

Day Birds Sing in the Night

by

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Submitted to the Board of Creative Writing
School of Humanities
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts

Purchase College
State University of New York

December 2018

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I'd Like to Thank Fear and Darkness: An Introduction

Writing is tiring business. It complicates simple images, thoughts, movements, and feelings by dismantling them into words that are then arranged to make some sense of what intrudes on the brain at the most inconvenient times. I haven't slept well since becoming a writer. Nights meant for rest are routinely interrupted by daydreams full of dead and unborn faces begging to be brought to life. There's a story, a scene behind each figure that splashes between the darkness of my closed eyelids, like a wayward bird flying overhead. Sometimes they find a way to follow into a dream, their discordant songs waking me before I can glean their destinations. Afraid to forget, I write.

Most of what I do is out of fear. Fearing a life of homelessness and unemployment, I enrolled in college only to realize in and of itself it does not guarantee safety from those troubles. Writing provided an escape from my insecurities until sharing my work with others made me more insecure. Although it is often a terrible decision maker, fear is what drives me. Tasked with compiling a collection of stories, I sought to include my best work. Hours spent scrolling through Word documents were unfruitful; my best wasn't good enough for me—or rather I didn't think it'd be good enough for potential readers. Fear of what others would think drove me to change my approach to this project. I would compile my “scariest” stories, those I dreaded having to workshop out of fear my peers and professors would find their subject matter too odd, boring, and/or poorly written. My fear of these stories would drive me to refine them until they elicited pride rather than repulsion. After reading past critiques through tear-filled eyes, it was time for revision.

Revision is a prison, is what I would write if I were a poet but I'm a fiction writer. Still, revision is the worst part of writing for me. It's like being forced to listen to an album you didn't care for too much in the first place on repeat until you can convince yourself it's not as bad as you remember. Listen to it enough and those special nuances that make it unique may become more discernible. Revisions began with the collection's final story, *Time in a Bottle* (Originally titled *Another Beginning to Another Story I Probably won't Finish*, then changed to *All Roads Lead Here*

before I settled on *Now & Then* and was 100% on *Until Next Time* until I changed my mind). For weeks, I was trapped inside of a smelly bathroom with a dead girl in the bathtub and her weirdo sister rocking back and forth mumbling about a past I couldn't see. The terrifying image of a girl face down in a filled bathtub first materialized at night, another bird I struggled to capture. The story would begin with her end and function through time jumps from past to present to chronicle the mother-daughter and sister-sister relationships further complicated by Vanessa's alcoholism. Hannah, Vanessa's younger sister and the narrator, needed to be made more than a bystander. Vanessa had to be shown before her descent into alcoholism to add weight to her untimely death. There needed to be precedence for their mother's favoritism toward Vanessa. With these criticisms in mind, I laid down in darkness and waited for the birds to sing.

I've searched all my life for a voice. Something that would distinguish me from the multitude who are unafraid to speak. In church, we were told God works through people, choosing a few among the many called to work as his instruments on Earth spreading His word. Inspired by my grandfather who was a Baptist preacher, I prayed to be one of those vital instruments made to stand at the pulpit. So, God made me an introvert. Introversion does not exclude one from becoming a preacher but it's difficult to enliven a congregation while your energy levels deplete from all the social stimulation. Other voices shine in my stories, not mine. I'm just the penholder—or typist—no matter how much I want to be the preacher. Though I would love to make a lady lose her wig, with a single hearty “Hallelujah!”, listening has been more vital to me in the writing process. Other voices guide me to write from perspectives and times much different than my own.

The voices of two rebellious figures from the mid-20th century inspired me to write the short fiction piece “Left in the Dust.” It is very much a telling story in the vein of Hunter S. Thompson. Told from the perspective of a road manager who has just lost a dear friend after the dissolution of the Hippie dream, I sought to capture the same loose cannon unpredictability that characterizes much of Thompson's writing. Our fallen hero, Greg Prescott, is modeled after country rock singer-songwriter

Gram Parsons whose fragile voice has soundtracked many a lonesome night staring at blank Word documents. My objective was to illustrate the transitional period from the late sixties to early seventies through Prescott's death and his friends' mission to fulfill his final wish. Like Parsons, Prescott dies alone of a drug overdose in a motel in Joshua Tree, California. Drugs, mostly psychedelics, were integral to late sixties counterculture. It's fascinating how drugs, much heavier ones like heroin, killed prominent musicians in the early seventies. In the work of Thompson and other writers during that time such as Norman Mailer, there is pervading darkness waiting to consume idealistic fancies. The most fiction-like aspect of the piece is truth; friends of Gram Parsons stole his body and attempted to cremate him near Cap Rock in Joshua Tree Park. It ends with a twist on the strange adventure to emanate starry-eyed dreams of peace and love coming to a sobering end.

There are happy endings, too. "The Fix is in" may just have the most positive ending I've written to date. This flash fiction story was inspired by the 1965 bout between Muhammad Ali and Sonny Liston, in which Ali won by first round knockout. Some claim Liston "took a dive" or threw the fight as it was difficult to tell whether Ali's punch really connected, leading critics to dub it the "phantom punch." In my story Ali is Samuel "the Chosen One" Taylor while Liston, troubled, unpopular, and heroin addicted is Johnny "the Kid" Valente. Valente is instructed by shady characters to throw the fight in a sort of forced passing of the torch to a young up-and-comer. Besides fiction writing, I am interested in sports journalism. Writing this story gave me the opportunity to combine both interests. Sometimes, I get sick of writing. The ability to create stories involving my other passions reinvigorates my creativity.

Violence is always the answer. Momma said so. The earliest stories I remember weren't by Dr. Seuss, but Mother Gloria. Mouth open in a state of sick pride, I'd listen while my mom detailed ass whoopin' after ass whoopin' she delivered from South Philly to the suburbs of Batavia, NY. As a child in Philly, a blonde girl twirling a baton called her the N-word so she marched across the street and beat her with it. As a teenager in Batavia, she was jumped by girls jealous of her light skin and afro wig but

overcame them all with a heavy coin belt her father bought her. “A hard head make a soft ass,” she’d warn whenever my siblings and I would misbehave. My mom would’ve been an amazing professional wrestler; she’s terrifying with an eye-catching look, catchphrases, devastating one-liners, and strength to boot. But she *hated* wrestling. Her distaste for sports entertainment, as the execs at World Wrestling Entertainment call it, pushed me toward it, drawn in by a natural desire to defy her rule and ingest the violent stories like those she relayed to me. It was a world I longed to live in. “Real Emotion in a Fake World,” the only nonfiction story in my collection, details my falling in and out and back in love again with pro-wrestling. A world of possibilities where misfits could be stars, wrestling provided a dream world where a kid bullied for her demeanor and appearance could thrive.

With *WrestleTopia*, I’ve made that world real. Tasha Rivers is a skinny, black, pro-wrestling obsessed girl from a town most people don’t know exists. Writing a character so much like myself felt vain but that was the bird that landed in my imagination. With daylight came rationality; Tasha would be an amalgamation of my mother and I with the former emerging in wrestling persona Bapsi Wild. Two opposites existing in one body creates balance and chaos; Bapsi steps in to protect Tasha when she submits to those who wish her harm; Tasha only wants to dress up and wrestle once a week, Bapsi wants to fight everyone. They are always both in the same body, yet the amount of control one has over the other depends on where they are. Tasha rules in the real world while Bapsi rules in *WrestleTopia*.

Accustomed to realism, the setting would prove most difficult to form. It was important to portray different styles of wrestling through the territories. Then, Tasha had to go from the real world of Angle Inlet, MN to the concurrently existing realm of *WrestleTopia*. I read a strange story about a man who built an entire life in a dream so real he begged to return after waking. This would be the approach, but it would not be a dream. Instead, Tasha travels through mental states induced by head trauma; when she’s comatose in Minnesota, she awakes in *WrestleTopia* and vice versa. Despite its “fakeness” wrestling has caused incurable health issues and death. Setting the first two chapters in an

overcrowded hospital serves to illustrate the very real dangers present in pro-wrestling. I wanted the reader to get a sense of how outrageous and serious wrestling can be. This balance provides a little breathing room between the humor. These are real people risking their lives for entertainment—and money, championships, respect. In WrestleTopia there is nothing fake about pro-wrestling. No one puts their hands up at the right moment to protect their skull from a steel chair shot. They just get hit.

Writing is a painful business. Sometimes there's an idea swelling but the words don't come to relieve the pressure. But writers must respect the pain, fear, and darkness that comes in the process of writing a story. Accept the fact not everyone (including ourselves) will like everything we write; that some stories just aren't meant to be told by you. For each bird I catch, there's a hundred that get away. Captured birds are brought into the light where they belong. Others scatter in the night sky leaving behind songs that can be heard though they cannot be seen.

Left in the Dust
(Loosely Based on a True Story)

It had been a rough tour and we needed a break. Thirty cities in fifteen states with Lonely Lover's Sinking Feeling, countless trips, none of them good. By 1973, the hippie dream was long dead. Nobody wanted to hear about peace, love, and understanding like they did in '67. For years, every American with a television set had been given a free ticket to Nam, no draft card needed. Voices of change were silenced with guns. Ten-minute guitar solos overtook hooky, sub-three-minute jaunts through audio bliss. All the things the band championed had been stripped, commodified, killed, then buried in unmarked graves. Crowds changed from flower children puffing on marijuana cigarettes and dancing to the beat of their LSD relegated hearts to strung out bikers and the disillusioned survivors of the fall. That tour made me fear what was to come and question everything that had come before it.

I got in with the band the way most people in the incestuous land of LA get in with whatever: connections. One morning, I heard a deep but fragile voice calling to me over the payphone I'd been using as my personal telephone.

"Our band needs a manager," it said.

I was living with my uncle up in Canada at the time (got a draft card in the mail three weeks before) and wasn't really interested in travelling back home and risking getting caught, but I could never say no to Greg in the four going on five years I'd known him. He could be convincing.

"Don't you have diabetes?" he asked.

"No. Why?"

“I have a doctor here, a Dr. Fugazi, who says he diagnosed you with diabetes—and bone spurs—at an appointment you had next Tuesday.”

This was much too much for my brain to comprehend.

“Be at the Toronto airport Monday morning. You have a flight to catch to Los Angeles. See you then.” He hung up.

In the summer of 1967, I became the Lonely Lovers’ manager. I wasn’t necessarily good at my job and I hated the jobby parts of it; the deals with janky promoters, counterfeit merch sellers, hangers-on, keeping everyone alive. I would’ve preferred to be *in* the band. So, I broke even: I got some of the money, but none of the glory; all the blowjobs, but none of the idol worship. Best of all, I got to be on the road with my friends, Greg being the best of them.

Greg Prescott was a pretty boy from Louisiana with a voice that could go as high as a castrato. I’d liken him to a skinny Thor on edibles with a Southern Twang. No matter how much I listened to that liquor-lubricated voice, I always got the chills. He was real ethereal. Too good for this world. Greg was burning out. He got bronchitis the final week of the ‘73 tour and was miserable. He agreed, a long break was in order.

It was Wednesday in Los Angeles but it felt like the weekend. Soon as we landed on tarmac in a little 10-seater private plane we got on loan from a friend of our friend Cyril, me, Greg, and him decided Joshua Tree would be the best place to unwind. I wore a necklace with an amber-colored tube on it that people assumed was some sort of crystal but was really an eyedropper filled with LSD. Greg broke out the blotter paper and thus began our trip. As it crinkled on my tongue, I begged whichever gods whom bestowed upon our earth these mystical potions to allow me full access to my insanity.

Through hazy eyes I ingested the burning yellow sky hanging over the desert floor. That sight is what I remember most from the first night. I thought it was a meteor shower just for the three of us. We’d just go out there and move. Run, jump, try to do somersaults and end up in a cactus, that sorta thing. Kid stuff. Out there, it’s like desert Stonehenge with all the rock formations beckoning in the

distance, making you think they could lead you to the heavens. We stayed at a motel there together for about four days. Cyril and I decided to cut out when Greg started shooting up. Greg could talk me into a lot of things but could never get me to confront my fear of needles. Cyril was curious until he saw how Greg got after taking the stuff. After so many years of friendship, the lasting image in my head of him is propped up in a corner with white boxers and t-shirt on, stains of vomit on both. His head is downturned with a ten-gallon cowboy hat adding to the weight. This lively, intelligent, passionate man devolved into a drooling, stammering, paranoid leper; no one wanted to be around him.

