and they knew they had a 5 star show ready. The “Swedish Storm” would crush and Jack Raptor would fly.

Brooks adjusted his body as best he could without taking his eyes off the road. The worn down cushion of the driver’s seat mimicked the deteriorating padding of the practice ring that endured twenty practice superplexes the night before. Gunnar had insisted that ten was plenty, but Brooks climbed right back on the ropes. He wouldn’t be the one to fuck this up, not if the name McMahon could be scrawled across the bottom of paycheck by year’s end. Brooks tapped the brakes and released the cruise; he needed to feel in control.

§

The message from Pete was a day early and unexpected. She'd been sleeping, however restlessly, and Vivian didn't like it when he changed plans. She wound through the maze of billiard tables, waiting for the office door to open. The 8-ball clock over the jukebox told her twenty minutes had passed with no sign he was ready for her. More than once, she'd thought about barging in on whatever meeting was happening, but she knew Pete didn't shut the door with no reason. As much as she wanted this over with, Vivian used the waiting period to figure out what to do about Wes, who she left sleeping alone for the second straight night. She timed her steps to the tick of the cue stick second hand and sorted through the options she had, which felt like few; she could continue to be Pete's on-call bitch, or she could be Wes's lover, not both.

Her first task—Pete liked to call them assignments, but Vivian couldn't associate the things she did with a word that studious—once Pete convinced her that working for him was a smart move, was to convince a man to come back to an apartment she pretended was hers. Take him to the front door. Talk sweet to him. Turn the door knob, push it open, and walk away. And so it went, in one form or another. Little envelopes of cash and a silent understanding.

A few minutes after midnight, the door opened, and a man whose face Vivian didn't see left the office ducked out the emergency exit in the storeroom. Pete waived her in, closed the door, and motioned for her to sit, which she ignored. A pack's worth of cigarette smoke hung in the air and veiled the expression on Pete's face. He usually leaned against his desk, neither seated nor standing, motionless and straight. The office

chair was rarely used. Tonight he paced, ashes and flakes of dry skin scattered like confetti in a jagged trail across threadbare green carpet.

Vivian was afraid she'd choke on the cloud that hung in the air if she opened her mouth, but the silence that clung to the particles of smoke already gripped at her throat. "I didn't think I'd hear from you tonight, Pete. Has something changed?"

"No, no not at all. Well, yes. You're still going to meet him tomorrow."

"But?"

"Just not here."

"Where?"

"He's going to meet you outside your place tomorrow."

Vivian didn't like the idea of a stranger who knew where she lived. The only other time Pete had asked her to meet someone at her home, she'd lied and given them Josh's address. That was the night Brooks thought he'd come to rescue her and put her in a headlock until she passed out so he could put her in the back of her own car. That was also the night she decided that when she went back home she would change what home meant.

"Are you okay, Pete?" As the room cleared, Vivian could see that the white of his eyes seemed dimmed, and his face more sallow than usual.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm good. It's just been a long day is all. He'll meet you out by the back the stairs to your place around nine."

“And then what?”

“I don’t know, go show him the carousel or something.”

Vivian resisted asking what his name was. If Pete hadn’t already told her, he wasn’t going to, and trying to figure out why would drive her mad. When she inched closer to the door, Pete bent down to a small safe on the floor and opened. Vivian forced long and even breaths. “Pete, after tomorrow, I don’t think I can do this anymore.”

Pete closed the safe and stood up, the angles of him snapping into straight lines. He slid an unmarked white envelope across the desk toward her and it stopped on the corner, half dangling over the edge. “Viv, sweetheart,” he lit another cigarette, and the room started to fill up again, “Where the hell else do you think you’re going to go?”

§

Mile marker 181, and Brooks turned the radio’s volume up another notch to combat the steading ringing in his ears. No one had called him. Not that she would have listed him as her emergency contact anyway, but Brooks thought someone would have to know to call him. She had his number, he was her next of kin. But it seemed no one had reported her missing, and no one had called him.

He’d sent her a letter after the headlock incident. He wanted to tell her they were even after the garden trowel—at least he hadn’t left a scar—but he didn’t. He didn’t say much of anything except an apology and an offer to meet on neutral ground

to talk sometime in the future, when they were both ready. The letter was mailed three days after Vivian left his apartment in the middle of the night. It came back to him a week later, partially opened on the corner and marked “return to sender” with a small note that the addressee no longer lived in the building written in smeared block print that looked like a smaller, shakier version of his own.

§

Vivian picked up the envelope, which felt less than the weight of her usual five hundred dollars, put it in her bag, and left the building through the alley door. The temperature hadn’t dropped with the late hour and the air buzzed with heat and anticipation. She stood still for a moment, unsure of whether she was ready to go home. The weight of the air dampened the noise of the city around her, which made the scrape of a shoe sole behind her the only audible sound.

Vivian reached into the bag hanging beside her and pulled out the small folding knife she kept in an inside compartment. She pressed herself against the side of the building and looked deeper into the alley to find the source of the sound. Raccoons and stray cats were common in the area, and when she spotted no one, she thought that could have been the cause, until a trace of moonlight bounced off the exposed corner of a scar.

“Wes?” She walked toward him as the clouds overhead shifted enough to make him visible. “What are you doing out here? Did you follow me?”

“Yes.” The tone of his voice was simple and direct as it bounced through the narrow alley. “What are you going to do with that?” He nodded at the knife she had open and raise in position to attack.

Vivian lowered the blade and motioned for Wes to speak softer. “You shouldn’t be out here.”

“Where? The dark alley in the middle of the night? Neither should you. Why exactly are you out?” Wes spoke in full voice, so Vivian closed the distance left between them.