Greg was found curled up underneath a coffee table in a motel on an August morning. A Do Not Disturb sign hung from his doorknob for five days straight before a concerned room attendant decided to intrude. I got the call from his girlfriend, Margie, that they'd found him in his room with empty bottles of liquor and empty morphine syrettes scattered all around the place. As she sobbed, all I could think about was his dead body.

Two, possibly three, or more weeks before, me, Greg, and our friend Cyril had a poolside chat at the same motel where Greg's body was found. The motel was a piss-colored stucco eyesore surrounded by the high desert beauty of Joshua Tree. Christmas lights hung from its single-level visage and in our altered states, it looked like the building bled red, green, and blue. That night, Greg told us he never wanted to leave. (Now, I must be honest with you, reader. My friends and I indulged on natural substances that may somewhat color my memory of what was said that night, *but* the heart of the conversation remains intact.)

"When I die, I want my body to be burned in the desert, and what's left scattered over Cap Rock," Greg said in a serious tone that could not be mistaken for anything else. Cap Rock is a rock formation with a giant boulder on top that we all liked to climb up and lie down on.

"Woah," I said. "That's beautiful, man," I patted him on the back and smiled.

Cyril laughed in agreement.

“I really, really mean it,” Greg said seriously. “My folks down in Louisiana want me buried, but I don’t want to be maggot meal.” He looked off in the distance over the sinister-looking trees. “I want to be up there on the big boulder.”

Then, I nodded off.

Now with Greg dead, we had to get him up on that boulder. I felt like we’d left him to die. The least we could do was let him rest as he pleased. After I got Margie to calm down a bit, I hung up the phone and called Cyril. We had to make plans and make them fast. I called the coroner’s office under the guise of being Greg’s (non-existent) brother and found out his body was to be shipped from Los Angeles International Airport to New Orleans at 3PM the next day.

Hours before Greg’s departure, we drove to a rental car lot owned by the same friend who loaned us the plane for the tour. He’d loan us any car for \$150, so we drove off the lot in a black hearse. Next, we needed something to start a fire large enough to cremate Greg. On the way to the airport, we stopped at Hess and filled up five one-gallon cannisters with gasoline. Confused customers looked on as two long hairs in Levi’s and t-shirts loaded up a hearse. The clerk asked why we needed so much gas and we told her we were headed to a funeral on the other side of the country.

We made it to the airport about two hours before Greg’s flight. As we pulled into the passenger pickup area, we decided I’d do all the talking because Cyril has a bad habit of telling the truth when he gets nervous. I spotted a bored-looking, greasy-haired ground attendant in a bright orange vest. I explained that we worked for a funeral home and were there to pick up a body.

“Excuse me?” he looked like I’d offended him.

“Listen, we’re on a tight schedule. We gotta get the body out of here by 3—” I could tell the kid wasn’t buying it. “We tip well.” I flashed a \$100 bill beside Cyril’s face which stretched into a nervous smile of stress and guilt.

“I’ll see what I can do.” He took the money and disappeared inside the terminal.

About 20 minutes passed and to our surprise, he and two others arrived with a pine wood coffin slanted upright on a luggage cart. We helped them load it into the back of the hearse and set off for Joshua Tree, thankful for overworked employees with no morals—or so we thought until we left the parking lot and saw lights.

“Shit, man! We’re goin’ down,” Cyril said.

I put on my stern voice. “Cool it. I *need* you. Greg needs you.”

Cyril continued to hyperventilate as we ran through a red light, nearly colliding into the side of a Coca-Cola truck.

“I’m gettin’ outta here.”

Cyril, the loon, started to feel around the passenger side door for a handle to open the door. I veered left to pull him away from it.

Cyril’s cries mixed with the police sirens made for a sickly groovy orchestra. “Just let me out!”

“I gotcha, bud.”

I pulled a trick I saw on *Dragnet*. I tailed a light blue Chevy until I saw the black and white get real close, almost on the bumper. Once we got to a green light, I hit the brakes and turned hard right. The hearse tail whipped into the Chevy, sending it sideways. With the nose of the hearse clear, I plowed forward over a median onto the highway. Meanwhile, the Chevy blocked traffic, including the three cop cars behind us.

We pushed the speed limit all the way to Cap Rock. With every turn, Greg’s casket slid from side-to-side and banged against the interior.

“You’re almost home!” I said.

I teared up as we pulled into the shadow of the rock formation. It felt like we were messiahs guiding a lost soul to the Promised Land. We knew we couldn’t carry Greg and his coffin up, so we planned to burn his body on the nature trail, gather what was left, climb Cap Rock, and scatter him over it. We took the casket from the hearse and began to unclasp it. After we lifted the lid and realized

it was the body of an elderly woman and not 26-year-old Greg, the sound of sirens overcame the silence of the desert.

The Fix is in

Eager spectators up in the nose bleeds of the Palisades Theatre on Saturday night can feel the heat rise. Reigning heavyweight champion Johnny “The Kid” Valente is set to defend his title against the much younger and undefeated Sammy “The Chosen One” Taylor.

Those in the cheap seats don’t know the fight has already been won. Johnny’s gonna take a dive in the first round. The decision was made by men in pressed suits who never got their hands dirty, let alone their knuckles bruised and busted from years of training to make it in the fight game. There’s was a game not too dissimilar. There were stakes and agreements, blood and competition, but rarely did they risk their own skin.

“Is your pride worth your life?” the man in the white suit asks Johnny.

The aged champ smiles as he picks the scabs that line the veins on his right arm. “Depends. I ain’t got much life left.”

“If you want the right type of payment, you’ll do as your told.”

The fighter’s tightly laced gloves send a warm tingle to his fingertips that provides a gross comfort. “I got fans out there,” Johnny calls out after the man leaves the locker room. He can hear his laughter in the hallway. Just outside the theatre’s doors, the newsstands sold papers with Johnny’s latest mugshot on the cover. The headline: Nobody’s Champ.

Contrary to public opinion, Johnny was always the oddsmakers’ favorite to win. Only a crazy person would bet against the infallible left hook of the Kid. Sanity rested within the upper tiers of the theatre while the mad were scattered among the first three rows. The flashbulbs of the cameras radiate off their ear-to-ear grins as Taylor connects strikes to the face and body of the champ outfitted in

golden trunks. Hands down at his waist, Sammy attempts to goad the veteran into a brawl. The crowd roars at his audacity.

“You ain’t so bad now. Are ya old man?” Sammy taunts as he sways with the swagger of an oblivious pawn in a dangerous game. Johnny was there but the aggression was gone. He usually led the dance, pressing forward with feints and threatening combos until his opponent left an opening for the knockout punch. To those not in the know, the fight signified Johnny was either over-the-hill or the *new* kid, the Chosen One was just that good.

But Johnny was still there in his mind. He was waiting for Sammy’s best shot. He wanted something real—or something that looked real enough to the spectators. Something even the nose bleeds could appreciate. They’d asked a man with an unloaded gun to send him out to pasture. Back against the ropes, Johnny half-heartedly parries a left jab to be hit with a right hook. It’s a good punch, but not enough to stagger the 260-pound man. Blood trickles from his nose to the mat. Sammy circles back to the center instead of pressing forward for the kill. Johnny glances at the timekeeper who sits a few feet away from the man in white. Two minutes remain.

They meet in the middle where Johnny allows himself to be pieced up by the same jab, jab, cross combo. Each time Sammy throws his left, he drops his right hand leaving him open for Johnny’s left hook. It had to be bait. He couldn’t be that naïve. Johnny figures if he throws a left, Sammy will slip under and counter with an uppercut. That’s what he would do. The veteran whiffs a left more akin to a barroom brawler than a professional fighter. Sammy slips under. Johnny bites down on his mouthguard, teeth seeping into rubber as he braces for impact. The shot lands clean...below the belt. Johnny drops to his knees while the crowd jeers, split between displeasure and glee.

Sammy leans over the champ. “Who you working for?” the referee gives him a stern warning rather than a point deduction for the cheap shot.

Short of breath, the veteran slowly staggers back to his feet. His lip twitches. He feels the warmth of blood as it rises from the coursing veins in his feet to his head. His left arm begins to throb as Sammy flashes a smile.

“45 seconds, Johnny!” yells one of his cornermen, unaware of Johnny’s agreement.

The referee calls time in. Sammy begins to show more aggression toward his wounded opponent. He lunges forward, chin up, putting all that he has into each shot. Johnny gets cracked with an overhand left. The veteran is rocked. This is what he’d been waiting for all night. Now all he must do is dive. The crowd gasps. They wait for the man to fall, yet he maintains an unsteady southpaw stance. Johnny draws back his left fist.

“10 seconds, Johnny!” the cornerman screams.

The crowd jumps to their feet at the familiar scene they prized and reviled for its certain end. Then, the blow. The head of the Chosen One snaps back in a fit of whiplash. Blood and sweat sprays from his face. The once-radiant faces of the fixers distort to anger and disbelief as the-man-who-should-be-champ falls to the canvas unconscious, too far gone for the usual count of ten.

“That’s it!” the ref calls for the bell.

The reigning champion’s corner runs in to celebrate, but he runs past them. He runs out of the ring and hops over the barricade like a prized show horse. The temperature rises ten degrees as he climbs each level until he reaches the tropics. Immediately, he is under siege by the sweaty masses who are happy to be acknowledged by the distant fighter. Though his fate tomorrow is uncertain, tonight he knows how it feels to be somebody’s champion.

Real Emotion in a Fake World

“Noooo!” I wailed as tears streamed down my face.

My brother Marquis snapped at me. “Shut up!”

I was watching *Raw is War* on January 4, 1999 with two of my older siblings. My sister Ariel and I sat on the floor of our brother’s bedroom in a house on a deceptively quiet suburban street in Batavia, New York. Transfixed by the scenes on the twenty-inch television, I bit my bottom lip to prevent any whimpers from escaping. No one said a word. We were all in disbelief.

With the help of Stone Cold Steve Austin, Mankind had just dethroned The Rock as champion of the World Wrestling Federation. Members of the faction D-Generation X flooded the ring to celebrate the new champion who looked just as disheveled in the aftermath as he had when the match began. Dressed like a deranged businessman in a torn and frayed white button-down shirt, brown tights, and a crooked tie, Mankind raised the title above his head and flaunted a smile that bared missing teeth through his brown leather mask. “*No, no! Not Mankind...*” Vince McMahon, chairman of the WWE, whined as he looked on in horror. The Rock, dazed from taking a steel chair shot to the back, was escorted from the ring by the Corporation, his black shirt still neatly tucked into matching track pants.

Although he had turned from the People’s Champ to the Corporate Champ who was a lackey for the McMahon family, I rooted for The Rock because of his charisma, humor, and good looks. He called his foes “jabronis”, “candy asses”, and other insulting names that sounded funny rather than

hurtful and had an electric persona so large he could enliven an arena with the raise of an eyebrow. Also, being a black kid in a predominately white town, it was inspiring to see a half-Samoan, half-black man at the top of the predominately white WWF. On the opposite side of the spectrum was Mankind, a man who found pleasure in agony. He became infamous for surviving a fall of sixteen feet from the top of a steel cage to the announcers' tables below. He pulled out his hair, had one ear, and shoved a dirty sock (Mr. Socko) down peoples' throats until they submitted out of pain and disgust. One month shy of three years old, I had yet to grasp the dynamics of heels (bad guys) and babyfaces (good guys). I didn't understand that I was rooting for the bully and that Mankind's victory was a triumph. Once I came face-to-face with real life heels, I began to see beauty in the underdog who reaches the top—or falls just short of it.