“Go home, Wes. We’ll talk about it in the morning.”

“Which home? The one I pay for or the one you keep leaving me alone in?” When she didn’t respond, he reached out to tilt her chin up toward him, but instinct made her knock his hand away. “Come back with me.”

Vivian brought her hand, the one still holding the knife, to his chest and traced the blade down the path of the scar she had memorized. When she reached the end of the trail, she reversed course, leaving snags in the fabric of his V-neck shirt. The closer she got to the beginning, the harder she pressed, drawing a single drop of blood above the point of his collar.

“I went to the laundromat today. Must have grabbed some of your stuff with mine.” Wes never looked down at how Vivian occupied her hands while he spoke. She wiped away the blood, warm on her finger, and left a red streak over the mark she’d

made. Her own railroad tie in his tracks. “You left some stuff in one of your pockets. There was a ticket for some indie wrestling show a couple of weeks ago and piece of paper with a name and address. Who’s Brooks?”

She’d seen Brooks perform with RWA before, back when he first started, but that ticket was for the first show she’d gone to in years. The night he came to find her, she’d been to the fairgrounds with the intent of buying a ticket. The crowd gathered and the sense of something special about to happen hovered over the building. She stood at the ticket gate until she heard the bell ring for the first match and then left.

The show in Medina almost ended the same way, and it was a fluke it didn’t. The ticket was purchased when she turned to flee and go back home, but she got swept in with a crowd headed through the door. An usher marked her ticket and showed her to her seat. Jack Raptor put on a show. It was easy to forget their history, or even that they were related, when she watched him perform. The spotlight caught his side when he climbed the ropes for his finisher, a crude and permanent reminder of a lifetime of broken endings. But he emerged victorious, a brief, glorious example of the art of living. Brooks Murphy didn’t exist inside the ring. Sometimes, Vivian wondered if he still existed at all.

The crowd merged and carried her out, quick and efficient, the same way she’d been taken in, and she made it to the car without him ever knowing she was there. Vivian looked Wes in the eye, surprised to find curiosity and a hint of sadness instead of

anger on his face. “Brooks is my brother.” She put the knife away and took Wes’s hand.
“Let’s go home.”

“Will you tell me what you’re doing in an alley after midnight?”

“Tomorrow. I promise.”

§

Mile marker 179 had a stripe of fluorescent orange sprayed down the middle. The list of things Brooks should have said to Vivian flew past him like the dotted white lines of the highway. The concept of family was one that had contorted into to something he no longer recognized; twisted into submission by years of running and apathy. He could still try. If he took that exit, drove to that street, and found her still lounged across that porch rail like an unattended vine, he could still try.

The car had slowed and two semis passed him on either side as he held steady in the middle lane. Brooks concocted the situation in his head. Josh would not be there. She would be alone. He’d say he was sorry that she felt abandoned all those years ago. Had he really abandoned her? Had he apologized for anything? He couldn’t remember. She’d say she always supported his dream, even if he didn’t know it. She’d tell him she always knew he’d come back for her someday – when he was ready. And then...that was really the question. She’d forgive him? Or maybe she’d stab him again.

That description could fit a thousand women.

§

Stray bands of early evening sun broke through gray clouds and cut diagonal patters across the building across the street from hers. Vivian sat on the bed and watched out the window as Wes disappeared further down the side street to leave for work. She picked up her phone and scrolled down to her brother's number without hitting call.

A small trunk sat buried in the back of her closet. Underneath her birth certificate, some old family photos, and an old Shawn Michaels t-shirt, there was an old, white, men's dress shirt with chunks and strips of an old sequined dress haphazardly sewn into it. Vivian stopped being a wrestling fan the day her brother stopped being anything other than a wrestler.

The last match to be wrestled in their back yard saw Brooks with their prized homemade championship. Fifteen kids from around the neighborhood, most of them closer to his age than to hers, showed up to watch. Brooks always came to get her before it was time for a match to start, usually so he could tell her what her role would be, whether announcer, referee, or just a valet. She waited until she heard a voice she didn't recognize through her bedroom window announce the champion, his friend Matt, to the ring. By the time she got down the stairs and out the side door, the match had already started. When Brooks climbed the stump and steadied his legs to leap, Jack Raptor was born. Vivian walked around the house and down the street before he ever hit the air, not stopping until she reached the carousel alone.

The sun started to lower by the time she opened her eyes and realized she'd fallen asleep against the window pane. What she could see of the narrow lane between her building and the next, where the mystery man was supposed to meet her, was deserted. It was almost nine o'clock. Vivian checked her appearance in the bathroom mirror, changed clothes and went outside. The clouds from the afternoon had thickened, and the temperature was unseasonably cool.

Nine o'clock passed, and she still stood alone by the stairs on the side of her building. She was tired of waiting. No calls or texts had come through on her phone, but she scrolled through old ones just in case. She stopped on her brother's number again. Maybe tomorrow. She looked both ways down the alley and listened for footsteps. The silence settled in her bones and she walked, slipping through the strip of moonlight and into shadow.

§

A green overhead sign said "Mansfield/Wooster next exit." One mile ahead on the right. Pale grey clouds filed in above the highway, lined up and waiting for the show to start. A pale flash of lighting signaled in the distance. Brooks flexed his fingers – Jack Raptor's fingers – to ward off the stiffness that threatened to settle in the bruised tissue and bones. He closed his eyes for a moment, not long enough to lose the road, but to settle the images that raced through his head. The steel guardrail, curving to the right and off into a different world, an old life, caught the glare of the headlights. Brooks held steady in the middle lane.