I love pro-wrestling because it's fake. Then and now, wrestling has allowed me to escape into a world without limits where adversity is never too big to overcome, and an outcast can be the most popular person in the room—the opposite of my reality. In my elementary school years, I watched as Rey Mysterio, a 5'6" luchador, become World Heavyweight Champion and Trish Stratus and Lita changed perceptions of women's wrestling through a heated rivalry that showcased they could tell compelling stories in and out of the ring. I was most enamored by Shawn Michaels. Although into his forties, he was seemingly ageless with a legendary career of over 20 years by the time I first saw him in the mid-2000s. In the eighties, the belief was one had to be over six feet tall and muscular to get over with the crowd or to be believable as an in-ring threat. At around 5'10", Michaels's unique moveset, ability to make matches look realistic, and to tell stories in-ring made him a viable opponent for the likes of the much larger Undertaker. When an opponent "hits" Shawn Michaels, he reacts like he's been shot. Whether he's playing good or bad, you feel every emotion he conveys: agony, fear, dismay, arrogance, disgust, elation... His gimmick, or persona, the Heartbreak Kid, works whether he's heel or face. The chiseled and tanned guy with long golden-brown hair who dons flashy outfits is

both the born-again Christian babyface of the mid-2000s, and the sleazy, wife stealing, drug addled heel of the nineties. He's a chameleon that never has to change colors. In pro-wrestling, personality and skill can supersede looks.

However, back in the “real” world, looks were everything. At Jackson Elementary I was introduced to the unspoken code of belonging where the external takes precedence over the internal and we're constantly expected to betray ourselves to please others. Those at the top of the social hierarchy had variations of the same brown or blonde hair color and wore clothes from Abercrombie Kids. The boys had buzzcuts and wanted to be police officers or firemen while the girls had long, straight hair (but would get their hair braided in the Bahamas during vacation) and wanted to be teachers or country singers. I wore clothes from Kmart and hand-me-downs and got my hair done by my mom in painfully tight braids with colorful beads at the bottom, and I wanted to be a professional wrestler—an aspiration my mother strongly disapproved.

I was raised in a strict household where obedience was the rule and anything short of it was discouraged and punished. My mother hated wrestling because she felt it was inappropriate in its portrayal of insubordinates as heroes and feared it would encourage us to cause physical harm to ourselves and others. Her disapproval could not sway me from watching. I'd wait for her to fall asleep so I could watch the weekly WWE shows—Monday nights for *Raw* and Friday nights for *SmackDown!*—on the lowest volume setting. When she'd approach the room, I'd turn off the T.V.

“You better not be watching wrestling,” she'd say.

“I'm not,” I'd blatantly lie. A skill I learned from one of my favorite wrestlers Eddie Guerrero whose motto was “Lie, Cheat, and Steal.”

Although wrong in her prediction that pro-wrestling would turn us into deviants, she was right to worry about us using one another as human crash test dummies. Whenever she left for work, we'd create a ring out of pillows and have our own version of *WrestleMania* in the living room. I still remember my neck pain after I fell victim to Ariel's version of Triple H's finisher the Pedigree.

Wrestling not only inspired the often-cartoonish violence we saw on television, it helped us bond. My siblings and I often fought over the most trivial things but when wrestling was on, it was time to put our differences aside to immerse ourselves in the conflicts of others. We brought wrestling with us everywhere we went. On dismal trips to the grocery store, we'd pretend to be the characters on screen while walking down the aisle. I mastered the Ric Flair strut and would proudly show it off in front of confused onlookers. I can imagine a conversation between a shopping couple who saw the strange sight.

“Is she...conflicted?”

“Just look away, honey.”

I was an unabashed wrestling fan until I went to middle school. In the fall of 2008, I entered sixth grade at Batavia Middle School. We were assigned a project to create a poster that showed our interests to supposedly get to know one another. The project only provided more joke material for the best dressed kids. At the center of my glitter accented poster board was a picture of Shawn Michaels. First, my peers made fun of me for putting a picture of a shirtless man on my board.

“Ooooooh, is that your boyfriend?” someone asked. The class burst into laughter.

“No, it's a wrestler. His name is—”

“You watch wrestling? Are you a baby?” then, more laughter. “It's stupid and *fake!*”

I folded up my poster board and held my head down for the rest of the day.

When I got home, I tore up the poster board, but occasionally watched wrestling through jaded eyes until about 2009 when I could no longer connect with the product. At that point WWE changed. It was the “Parental Guidance Era” when everything was sanitized to appeal to a wider audience. Most of the wrestlers I admired were either retired or losing to John Cena, the new face of the company. The new character closest to the loose cannon misfits I grew up admiring was CM Punk, but his self-

righteous ramblings about his straight-edge lifestyle annoyed me. I had enough people in real life telling me what I should and shouldn't do or believe.

At that impressionable age, I felt the near-constant urge to conform, to be who I was not to become popular or please my parents. Maybe that's why I became so disconnected from pro-wrestling: it was too much like my reality. WWE became a product fed to people rather than something they'd willingly want to consume. Storylines were dictated by advertisers instead of creative writers. Wrestlers were no longer allowed to go off-script. Everything had to be done by the book, repackaged to appeal to a larger audience more likely to be offended by wrestling's more irreverent qualities. The forced change in presentation in the name of popularity and money was dismaying to me, an eighth grader getting physically and verbally attacked each week because of how I presented myself; my reality began to play out in the fake world that initially taught me there was another way to gain respect and admiration. I would need to discover a world outside of the WWE Universe to rekindle what I'd lost.

At 5AM on June 11, 2017, I am propped up in bed wearing pajamas, hypnotized by my laptop screen. Streaks of clear blue light bleed through the blinds over the window beside me. I'd been counting down the days all week to watch a New Japan Pro-Wrestling event live for the first time. Kenny Omega enters the ring accompanied by the tag team the Young Bucks. Omega's entrance music, "Devil's Sky", is a swirling, apocalyptic composition of choral howls and orchestral swells that would suit a final boss in a video game. It blasts through my eardrums as I watch the broad-shouldered half blond, half brunette Canadian make his way to the ring. Amongst all the black of his belted tights and boots, there is a single white wing on his right kick pad. With a look of intensity on his face, he stalks to the center of the ring and does his signature finger gun pose as the ring announcer shouts his name.

"Representing the Bullet Club, "the Cleaner" Kennyyyyy Omegaaaaaa!!"

The crowd in Osaka-jō Hall applauds the gaijin (foreigner) challenging the IWGP (International Wrestling Grand Prix) Heavyweight Champion “the Rainmaker” Kazuchika Okada for one of the most prestigious titles in pro-wrestling. On the other side of the world I could feel my heart pounding in my throat. Six months ago, I’d never heard of Kenny Omega. Now, as Okada makes his way to the ring in a floor-length robe of metallic colors while fake money marked with his face rains from the ceiling, I have my shaking hands clasped in prayer hoping that by God’s will, Omega will accomplish what he fell short of doing five months earlier at *Wrestle Kingdom 11*. His failure in that match reignited my passion for pro-wrestling.

Born and raised in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada, Kenny Omega started his career wrestling for independent promotions before joining Deep South Wrestling, a developmental territory of WWE in the early 2000s. Unsatisfied with the lack of creative freedom, he decides to leave and return to the independent wrestling scene. After competing in independent promotions across North America, he achieves his dream of wrestling in Japan where he has odd matches against opponents like a nine-year-old girl and a blow-up doll. In 2010, he joins New Japan where he is an acclaimed performer and fan favorite for the second-largest promotion in the world.

Omega doesn’t dwell in the past wondering what could’ve been had he stayed in WWE. He uses his negative experiences there as fuel to become who he wants to be: “Looking back on it now, I’m sort of happy that my time there was as unpleasant as it was because had I not had to persevere in that environment, I never would’ve been able to persevere in Japan because things were much more difficult out there for me being completely segregated, isolated...” Maybe he could’ve been like John Cena, an adored company man shoved down every fan’s throat like Brussels sprouts into the mouth of a crying toddler. Maybe this, maybe that. Omega’s story inspires me to ignore the maybes and take pride in who I am rather than dwell on who I could’ve become.

Kenny Omega helps me to see what I once considered to be the biggest mistake of my life as a blessing. I withdrew from school during my junior year of high school. I caved to bullies who would

shout racial epithets at me while I walked down the hall and eventually carved the N-word into my desk—all actions that go unpunished although I report them to school administration. The discrimination coupled with insecurities arising from other bullying incidents bring about suicidal thoughts. I go see a counselor who only wants to fill me with pills which I refuse. I weigh my options and decide to leave school, eventually earning my high school equivalency diploma. While I initially feel like a quitter, reading statistics that paint all dropouts as doomed low-lives fuels me to attend college. In Omega, I found someone akin to the wrestlers I grew up admiring: those who successfully surpassed the limits others set for them. Now, just one semester away from graduating with a bachelor's degree in creative writing, I've embraced the idea that it is sometimes necessary to take risks with unknowable consequences to reach your goals. Omega embodies this principal each time he enters the ring, risking life and limb in the pursuit of victory.

The Omega vs Okada rivalry is a battle between a rebellious outsider and a homegrown talent with looks, skill, and corporate backing. Each believe they are the best in the world and can expand the company's reach. They possess an in-ring chemistry that conveys the idea one could kill the other with the slightest mistake. Their rematch at Dominion 2017 perfectly illustrates the nature of their rivalry. Okada takes control about forty minutes in to the rematch. With each pin attempt, Omega kicks out closer to the count of three, causing me to jolt backward into my headboard. Omega becomes so battered that his fellow Bullet Club member, Cody, comes to ringside and attempts to throw in a towel to signify Omega's surrender. The Young Bucks stop him and soon enough, Omega fights his way back into the match. He grabs the towel Cody tried to throw in, uses it to wipe his sweat, and throws it on the mat.

A demoralized Okada kneels against the ropes, but quickly recovers. He and Omega once again trade counters and offense until Omega catches Okada with the Rain-Trigger, a combination of Omega's signature running knee the V-trigger and Okada's ripcord lariat, the Rainmaker. He picks his

opponent up from the mat and puts him in the electric chair position on his shoulders—the set up for his finisher the One-Winged Angel. Still beside the ropes, he puts Okada’s right leg behind his shoulder, grabs his neck, and brings him over his head, crashing the champion’s head and neck into the canvas. He pins Okada shoulders down on the mat.

The referee counts, “1—2...”

With the ref’s hand barely an inch from the canvas for the count of three, the 6’3” Okada sets his foot on the bottom rope, breaking the count. One simple movement crushes me. Moments from the expiration of the sixty-minute match, Okada delivers a devastating Rainmaker but is too exhausted to properly pin Omega for the win. The toll of the ring bell signifies the end of the war of attrition. The match is declared a time limit draw; Okada is still the IWGP Heavyweight Champion. It is the reverse of the scene from eighteen years ago; Okada, the man with the corporate machine behind him stands tall in the center of the ring while gold confetti streams from the heavens. Omega, the misfit, is aided from the ring while tears stream down his cheeks. The face reflected in the laptop screen is crying with him and in that moment, I could’ve sworn I was a kid again.

WrestleTopia

Chapter 1: A Departure, A Return

A typical Tuesday afternoon: Bapsi Wild prepares to dive from the roof of a mobile home.

“She’s as mad as a box of spiders!” the commentator’s voice crackles through a cheap speaker.

“Only here at Angle Inlet Backyard Wrestling are you gonna see something like this, folks.”

Bapsi appears like a black-winged shadow with the sun setting over her shoulder. She raises her cape overhead as she growls and grits her teeth at her defenseless opponent splayed on the table below with a steel chair on his stomach. The scene of impending violence is quite a contrast to the serenity of forest and deep blue lake just yards away. Bapsi’s heart races when she surveys fifteen anxious spectators seated around the wrestling ring in checkered patterned lawn chairs. Most are on lunch breaks from working in the lumberyard or fishing. They crane their necks up to the mad woman ten feet off the ground, metal chair legs digging into the uneven earth and plastic arms digging into their flesh. She jumped from a burning ladder last week. Without flames, this sight wasn’t as spectacular.

Bapsi takes three steps backward and tries to remember the motions for a new move she’s practiced for the past month: the shooting star press. A film of sweat coats her skin beneath a black patent leather catsuit emblazoned with metallic gold stars, made for this moment. With her custom

outfit and thick curls slicked back in a pompadour, she felt like Evel Knievel, equal parts badass and insane.

The commentator stands and shouts, “Don’t do this!” All the while he knows she will and says a silent prayer for her well-being.

Bapsi responds with the wails of a caterwauling demon zooming through hell.

“RRRRRAHHHHHWWRRRRR!”

Her platform boots thud the trailer’s roof as she runs toward the edge. She leaps off then throws her body backward mid-air. She tightens her core to summon the strength to pull her legs over her head to complete the backflip. Nanoseconds from impact, the man splayed on the table flinches. The tiny movement causes the chair to shift from flat on his belly to slanted upward, squared edge eager to meet Bapsi’s head. The crowd erupts as she lands on the man dressed in clown garb, snapping the table in two. The chair collided with her head, sending her body backward upon impact.

The referee rushes over to Bapsi who resembles a fortune cookie with her legs over her head.

“Jesus, that looked brutal,” he whispers. “The way your head snapped back...” Usually by now she’d be telling him to shut up and count. She must be playing it long today. “Alright Tasha, quit milking it, go for the pin.” He motions for her to roll over and lay on top of her opponent so she can get the three count to win the match. She doesn’t move.

The clown peeks one eye open to see what’s going on and notices a red puddle underneath Tasha’s head. He told her before the match, no fake blood. Even the fake stuff made his stomach churn. He closes his eyes and goes back to pretending to be unconscious.

No one is worried. Spectators debate whether the “blood” on the ring’s white canvas is ketchup or a corn syrup mixture like they use to decorate on Halloween.

“I think it’s Kool-Aid,” a woman remarks confidently.

They all know it’s fake, a *work*. They know Bapsi Wild is 22-year-old Tasha Rivers, a cashier at her father’s bait and tackle shop and one of the sixty residents of Angle Inlet, Minnesota. They know

she hasn't been quite right since her mom left seven years ago. That her guilt-ridden father caved in and started driving her across the border into Winnipeg where she trains in the art of deceptive combat—better known as pro-wrestling. Next, he built her a ring, started paying a few guys in town to train with her, then had them dress up in costumes and face off against her in matches. They'd seen her pull stunts like these since she was fifteen; her penchant for pretending to be hurt, or *selling*, was unrivaled. They leave to return to their jobs.

The frazzled commentator, Tasha's father, tries to halt the crowd. "Now, hold on just a minute there, folks. Don't you want to see if Ta—I mean Bapsi can recover and win?"

"She always wins," someone shouts.

Once in the ring, her father notices the red liquid.

"I told you, Tasha, no blading!" her father whisper-shouts. He was still paying the hospital bill from last month when she thought it was a good idea to slash her face with a razor mid-match to give herself a crimson mask. "You can stop pretending now, everyone's leaving."

"That's quite some daughter you got there, Conway." The clown stands and leaves with an aching back.

Conway picks Tasha's legs up from over her head and sets them on the broken cardboard filled table. Tranquility marked her expression. Chaos left its mark in a crevice seared into her forehead like a volcanic eruption on a brown plateau. "Tasha?"

Her breath comes in spurts tricking the lungs into thinking they'll get their fill; a stale copper taste coats her tongue and throat. One minute, she's on fire, the next she's freezing cold. It feels familiar.

"Someone call an ambulance!" Conway shouts.

Conway did his best to raise Tasha alone. It hadn't been easy. She could be a bit...complicated. He'd first noticed these complications during her childhood. Most days she'd sit calmly on the edge of

the dock, fishing rod in hand waiting for a good bite. Others, he'd have to restrain her from jumping into the lake or pull fresh catches from between her teeth. She was expelled from Angle Inlet's only school in second grade for what her teacher called "occasional animalistic outbursts." It began with biting a classmate's nose for budging in line, then progressed to nearly biting a boy's finger off for taking the last Jell-O cup in the cafeteria. Jean couldn't handle it. She couldn't understand how her daughter, *the* daughter of former Miss Lake in the Woods county Jean Jeanine, could behave like a savage. But Conway still thought she was precious. Even now lying motionless in a hospital bed with tubes running from her throat and arms to medical machinery, staples protruding from her head, he thinks she looks perfect.

The room door swings open. "May I have a word with you, Mr. Rivers?"

"Of course," Conway stands and follows Dr. Tomley out into the hallway.

"Good news. After a couple days of panic, Tasha is in stable condition. Her vitals look great."

"Thank goodness for that," he exhales and buries his hands in his pockets.

"The only thing is," the doctor takes off his glasses, "we don't know how long she'll be under."

"What?" Conway pulls one hand from his pocket, throwing it in the air. "You put her under.

Why can't you pull her out?"

"Unfortunately, Mr. Rivers, it's not that simple. We employed the medically induced coma to reduce brain swelling. A patient can be under from two weeks, to usually a month at the most except--"

"Except what?" he crosses his arms.

"Tasha's is not a usual case. Follow me." Dr. Tomley guides Conway back into the bright room. Light from the window ricochets off the tile floor. He closes the curtains then walks over to an x-ray illuminator with several CAT scan images of Tasha's brain pinned to it.

"We are detecting highly unusual brain activity. In a comatose state, the brain's metabolism and electrical activity are supposed to decrease, yet," he points to an image of Tasha's brain before she was put under, then moves the after image beside it, "it's like she's still awake."

“Then why isn’t she *awake*?” Conway’s voice is gruff.

“Your guess is as good as mine, Mr. Rivers. In my twelve years of practice, I’ve never seen anything like this.”

Both men stand in silence, bathed in the board’s glow. One is dressed in blue jeans and a flannel, the other a lab coat and scrubs. They study the images, dark gray masses with rings of light like a halo tracing their oblong shape. Dr. Tomley searches for medical answers while Conway searches for faith. If Jean was around this wouldn’t be happening. He would’ve never let Tasha wrestle. He should’ve taken on the debt of shrinks, boarding school, etiquette class, whatever it took to keep Tasha from turning into this. To keep her bad side at bay.

“How long can she be under and wake up okay?” Conway stares through the illuminating board.

Dr. Tomley hears the quivers in Conway’s voice. “Let’s not think about that,” he pats him on the shoulder. “When she wakes up, she’ll be awake.” He couldn’t bear to tell him that if weeks turn to months, there could be greater chance of her being in a vegetative state. The doctor turns on the light. “Let’s check on her.”

They walk over to Tasha, unconsciously conscious in her peculiar state. Dr. Tomley takes a small flashlight from his pocket and lifts one of her eyelids. He stumbles backward. Her golden-brown eye’s pupil constricted to a pinpoint.

“Is there something wrong?” Conway’s face scrunches with concern as he walks next to the doctor.

“No, no. It’s just another...unusual discovery,” he takes a deep breath. He opens the eyelid and shines the light so Conway can see. “Again, this is something that is quite abnormal for a comatose patient.”

Conway is speechless while he observes his daughter’s eye. The light had somehow gotten through to her.

“I’m beginning to think your daughter isn’t comatose at all.” Dr. Tomley doesn’t think what he’s saying makes sense. They’d administered all the drugs necessary to induce coma. Her vitals matched those of a comatose patient.

“Then...what is she?”

“Your guess is as good as mine.”

In movies they always say don’t go into the light, but Tasha couldn’t stand to stay in darkness. She doesn’t feel like she has a body, but she somehow manages to move forward until she becomes trapped in a white glow. Her vision is bombarded by an image of herself, dressed as Bapsi, standing in the center of a wrestling ring situated in the burrow of a vast mountain. Then, the light returns.

An odd smell, surgical hand soap mixed with deer piss fills her nostrils. She always associated the latter with her dad who used it like cologne on hunting trips. She parts her chapped lips.

“Dad? What happened?” she asks, too weak to even open her eyes.

“Shh, Bapsi, I’m right here.”

She starts to laugh but then stops because of the pain.

“Since when do you call me that?”

“Do you have some other name I don’t know about?”

A sharp pain shoots through her head before she can answer. “Goddammit. My head hurts.”

“Ladies do not use such vulgar language,” a woman’s breathy voice cuts in.

Mom? Bapsi thinks. All the blood rushes to her head. *How? I’m going crazy—crazier.*

Bapsi hears a door squeak open.

“¡Dios Mio! She’s awake?!” The voice is unfamiliar.

“Quiet down, Bandido.”

“Sorry,” the voice whispers.

Bapsi feels a soft, warm hand on her forehead.

“Take it easy, honey. You’ll be well soon.” Her voice, her hand. Could it really be? Bapsi opens her eyes

And screams.

“Calm down, calm down,” her father says in a voice that is far from calm.

“Why the hell are you dressed like that? Why is she here? Who is he?” Bapsi sits up to express her confusion person-to-person. Dad is dressed like Davy Crockett, “mom” like Jackie Kennedy, and the man in the shiny red mask looks like a Power Rangers reject from the neck up and a train robber from the neck down. She was dressed in a backless white hospital gown.

“I am your mother and you will respect me.” The lady’s gold bangles cling together as she crosses her arms. Her lilac dress suit is the only colorful thing in the sterile white room.

“My mother is dead!”

“I’m gonna...go get the doctor,” Bandido rushes out of the room.

“Bapsi—”

“She’s gone totally batty, Conway. I warned you this would happen. But you just had to let her keep upping the ante.”

“Jean, I trained her. She knows the risks of everything she does,” he points to the half-dazed girl, causing the dead racoon around his neck to move. “She’s never been hurt like this before.”

Jean scoffs and looks down at her painted nails. Outside the rectangular window behind her, three-story tall jumbotrons broadcast wrestling matches. Crystal clear displays show beads of sweat spritz off bodies with each blow and veins tensing in agony. Blood threatens to fall on the streets like rain as it leaks from the mouth of the defeated. Bapsi sits up, in awe at the sight.

Bandido returns. This time he knocked before entering. Another masked man with a clipboard in hand follows closely behind. He is dressed in the normal scrubs and long coat of a doctor. His mask matches the white and turquoise green of his uniform. Bapsi is speechless as she watches the man sit at the end of the bed. “You’re in a hospital, the ICU. I’m El Doctor.”

Her eyes are blank and glazed over. What she saw outside did not look like any place on Earth. This was not Warroad Hospital. The walls there were blue not white. All the advertisements for medications and warnings about the flu posted to the wall are in Spanish. She doesn't know anyone who speaks Spanish. Balloons, cards, and flowers decorate her bedside.

El Doctor raises his eyebrows that no one can see, surprised by her silence. "So, Señorita Bapsi Wild—"

"No, no," she shakes herself awake from her daze, "Bapsi Wild is a character I created. I'm Tasha Rivers."

Everyone looks at her like she's guilty of something awful. Bandido covers his ears.

Jean's eyes dart back and forth. "You can't talk like that. You can get in trouble."

"I'm sure she means no harm," El Doctor begins. "We must be understanding. It is very common for people who suffer head trauma to have memory loss."

"Head trauma?" Even the words make her head hurt. "Ouch." She can feel little lumps on the right side of her forehead. They're smooth, like some sort of metal.

"Take it easy, mija, we'll get to that later." El Doctor scoots closer. "Now...Tasha," he winks. "How old are you?" He speaks slowly as though talking to a toddler.

"Twenty-two."

El Doctor checks her chart to make sure.

"Very good. Do you know where you are right now?"

"Nope."

"Luchadoria Medical Center."

Bapsi laughs. "No. It's not real."

"What isn't real, honey?" Conway walks to her bedside.

"All of this," she points around the room. "I'm dreaming."

“Ok, if this is a ‘dreamworld’, then where are you sleeping?” El Doctor’s voice is no longer gentle.

“Minnesota.”

Bandido scratches his head. “What’s a mini soda?”

“My God, Conway,” Jean grabs her chest, “it’s worse than I thought.” She begins to sob, and Conway tries to console her.

“Bapsi, do you see what you’re doing to your mother? What’s the point in behaving like this?”

Bapsi crosses her arms. “Alright, I’ll play along. Tell me where I’m from then.”

“As far as we know, Americanadia,” Conway replies.

She lets out a dry, punctuated laugh. “Oh, I get it. Because Angle Inlet is between the United States and Canada, right?” she says in a mocking tone with a dopey smile on her face. “Good one, dad.” She gives him a thumbs up.

“It’s no joke,” the big man leads his wife to a chair. He buries his hands in the pockets of his deer hide pants. “At least... that’s where we found you.”

“Found me—you know what? Everybody just get out of here. Let me go to sleep.” Her father used to tell her to go to sleep if she ever found herself trapped in a nightmare.

“But you just woke up, my friend,” Bandido walks to her side. “We must train.”

Jean startles from her faintness. “Train? With you? Never again!”

Bapsi lies back on a pillow with her eyes closed.

“We should let her rest,” Conway says.

El Doctor nods his head in agreement. “Everyone out. We’ll see our Bapsi, or Tasha, tomorrow.”

Jean, Conway, and El Doctor leave the room but Bandido lingers behind. Once the door closes, he creeps to Bapsi’s bedside and kisses her on the cheek. “Hasta mañana, mi amor.”

Before she can think it through, her fist meets Bandido’s face. He crumbles to the ground.

Shocked by the strength of the blow, Bapsi sits up. In her dreams, she's always pillow-fisted. In real life, too. "Sorry, reflexes."

"Love hurts." Bandido staggers back into the window. The thud of his back against it draws Bapsi's eyes outside.

The wrestling scenes playing out on large jumbotrons pull Bapsi from bed and onto her feet toward the window. Behind the jumbotrons are even taller buildings made of glass and steel; the streets glisten as though littered with precious stones; stop lights are colored red, white, and green; streets bear names like Mysterio Place, El Santo Blvd, and La Parka Way in honor of legendary luchadores; pale pastel colored homes rest beyond the city limits; in the city center, a large open air stadium that resembles a phoenix hosts wrestling matches where spectators sit on purple wings that burst flames at the conclusion of each match.

"I'm not dreaming?" Victory's flames flash in her unblinking eyes. They follow the people below who all wear masks. Even babies pushed in strollers obscure their not yet formed identities. Sounds of muffled cheers, the thud of boots on canvas, and steel chairs against skulls bleed through the window.

"Uh, no." Bandido breathes heavily as he tries not to stare at her bare butt.

Bapsi rushes to the bedside table and grabs a vase of flowers. Eyes tightly closed, she smashes it on her head. Through the stars in her eyes, she can see Bandido pressed against the window, terrified. She growls as water and blood pour down her face. Sprinkles of flower petals tangle in her wet, matted hair.

"That fall really messed you up, huh? You were crazy before, but now you're," he circles his finger around his covered ear, "crazy crazy."

She wipes the mess off her face and onto her hospital gown. She looks at her reflection in a shard of glass gripped in her hand. "How did I get here?" The same face she recognized stared back, just with staples jutting from the head.

Bandido whistles. “Well,” he leans against a wall, “you trip and fell.” His eyes look up and to the right. A smile shines bright white between the devilish red of his mask.

“No, I mean *here*.” She points out the window.

“Oh, oh,” he laughs. “You came here to train, remember? All the wrestlers go to each territory to learn new things. This was your last stop.”

She tries to remember only to recall waking up in this hospital room. “I don’t...” The bed creaks as she plops down. Repeated shakes of her head only make her dizzy.

“Ah,” Bandido reaches into his back pocket. “Maybe this will help.”

Seeing the dull leather mask sends a chill down her spine. She traces along the thick red line that runs underneath and between the wolf’s eyes and the golden swirls that line the ears. Tingles of electricity fill her fingers. There’s a magnetism between her and the mask, like a gravitational pull. Her pupils dilate as the bright light returns. She feels like she’s floating again and can’t move in her physical state. Then, she’s standing in the middle of the ring, bloody and battered now. Half of the mask has been ripped from her face, revealing the mark on her forehead, now a scar. Drool drizzles from her mouth onto the nose of the wolf. Bandido sits beside her. He’d seen her like this before.

“Do you see yourself?”

Bapsi nods absentmindedly, still staring at the mask.

“It’s your *destino*,” he’d given the speech so many times before, he hardly had to think while doing it. “You must reach the top of the mountain, the Precipice. That’s where it will be decided who you truly are and where you belong.” She is supposed to break out of the trance at the speech’s end.

“Where you belong,” Bandido repeats the last phrase, thinking it will stir her. This was different from the other times.

“Where you—” he gives up on it. “Bapsi, Bapsi?” Bandido claps his hands in front of her face. “Don’t make me kiss you again.”

She snaps her head in his direction. “Put those lips on me, I’ll rip ‘em off.”

A smile grows on Bandido's face. Slowly but surely, she was coming back. And she'd eventually learned to love him again, like she always did.

"How do I get there?"

"No problemo, my friend." He takes the cover from the bed and drapes it over his head. Underneath it, he removes his mask, takes the wolf mask from Bapsi's lap, and throws his to her. The bandit emerges as a wolf.

"Put that on," he instructs.

"Why?"

"They won't let you out of here as Bapsi. You'll have to be Bandido until you can get out into the streets."

"What about my clothes?"

Bandido opens his mouth to speak but closes it. "I didn't think about that. Try mine?"

"Nonono," Bapsi recoils from the sight of him undoing his belt.

"You're right, I'm too big."

"How about I just wear your jacket?"

Questionable smells came from the jean material but Bapsi was desperate. "Why won't they let me leave? Is there something wrong?" She tugs the mask over her mess of curls.

"You were asleep for a loooong time...", Bandido begins while tightening the laces on the back of his mask Bapsi now wears. He wondered if he should tell her it wasn't the long sleep, but things she had done before that made them want to keep her holed up in a hospital. With her back turned, he tucks a restraint into the side of the mattress.

"I have no idea where I'm going," she says, pulling down the jacket to cover her bare bottom.

"We can't leave together, too obvious. Just follow the wings of the phoenix. I'll meet you there tonight. Then, we will train."

"And the Precipice?"

“That will come with time. First, you must prove your worth.”

The only thing racing faster than her mind was her heart. She couldn't stay here. Not after the bright lights, visions, and Bandido's speech. But she began to wonder why she had so much trust in this man who she couldn't remember.

“Why should I trust you?” Bapsi asks while being led to the door by Bandido.

He pulls up Bapsi's sleeve to reveal a tattoo of a red heart on her forearm. “Bandido” is inked across a white banner that wraps around it. In the same spot on his forearm, an identical tattoo with “Bapsi” in place of his own name.

“Por vida,” he says, tenderly touching her tattoo. His green eyes glisten from between the wolf's almond-shaped eyes lined with red.

She stares vacant-eyed at the man. A chill creeps up her spine, travelling to her head where it warms her mind. It was a comforting feeling. Like she wasn't alone in this strange world after all.

“Now, you must be on your way,” he whispers. “Look for an elevator, go down to the basement. There's an exit. That will be the safest way for you to get out without getting caught.”

Bapsi nods, slowly pulling her arm from Bandido's gentle grip. The mad alter ego, allowed to surface only once a week, now controlled both fates. Tasha was lost, but maybe she could find her true self in her madness, a balance. What she once suffocated may be what saves her.

Chapter 2: Medical Waste

Being pant-less in public seemed quite normal for this setting with people walking around in wedgie-inducing spandex. A man lies on a stretcher wearing a gold lamé banana hammock with a parrot on his shoulder. He stares at Bapsi through glazed over eyes, unfazed by the blood dripping from the bandage on his head. She tries to keep a low profile as she searches for an exit, avoiding eye contact and staying close to the walls so she can pivot around a corner if someone gets too close. She wears Bandido's mask and jacket, but she does not have his height, build, or skin tone. She'd have to be stealthy. The reception area is that of a typical hospital, a spacious white room with a circular desk in its center. Nurses wearing white masks emblazoned with a red cross symbol on the forehead mill about from room to room.

Her bare feet squeak against the freshly waxed sea green tile. It's hard not to look into the rooms where patients lie in elevated hospital beds, anguished expressions visible through creases on their skin or colorful masks. One hall of rooms occupied with broken bodies leads to another. She winces at the occasional scream. After exploring four hallways, she comes to a dead end. A large bay window provides a view of the city skyline. Across from it, an elevator for patients and visitors opens with a ding. Startled, Bapsi turns toward a map of a place called WrestleTopia. There's no United States... no Minnesota. Instead five territories connected by roads. Luchadoria is the southernmost territory, with Americandia to the north, Puroresu to the east, and European to the west.

"Hey, man!" a deep voice calls from above.

Bapsi turns to see orange abs chiseled to perfection. They're oily enough for her to spot her reflection. She backs up and beholds a seven-foot-tall man with bleach blonde hair wearing mirrored sunglasses and green tights with "Buff" written in glitter cursive across the waist.

"Bandido!" Buff traps her in his embrace. He only registers those shorter than him as short, never considering the differences they may have in inches. "What kind of spray tan are you using? You look dark!" He adjusts the leather jewel encrusted belt draped over his shoulder.

Bapsi looks around the hallway uncertain of what to say or do.

"Oh, I see. You're thinking about Bapsi," he says in a mocking tone. A slap on the shoulder knocks her off balance. "Underneath all that crazy is a smokeshow. You're a lucky man."

"Our pal Chavo won't be in the Precipice qualifiers," he lowers his head and sighs. "His leg practically snapped in two. But if you ask me..." Bapsi backs away as he bends down toward her ear, "he's one less bum to smash on the way to the top."

She started to fit the puzzle pieces together in her mind. The Precipice wasn't a given. She'd have to earn her way there.

Buff looks out the window. "It's a beautiful day. Not just any day, leg day." He points down at Bapsi's thin legs. "You're gonna have to work on those gains if you wanna be champ." He smacks her on the shoulder while she hangs her head in defeat. "Chavo's room is around the corner if you wanna see him. I gotta get going," Buff flexes his bicep, in awe at its size. The veiny mass is larger than his head. "Until next time, amigo." Bapsi resists temptation to bite the man's ankle as he bends down into the elevator. She'd probably break her jaw. She goes back down the hall she came from.

"You'll be on your feet in no time, Chavo."

Bapsi halts at the name. She peeks inside the room to see a man in a wheelchair whose casted leg is bent in a direction legs aren't meant to go speaking to a red-headed nurse.

Chavo looks up at the face in the doorway. "Bandido?" When the nurse turns to look, the face is already gone.

“I’ll be back in to check on you later,” she pats him on the shoulder. There’s a long list of patients on the morning rounds sheet. Next: **Bapsi Wild**. The nurse had only ever seen her unconscious. News of her revival an hour ago made her feel uneasy.

Like other places, WrestleTopia has its own myths and legends. The most prominent in recent years has been the legend of the Feral Child of Breakneck Wood. Some say she was born under a full blood moon, the progeny of man and wolf. Others say she ascended from a dark place. Wild Man Conway stumbled upon the child of unknown origin while on a hunting trip. He took her in and raised her as his own, despite the protestations of his posh wife Jean Jeanine. For the past four months, the nurse warily entered room 12 with dark tales of a hairy, flesh eating girl-beast spinning in her head. Even after she discovered Bapsi was barely 5’3” and no hairier than her, she carried a sedative-filled syringe. The paranoia worsened two months ago when they removed the restraints from Bapsi’s wrists and ankles, no longer seeing it necessary to tie down a hibernating beast.

She makes the sign of the cross as she enters the room. It’s pitch black with the lights off and curtains drawn. Light from the hall reveals a shadow propped up in bed. The nurse’s trembling hand flips on the light switch. She gasps at the sight of the wolf mask, unaware that Bapsi is not beneath it.

“G-good morning,” she closes the door behind her. “You probably don’t know me…” she takes slow, measured steps, careful not to step on the shards of glass littered on the floor at bedside. “I’ve been your nurse these past few months.” There’s a foot of distance between them. The nurse rests her hand on the syringe in her pocket. “I see you found your mask.” Somehow, the mask showed none of the damage it bore the day Bapsi was admitted.

Bandido nods.

“I’m gonna help you get washed up. Ok?” the nurse cautiously motions to pull back the covers. Bandido grabs her wrist. She could swear “her” eyes glowed.

“No, no, thank you,” in a voice like he’d inhaled helium.

“That’s some grip you have,” a nervous laugh escapes her throat, “I guess the long rest made you stronger.”

Bandido nods, smiles. He realizes he hadn’t thought this through. Bapsi escapes, then what? He scales down the building from the twelfth floor? Idiota! His eyes dart across the room, framed motivational posters making him nauseous.

“C-could you p-please let go of my wrist?” the nurse asks, but his grip only tightens. At the same time, her grip tightens on the syringe in her pocket. At any moment, she expected the wolf to pull her in and bite her nose off. She’d seen Bapsi do it to a poor man...or she heard people talk about it.

Bandido’s mind continues to race, thinking of how they’ve probably already caught Bapsi. She’s probably being tortured at Castaway Island right now! It’s his fault she was in the hospital in the first place. They’d never be tag team champions. Bapsi would never love him again.

A syringe appears in his entranced eyes. Bandido grabs the nurse’s hand. They resemble dance partners at a stalemate, male and female attempting to dictate the next move. Their limbs quiver as they push into one another. Bandido jolts from the bed to his feet, spinning the nurse around into his arms in a swift motion. She tries to scream but can only manage a weak squeal. Her arms in an X across her chest, Bandido lets go of her wrist to cover her mouth.

“Lo siento,” he whispers in his normal voice. He forces the syringe inward toward her, bites the cap off, and slides the needle into her neck. He catches her before she falls to the ground, then places her in bed with cover over head. He leaves the room pitch dark as it was when she entered.

Bandido breathes a sigh of relief unaware Wild Man Conway stands outside the door, eyes wide and nostrils flared.

His deer skin jacket’s fringe trembles on his heaving chest. “Where is she?”

...

Bapsi finds a way out at another dead end. A raven-haired boy in a burlap get up waits for the elevator beside a stainless-steel cart. She looks over her shoulder as she stalks forward on all fours.

The boy's whistles echo down the empty hall. Distracted by his unrhythmic tune and biting his fingernails, Bapsi goes unnoticed as she slides into a small compartment beneath the cart.

Hiromu is a jabroni. He's one of many who work at Luchadoria Medical Center. There are many rules jabronis must abide by, the most important being under no circumstances are jabronis allowed to freely converse with wrestlers. Only during the shameful paid act of jobbing, purposely losing a match to make a wrestler appear strong, can a jabroni interact with a wrestler. Even then, there is no talking involved, just the jabroni subjecting themselves to two or three minutes of punishment either for WrestleTopia's currency, DiBiases, or pride to say they stood in a wrestling arena. Hiromu bemoans his status as he descends toward Lower Level 2 where he must dispose of medical waste.

The elevator's jaws open onto the cavernous basement. Sparse beams of light flick on as he pushes on toward the waste disposal room. Hiromu keeps his guard up. Eyes darting back and forth, he searches the pipe-lined walls for shadows in the yellow light. Nothing bad had ever happened to him while down there, but the silence made it feel like it could.

"Pssst."

Probably just steam leaking from a pipe, he thinks. Then he hears it again, louder.

"Psssssst," spittle shoots from Bapsi's lips.

Hiromu stops the cart.

"Hey! Down here," a muffled voice whisper-shouts. The stainless-steel door squeaks open and a red masked face peers out.

I am a jabroni, Hiromu begins mentally reciting Article I of the Jabroni Code, *I am not worthy of the presence, time, or conversation of a professional wrestler...* His face reddens as the character pulls itself out of the cart.

Bapsi looks up and down the empty hall. Her bare feet stick to the concrete floor as she pulls herself out. "You know a way out of here?"

I am a jabroni, I am not worthy of...

CRASH

Bapsi grabs and throws Hiromu into the cart. Her frustration could be suppressed no longer. It was like all the blood rushed from her brain into her body leaving her mind defenseless to her body's actions. She picks him up by two handfuls of his burlap shirt.

"Listen, buddy," they're nose to nose, "either you show me a way out or—" Air escapes her lungs as Hiromu buries his fist into her side. He pushes her off and rolls back to his feet. He was not supposed to do that.

"You can't be down here!" he yells. The realization he'd committed a crime makes his voice crack. He puts a hand over his mouth, turning his back to avoid eye contact.

Bapsi lunges forward, picks him up by the waist, and suplexes him, throwing him over her head and onto his. Their violent exchange casts shadows of flying fist and flailing legs on the wall. Hiromu shoves his feet into Bapsi's stomach and monkey flips her over into the cart. Orange baggies filled with removed appendages and medical paraphernalia spill out. With Bapsi flat on her back, Hiromu runs toward her only to be stopped by a foot to the face. She tears one of the baggies open with her teeth, then positions herself on his back. A squishy, cord-like thing emerges. She wraps it around her wounded opponent's neck. The smell makes him gag more than the pressure on his windpipe. Bapsi smiles as the light dims in his eyes.

BBBRRRRRR

An alarm blares and red lights flash throughout the hall.

"Atención, esto es una emergencia." The alert system warns of escaped patient, Bapsi Wild in Spanish, English, and Japanese among other languages.

It's distraction enough for Bapsi to loosen her grip. "Hey!" she yells as Hiromu reaches up to grab the top of her head. He pulls off the mask.

Hiromu struggles to get his breath back, coughing and gagging. "We've got to get you out of here. Security will be everywhere." He limps to his feet.

“I just choked you, now you wanna help me?” blood drips from her mouth.

“If we get caught, we’re both screwed.” Hiromu had lost count of the number of Jabroni Codes he’d broken in the last ten minutes. He’d never be allowed to leave Jabroniville again or be sent to prison if he was caught.

Bapsi considers her other options. There are none. “Alright, what do we do?”

They shove the bags and Bapsi back into the cart. From there, it’s a race to the waste disposal room. Once in front of the door, Hiromu enters a pin number on the keypad. The echo of the elevator coming to rest on their level echoes just as the door clicks open. Red lights and alarm stay behind in the hallway.

Cheeks flushed red, Hiromu slams the door behind them. “You have to go out with the trash.”

“Out where?” Bapsi pulls herself from beneath the cart.

“I’m not sure exactly where it lets out,” he gasps for air, “but the waste goes down that chute into the boiler room where it is incinerated.”

“What if it goes straight into the incinerator?”

They hear running footsteps approaching. Hiromu opens the chute in the concrete wall a few feet above the floor. His face glows orange with flame.

Bapsi backs away. “You’re trying to kill me!”

“No, it could be coming from the other side of the room,” Hiromu tries to assure her of something he doesn’t know. “I know for a fact tunnels run under all of Luchadoria. There has to be a way in from down there.”

Fists pound at the door.

“Listen, either you go down there, or to Castaway Island. From what I’ve heard being burned alive is a godsend compared to there.”

They hear buttons clicking on the keypad.

Hiromu grabs Bapsi and lifts her to the open chute, struggling to summon strength after the beating he took.

“I swear if I die—“

“You’ll be dead,” he pushes her down toward rising heat and blinding light as the door flies open.

Hiromu turns to the men dressed in black from head to toe.

“Just taking out the garbage.”

...

“Conway, please.” Bandido begs Conway for mercy.

“Why’d you let her go?!” he pushes his forearm into Bandido’s neck, letting go just enough so he could speak

“I—I thought I could help. She saw her destino!”

Conway lets the unmasked man go. The sparse light in the broom closet isn’t enough to fully expose his identity. “She always sees it, and that’s the problem. You know if she makes it there she’s never coming back.”

Bandido rubs his aching neck. “I know, but maybe we should let her go.”

“She’s my daughter dammit!”

“In a way, I guess. But you know it’s not true. She cannot stay here. You know what happens if she stays!” Intensity rises in Bandido’s voice with each word.

“I can make it right this time.”

Bandido scoffs. “No comprendes. If Bapsi doesn’t meet her destino, if she doesn’t go back to the other side, she will die.”

“No, she won’t,” Conway points a finger at Bandido. “I’ll find a way to keep her here. We must find her before security does. Are you going to come with me, or keep trying to justify your mistakes?”

Bandido puts a mop bucket on his head, signifying he is willing to help find Bapsi.

“What are you doing?” Conway is annoyed.

“What? I have to cover my face.”

“At least choose something you can see through.” Conway tears the tail off his raccoon. With a bear tooth, he cuts two holes into it. “Here.”

“Gee, thanks,” Bandido ties the furry thing to his face and follows the large man out into the hall, sirens still blaring. “Silly gringo,” he mutters.

“What did you say?”

“Silly gringo!” he yells.

Conway laughs and hits the call button for the elevator.

Time in a Bottle

FUTURE

Vanessa died a preventable death. This is hindsight, of course. I lived those moments before without fear of the future, too busy ruminating on the past while dreading the present. Then, I thought the past could heal her body. The body now hunched over, face down in a tub of filth. The body in whose destruction I played a part.

*

PRESENT

Summer's almost gone. The plane is filled with families who reek of sunscreen after weeks of application to protect from the Florida sunshine. Mickey Mouse ears peer around seats and become trapped in my aimless gaze. Five years living a few miles away, I've never been to Disneyland. I told myself it'd be weird to go alone. It seems like one of those places you need to experience with others to enjoy. All my others are in upstate New York. I travel home to get away.

I have a sister, a mother, and a nephew. They'll meet me at the airport in Buffalo. My stomach churns, tumbling like the wind around airplane wings. Lisa Rinna's mocking smile sells *Depends* adult diapers in an *American Way* magazine whose pages stick to my palms. I'm not a nervous flyer. I fear destinations, or rather what may happen upon arrival. Certainty is a comfort I have learned to live without.

"Where's God, mommy?" a little girl in the window seat of my row points outward to endless blue sky.

"Too far up for us to see Him." She returns to her iPad.

Our eyes meet as she turns away from the window. She's maybe four or five years old. That odd look children get when they're disappointed but not exactly sure why marks her face, lip curled downward but eyes wide. Sunshine glints through her wild red curls. I smirk at the thought I once believed adults knew everything—and they always told the truth. *It's just a phase, Mom said. She can stop whenever she wants to.*

We touchdown with the sun. Orange dreamsicle sky is suspended over gray tarmac lined with little white lights. Out of habit, I always brace myself for a big impact before landing. Turbulence is only scary when you don't expect it. Freshly tanned people wearing cargo shorts and gift shop t-shirts rise from their seats on the grounded plane and rush to gather belongings before deboarding. The voice of a flight attendant thanking us for flying with American Airlines between corny jokes crackles through the air before cheesy muzak takes over. I text Mom: *just landed*. A message left on "Read" from one week ago at 3:22AM idles above it: *got the ticket. See you in a week. Love you.*

Was I wrong for only showing up when things went bad? Was it wrong to leave in the first place? No, is what I tell myself. This is how a family functions. News must be good or bad to be worthy of response. If there's an in between, it's too much. When you aren't self-reliant enough to care for yourself, you live at home. Once you gain individual survival ability you leave. Then there was that nagging part of me that felt like a deserter. It was easy to live there when I didn't understand, or rather chose to ignore what was going on. I retreated when forced to stare down the barrel of the smoking gun. Now I've returned, charging down the tunnel headed into battle with burden on my back. My phone dings. A message from Mom: *meet at baggage claim*.

The terminal gets more claustrophobic the further I go. Floor to ceiling windows with runway views turn to kiosks with overpriced travel essentials. Down two escalators, then to the left, I see a highlighter yellow sign with colorful metallic letters spelling out "Welcome Home Hannah!" beside a conveyer belt carrying luggage. I get a few feet within the sign when a person darts from behind it,

leaving one end of the sign touching the floor. It's Vanessa charging full speed ahead like a raging bull. We collide with a force so strong the wind is driven from my lungs. I drop the roller bag I'd been lugging behind me. She caught me off guard. I'd never seen her like this.

"Hannah!" she yells loud enough for the entire room to hear.

"Hey!" I say with bated breath. I return her tight embrace and we stand in one place waddling back and forth like uncoordinated dancers. Over her shoulder, Mom and little Troy lightly jog to where we are.

"Long time no see, stranger," Mom says. Troy releases her hand and hides behind her legs. She turns around to look down at him. "Come on and say hi to your auntie. You ain't shy." He shakes his head "no".

"You don't remember me?" I bend a knee to make myself appear closer to his size. Friendlier.

Troy hugs Mom's legs unwilling to greet the stranger. Last time I saw him he could barely walk.

"That's all you brought?" Vanessa asks looking down at the roller bag on the floor.

"Yeah. I won't be staying that long...will I?"

Mom glances over at Vanessa to indicate the length of my stay is dependent on her.

Vanessa bends down and picks up my seemingly inadequate luggage. "Alright, then. Let's go. I wanna get something to eat while we're here. All the restaurants in Elba suck."

Mom pries Troy from her legs and we head out the revolving door.

We settle on TGI Fridays. Lately, I'd been trying to follow a healthy diet but that all ends today. There were so many habits I'd abandoned since leaving home that I always wound up picking up again on the rare visit. The greeter guides us to a booth in the back. It's busy for a Sunday. Those stares I remember from when I was last upstate five years ago are still present. Inquiring minds wondering how a black family ended up with a porcelain skin child with dirty blond hair. The red

cushions feel surprisingly comfortable compared to the airline seats. Date night lighting, the type that obscures just enough, suspends above the table in an aluminum fixture. Mom and Vanessa sit on one side of the booth while I sit on the other. Troy sits at the head of the table in a booster seat. I can't help but smile as I look at them in coordinating outfits: black tops accented with lace and light blue jeans. They only differ in their cardigan colors with Mom going with gray and Vanessa in tan.

“So, how's it going?” Vanessa's eyes scan the large laminated menu.

“Pretty good,” my eyes pass over a monstrosity of four beef patties between grilled cheese sandwiches. “The flight wasn't too bad.”

“You look comfortable,” Mom says. I can't help but feel it's a slight at the way I'm dressed. Sweatpants and an old basketball t-shirt. I don't respond and continue my search for the least diabetes-inducing item on the menu. Troy begins to whine and squirm in his seat after dropping a crayon on the ground. I bend down to pick it up.

“Here you go.”

Troy's face twists with disgust as he turns away. “No, not you.”

“Stop being a jerk.” Vanessa says. She turns on the small tablet on the table where we can place our order without human interaction. The screen stops Troy from bursting into a tantrum, too distracted by the colorful pictures.

“I should get a martini,” Vanessa smiles. She notices Mom and I staring at her. “I'm just kidding.”

“You better be,” Mom pulls the tablet away from her.

Vanessa changes the subject. “Do you like living in Florida?”

No, not really, I think. But I'm too proud to say it out loud. There must be a reason for my years-long absence. More than I just wanted to get away.

“It's nice. Don't have to worry about lake effect snow or my car rusting from all the salt.” I order a root beer and soft pretzel appetizer.

“That’s cool.”

I turn my attention to Mom. “You’re awfully quiet.”

“I got a lot on my mind.” She pulls a crayon from Troy’s mouth.

The food arrives, and the table falls silent. Mom or Vanessa occasionally scold Troy for pulling his straw out of his drink cup. I’m the first to finish my small meal so I bury my face in my phone. I have one notification: an email from Rebecca Warren, MS. The subject: Vanessa’s Treatment.

Hello Hannah,

I hope you don’t mind I asked your mother for your email address. As you already know, Vanessa begins in-patient treatment on Tuesday. While in our care at ERF, she will have group meetings with other recovering addicts, as well as one-on-one meetings with me and a sober coach. Through these sessions of individual and group therapy, we seek to get to the root of their addiction, how it began, and how we can work together so that they may live healthy lives free of drugs and alcohol.

We believe it is important for our patients to realize their addictions also have a great impact on their families. I’ve spoken with your mother on numerous occasions individually and with Vanessa in attendance. I would like you to be an active part of Vanessa’s recovery as well. I’ve found that reminding addicts of incidences in which they have harmed family members, on purpose and inadvertently, helps them to see how the addiction affects their behavior, often leading to the deterioration of relationships. For your part, I would like you to share memories of times when Vanessa’s alcohol consumption has negatively impacted you. Write them down to the best of your memory (ages/years help) as though you are speaking to her and email at your convenience. My hope is to share these with Vanessa once we begin to progress in her treatment.

I understand that you are visiting to help mediate the process of Vanessa checking into our facility and your mother taking on sole custody of her child while she is away. If you have the time and are willing, we can meet in person as well.

Thank you,

Rebecca Warren, MS

Elba Rehabilitation Facility

“Did you get a message from work?” Mom polishes off her last bit of burger.

“No, just reading some dumb article,” I put my phone face down on the table. “I can pay.”

“Already did,” Vanessa swipes her card on the waiter tablet.

“Oh, thanks.”

“No problem. Thanks for coming.” She smiles.

That night, I ruminated on the proposition while feigning sleep in my childhood bed. Is it betrayal or therapy to expose someone at their most vulnerable? Whenever there was an incident with Vanessa, we’d act like nothing had happened at all. It was like the sun’s rays erased our minds of what had transpired the night before. Mom and I pretended to forget. Vanessa just forgot. If I write it down and she reads it, she probably won’t recall anything I describe. What she doesn’t remember won’t hurt her. But I’m not sure I want to open all the doors I’ve long left closed with their locks made to rust until no key could open them. But I’ll control the narrative. I decide to write it all down, what I’ve chosen to remember. I’ll send it to her counselor if it *feels* right...whatever that means. I pull my laptop from my bag and begin typing.

PAST

2004: I was 8, you were 18

“This is all just a bad dream and I’m gonna wake up!” you scream at the top of your lungs.

Mom has just told you grandpa died. I peek over the banister and watch while you throw things around your already messy room.

“Vanessa, calm down,” Mom says as she chokes back tears.

By eight, I had been trained well to let my tears fall quietly but your display makes me want to mourn louder. Mom cautiously approaches your room, careful not to do anything that may further upset you. Before she can begin her taming routine of slow, measure platitudes followed by a forced hug, I hop up the last step onto the faux hardwood floor of the upstairs foyer and slide in front of Mom. I wail as loudly as I can, like I have something to prove. She looks down at me for a moment, then back up at you. She sidesteps the youngest daughter to console her oldest one.

2010 – I was 14, you were 24

The day passes quietly like most other days in the suburbs. I'm at home feigning sickness to avoid another day of eighth grade. I sit alone in a wicker chair on the front porch of our house while a stray cat claws at the chipped burgundy paint of the slanted steps. The trees are the greenest they'll be all year while the sky is a wicked blue-gray threatening rain. I stare across the street at three kids who play on scooters. They curse as the uneven and cracked sidewalk catches their wheels, sending their bodies forward and nearly tumbling to the pavement.

A bright green Dodge Neon scares away my cat companion and blocks the view of the potty-mouthed kids. A strange white guy gets out of the driver's side and opens the passenger side door. He leans in and struggles to pull something out. He emerges with you in his arms. You're like a rag doll with your limbs swinging back and forth as he approaches the steps. I jump up and run inside.

“Mom!”

The man kicks the screen door begging to be let in.

Mom pulls the door open. “Who the fuck are you?”

“I—uh,” the scrawny man is losing his balance as he struggles to maintain his grip on your lower back, “she just—”

“Get the fuck out of my house!”

He sets the body down on the living room floor and runs back outside.

We try to revive you with smacks and cold water on the face and screaming. The only response we get is spewing vomit that makes small orange-pink rivers along the wiry carpet. I call 9-1-1.

“She has the liver of a man in his mid-forties,” I hear the doctor say to Mom. “If she continues to drink like this, the organ will fail.”

“Oh, help me, Father God.”

I want to cry but the tears won't come. I thought the sight of you on the hospital bed with tubes sticking out of your arms would make me feel something. At least I have an excuse for being absent from school today.

“Did you see the marks on her arm?” I ask as Mom walks into the room.

Dark lines, some near-perfect horizontals others slanted, scar your left arm like tally marks. Mom walks over and grabs the limp arm. She studies it for a moment, lays it at your side, then says nothing as she walks away. She takes a seat in a chair beside the bed and uses the remote control to turn on the five o'clock news.

“How long are we staying?”

“We'll leave after she wakes up,” Mom's eyes remain on the mounted television.

“Well, we can't stay too long. I have to go to school tomorrow.”

She laughs. “Whatever.”

It's nearly nine o'clock and you're finally awake. Artificial light replaces the natural light of day. You jolt up onto your forearms, eyes nearly closed, black mascara smudged on your eyelids.

“It's okay,” Mom says as she rubs your back. “You need to stop all that drinking mess. The doctor said if you keep it up—”

You turn away from her and bury your face in the pillow, wrapping it around your head from ear-to ear.

“Moooooom, stooooop!!” you growl into the pillow.

“Let’s go,” I say.

You turn toward me and reach out your arms.

“Hannah, gimme a hug.”

The rare words tingle my ears, but I remain seated on the window sill looking at the quiet houses with all their lights out. I’m mad that I have to be here because of you and have no interest in playing consoler. But then I look up at you, uncharacteristically messy with wide, glassy eyes. I can’t resist. I stand and walk over toward your outstretched arms.

“Hannah,” you begin, “why are you wearing those pants?”

You pull your arms back in and hug yourself to quell the uncontrollable movement of your shoulders as you laugh.

“Those are way too short for you,” you’re in hysterics: head tipped back, mouth wide open, and tears streaming down your face.

“Is there a flood coming?” Mom chimes in.

The story ends with cackling witches. Forget the limp body carried into our home by a stranger; forget the stomach pumping; forget the past four hours spent waiting for you to wake from a drunk coma because... Hannah is wearing highwaters. Always a pleasure to be your therapeutic punchline. P.S. - Something small this reminded me of: Before you were all bad, when I was about twelve, we went to Burlington Coat Factory. We tried on sunglasses and looked at ourselves in the mirrors on the display.

“Do you think you’re ugly?” you asked.

“Yeah.”

“No, you’re not, stupid.”

Then I was stupid and ugly.

PRESENT

I wake up the next morning not feeling much different than I would've if I hadn't written anything. Admittedly, my hesitance was heightened by the fact Vanessa slept on the other side of the wall. She and Troy have been staying with Mom for a couple weeks now. She never drank in front of Mom, so this was the best way to keep her sober while she waited to begin rehab. She had to get a weekly shot to ensure she wouldn't get the shakes or go into shock from withdrawal. I'm sitting at the dining room table eating a Pop Tart and reading what I wrote when she comes back from her appointment. I quickly close out of the window.

"Good morning," she sounds unusually cheerful.

"Good morning." I can't look her in the eye.

"Any plans for the day?"

"Nope. One of my friends at work needed extra hours so they're making up everything I miss."

"What do you do again?" She pulls out a chair and sits next to me.

I shift in my seat uncomfortably. "Boring sales stuff. Mostly typing names, addresses, and manufacturer's numbers into Excel."

"Oh."

A familiar silence.

"Where's Mom and Troy?"

"Mom took Troy to school. She's at WalMart picking up some stuff I'll need while I'm away."

"Oh."

"I have to pick up some clothes from my apartment later if you wanna come."

"Sure," I respond without hesitation. My heart sinks. I don't want to go back there but I'm worried Vanessa will find a bottle that she can't resist. "I'm gonna go shower."

"Ok. I'll be here."

The wooden wall beside the light blue carpeted stairs is full of pictures. I stop to look at one of Vanessa, Mom, our Dad, and I—back when we pretended to be a family. It looks to have been taken the same year Dad left. He grew a beard, started wearing a prayer cap, and wearing tunics, claiming to have converted to Islam. Besides the change in appearance and avoidance of pork, he didn't change far as I could tell at age five. I lean in for a closer look and see raised skin beneath Mom's left eye. She'd attempted to cover it with makeup, but it only drew more attention to the cakey layers of foundation. Vanessa and Mom are posed in white dresses on the left while my Dad and I are on the right. We're matched accordingly except our dark skin makes the white look a bit crispier. Their eyes are round and bright, ours narrow and questioning. No one smiles.

I slip back into my room. I want to write a memory before I shower so I don't forget it in the mist.

PAST

2002: I was 6, you were 16

“Don't take the picture yet. I'm not ready.”

Mom is down on one knee playing photographer. She's holding a disposable camera with her eye fixed on the viewfinder. You're standing in front of a black curtain mom has nailed over your bedroom's doorway posing for photos to send off to a modelling agency. There's an indigo bandana tied over your straight black hair weave and you're wearing an orange halter top with a mandala printed on it and wide-legged blue jeans. I stare in awe as you strike your signature pose: left hand crossed over to right hip, right hand on right shoulder, head tilted to the left, eyes on the camera.

“You got that from your momma,” Mom smiles as though looking at a reflection of her younger self. She snaps the photo while I imitate you behind her back.

“I wanna be pretty just like Nessa when I grow up.”

“Good luck with that,” you change poses.

“Thanks!” I smile and continue mimicking your every move.

“I think that’s enough,” Mom is slow to get up. “I’ll take this to CVS to have the pictures developed then we can add them to your portfolio and send it off to the city.”

Other sixteen-year-olds are getting ready for the start of junior year while your eyes are set on becoming a supermodel. I’d lean over your shoulder while you flicked through the pages of *Vogue* and practiced poses with you in the mirror. I’d stay by your side until you’d push me away.

Mom leaves to go have the pictures developed while we stay at home. To my delight, you make us turkey sandwiches for lunch. I grab a Kool-Aid Burst from the fridge while you reach for one of Mom’s beers.

“If you don’t tell, I’ll let you watch me practice my runway walk.”

“Okay,” I whisper.

You bend down and kiss me on the cheek.

We eat and watch *MTV* in the living room. The video for Christina Aguilera’s “Dirrty” is on. In the video, she wears a short plaid skirt like the one mom found hidden in your closet and forbade you from wearing. You’re absorbed in the T.V. as you move along to the beat while you sit cross-legged on the floor. The unattended beer is by your side, open and half-empty. I carefully lean over and grab the cool green glass bottle and put it to my lips. As I throw my head back to take a swig, just like you, I feel a smack across my face.

“What the fuck, Hannah?”

I cry as the bitter smell of the liquid seeps into my clothes. I can feel my top lip grow warm as it swells from the impact of the slap that made the bottle collide with my mouth and fly out of my hand.

“You’re a fucking six-year-old,” you say. “Now the shit is all over you and the carpet!”

“I’m sorry!”

“Shut up!” you push me, and my head hits the carpeted floor. I cry louder.

When Mom comes home, you tell her I brought the bottle into the living room and spilled it. She asks how I got it open, you say you don't know and she believes you.

"You made the mess, you've got to clean it up," Mom tells me.

I cry as I'm forced to scrub the carpet.

PRESENT

Mom comes back with Troy in tow. She'd spent hours in WalMart getting all the stuff on Vanessa's list and groceries.

"Hannah!" Mom calls from downstairs. "Come help me put this food away."

I come downstairs to see Vanessa is not in her usual spot in front of the television. Gray plastic bags litter the kitchen floor and countertops. Troy sits among the mess on a rug playing with a car toy, too distracted to be bothered by me. Mom has already separated pantry from fridge and freezer items. I grab some fridge items to put away.

"Where's Vanessa?"

Mom slams a cupboard shut, seemingly unaware of her own strength. "She said she was going to get up some clothes to take for tomorrow."

"I was supposed to go with her."

"Then why you still here?" she asks rhetorically, her tone weighted with annoyance. "You know she skipped her appointment this morning, too, right?"

"No." I hadn't bothered asking.

"The counselor lady called me when I was on the way to pick up Troy," her voice quivers. "I ain't seen Nessa since this morning when she lied and said she was going to her appointment." I startle whenever she begins to speak, anticipating the bad.

"Maybe she forgot."

"Sure," she returns to arranging boxes and cans.

A silence falls between us while we attend to our respective duties.

“So, how are you?” I try to start conversation.

“How do you think?” she says. Then, the sound of another cupboard slamming.

“You shouldn’t stress so much,” I wring my hands, near frozen from a gallon of ice cream.

“Easy for you to say,” she begins gathering bags and throwing them in the garbage.

I refocus on the refrigerator, eager to be free from the tension.

“That doesn’t go there,” mom pulls the eggs from where I’d placed them. “And why you putting small stuff in the back? It just makes it harder for me to find.” Her voice is shrill, condemning.

“Sorry, I didn’t—”

“I know, you’re always sorry.”

My heart races. I understand why she’s stressed but why take it out on me? She seemed to be angry with me for her voluntary role in a negative situation.

“Put the stuff back on the counter. I’ll do it myself.”

“I’ll fix it.”

“Just put it back on the counter, dammit.”

I rise to my feet and do as I’m told, roughly thrusting the food back onto the countertops before stomping out like a child. Like Vanessa. Mom’s whispers tingle in my ear while I walk out the kitchen.

“Good for nothing.”

Good enough to be woken up at odd hours in the morning to listen to her vent. Hours long conversations that begin with *I’ve been having a tough time with Nessa* but never end with an *I love you*. I’d remind her that “Nessa” is a thirty-two-year-old woman to be rebuked with accusations of not caring or being selfish or made to feel bad for never visiting as though my presence would somehow cure her. Her voice was like gravity, pulling me back down after I’d finally discovered what it felt like to be weightless. I could never ignore it.

PAST

NOTE: I've prefaced this with some bits of text conversations.

"Just come back up here for a couple weeks. You can leave right after," she pleaded. "Troy's in school now and I don't know how many more early mornings I can stand. Maybe if Nessa sees how well you're doing she'll get her act together, find another job, and start being a parent."

I was terrified by her optimism. Could it really be that easy?

"Alright," I gave in, "I'll see if I can get some time away from work and get back to you."

"Okay, but think about what's more important: work or family?"

I didn't say what I wanted to say because I didn't want to upset her. But if I didn't care, I would've asked who's more important: me or Vanessa. The question is cruel but knowing that she would've answered is most disconcerting. That's what I should've said. Instead, I requested time off and got on a plane. Mom always made her sound like the victim but the real victim in this is Troy.

No one was happy when she announced her pregnancy. We weren't ready for another baby. I figured the bloat was from the liquor. It was easy not to believe you.

"Who's the father?" I asked.

You replied. "Jesus."

2013: I was 17, you were 27

"What kind of Christian are you?"

You're yelling at Mom while she washes the dirty dishes in your kitchen sink. We came over to check on you and Troy because you wouldn't answer your phone. We were greeted at the door by one of your boyfriends. He'd brought over plenty of liquor although he knows you have a nineteen-month-old baby. Luckily, we got there while you were just buzzed. Mom worked up the courage to berate you but is still cleaning up your mess. Now, you're trying to make her feel guilty.

“You never help me,” you hiccup, “I’m by myself taking care of a damn baby I didn’t want to have.”

“And whose fault is that, Vanessa?” Mom sounds surprised at her own gumption.

I’m on the ground waving various rattles and stuffed animals in front of Troy, trying in vain to distract him from the drama. Your supplier slips on his jacket and slinks out of the front door.

You lower your voice. “It’s better he has no dad than the sorry ass one you picked for us.”

Mom throws a bubble coated plate in the sink. “Shut your damn mouth!”

“He used to beat your ass and I had to stand there and watch it.”

This makes me angry. “It’s not her fault!”

You snap in my direction. “You didn’t have to see it, so you don’t know. He’d walk in fucked up, yelling and breaking shit...”

“I guess that’s where you get it from.”

Just as you start stomping toward Mom, I run into the kitchen and stand between the two of you.

“Fuck you, Mom,” you leave the kitchen and pick up Troy who has started crying. “I wish you were dead.”

“Alright,” I can hear the tears in Mom’s voice, “then who’s gonna clean all this up?”

“Not me,” I say.

The only sound is Troy’s shrill cries. Every now and then a snuffle or hiccup from you or mom cuts in. We stay on our respective sides: me and Mom in the kitchen, you and Troy in the living room. Both sides are equally messy save for the clean dishes on the drying rack.

You break the crying silence. “He broke my piggy bank.”

“What?” Mom steps from behind me.

“Dad broke my piggy bank. The one that grandpa bought me. He came into my room one night and smashed it into a wall.” Your face looks like a Dalian distortion, long and dripping. “He hurt me, too.” You pull Troy close to you and wail into his tiny shoulder.

Mom crosses the threshold into the living room and embraces you. I remain in the kitchen. This was the ‘straw that broke the camel’s back’ as they say. I realized then that the only way to be free of the mess—of you—was to leave. I left for college that fall and didn’t come back.

PRESENT

She welcomed me into the apartment without saying a word, simply leaving the door ajar as she stumbled back into the darkness. I felt bad for storming out of the kitchen, so I volunteered to go looking for Vanessa. Mom was occupied with Troy whom she didn’t want to wake from his nap. Traces of a familiar bitter smell weighed in the air inside. I already knew what happened, there was no need to ask. The living room is trashed. Couch pillows, blankets, food, and superhero action figures are all over the wooden floor. That’s the biggest difference between Vanessa and mom: cleanliness. Mom always cleans up after herself while Vanessa likes to wallow in the mess she’s made and wait for others to clean it up for her. An eviction notice is trapped beneath an empty bottle of vodka on the kitchen counter.

Vanessa plops down onto the stained couch. I take a seat beside her feet poking from under a comforter. She looked like an adult baby swaddled and put down for bed with her thumb in her mouth and eyes closed.

“Are you going to sleep?” I laughed.

No response.

I sit in silence and stare unblinkingly at my cell phone unsure of what to say or do. This place had been her fortress, an escape into oblivion. Alcohol had become her intervening god. It decided her employment, mothering, eating habits...all that makes a productive life.

“Why didn’t you go to your appointment this morning?” I try my best to sound assertive, like Mom.

“I didn’t feel like it,” Vanessa turns away, shoulders quivering.

“Have you been drinking?”

“No!” she replies without hesitation.

“It smells like you have.”

“That’s old,” she sits up and points to the vodka bottle. “The bottle is dry,” she begins to cry. “I don’t want to go to rehab. I don’t need to go,” her voice grows louder. “You and Mom always say I’m drinking even if I’m not so why should I bother quitting?”

“For Troy,” I reply. “The problem isn’t that you drink, it’s how much and how often you do it. Mom can’t always do everything for you.”

“She doesn’t! You don’t even know what’s going on, you haven’t been here!”

That was true but so what? Was I obligated to stick around? My cheeks grow warm.

“You’re not my responsibility,” I spit back. “Not Mom’s either. You need to learn how to take account for the things you do, for the people you hurt.”

“You don’t think I’m hurting?” she sobs. “I feel alone all the time. When I’m alone I think about all the messed-up stuff that’s happened—”

“Like what, Vanessa?” I yell. “Like Mom taking you shopping, or taking modeling pictures, or having a free babysitter, or being popular in school?”

“No, you bitch! You don’t even understand all the shit I’ve been through.”

“You don’t talk to me, so how am I supposed to understand? Nothing’s ever wrong with you, or at least you act that way.”

“Dad raped me.”

My mind dissolves. All thought, all questions, every word.

Vanessa stares me down, face contorted, eyes narrowed, hateful. Tears quietly stream from them. I can't muster a single tear. I just stare at that painful face, wondering whether I should believe her words. If something like that happens to you, you don't hold it in. Or, at least I wouldn't...or I don't think I would. When could this have happened? Why would he do it? Does Mom know?

I swallow the bitter taste on my tongue, the contemptuousness toward the thought of her being a victim. "Are you going to rehab, Vanessa?"

She squeezes her eyes shut. "I need to take a bath."

"Are you going?" I ask firmly.

"Yes, just let me take a bath." She stands and disappears into her bedroom at the end of the hall.

I text Mom: *she's okay.*

I sit and wait for her. I follow the sound of her footsteps to the bathroom. I listen to the tumble of the water surging through pipes as it fills the tub. I smell the lavender bath bomb as it dissolves in hot water, diffusing its scent from the bathroom out into the apartment. I hear the water stop. I keep waiting.

My heart races with the passing time. Ten minutes turns to twenty, then to forty, past an hour. *When are y'all coming back?* Mom texts. It was getting dark outside. *Vanessa's taking a bath. Be back soon.* I decide to check on her. My footsteps track silently on the plushy carpet. I see the yellow light from beneath the bathroom door. I twist the knob, it's locked. I knock, no response. But through the door I can hear an odd sound. A gurgling sound. I drive my shoulder into the door three times to no avail. I start kicking it below the door knob. The wood cracks but the door doesn't open. I used my hands to hammer at the cracked spot until I can see into the bathroom. Vanessa's body jerks up and down, her head tilted backward. Blood streams down the porcelain tub.

I reach through a hole I create by prying wood, twisting the lock on the inside. The door opens and I barrel toward Vanessa. Vomit spews from her mouth as I lean her over to her side. Chunks gather in her hair, on her chin, float on the water. She is no longer shaking. Her blood smears on my shirt. I notice her slit wrists, plastic bits of a broken pink razor in the water. She begins to slip from my grasp. I'm too weak to pull her up high enough so she doesn't slump forward. I cry out of frustration. I was soaked to the elbows. The more I tried to hold her up the more the water would seep into my clothing. She wouldn't wake up, but she was still breathing. I could hear the water being sucked up into her nose each time she slipped back in. Wind chimes sound from somewhere outside. Mom is calling. For the first time, I won't answer.

I try my best to ignore it. I grab Vanessa's face and try to squeeze open her mouth but she's too slippery. My arms burn just like the liquor as it poured down Vanessa's throat. But I can't stop. This is happening now. Forget the past, intentionally. Not to obscure or excuse her faults, but to save her from them. My arms turn to jelly while my knees pound with pain from kneeling. Her head is fully under now. Her blood-soaked arms drape over the tub. It reminds me of when she hit a deer on the thruway and didn't die although its head smashed through the windshield and bled onto her lap. I thought she died then, but she walked through the door covered in blood and scared but alive. But that's the past. Now, I can no longer hold on.

