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Par Terre

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PAR TERRE

Darryl Crawford

The tattoo parlor was called Monty's. My oldest brother, Shawn, had discovered the Greek word for 'wrestler' in one of the books he was always reading on ancient wars and fighting. He decided he wanted the strange letters tattooed on his inner forearm. We were in high school then, and he was a champion wrestler. He could have gone to Michigan or Ohio State, he was that good, but he also dreamed of becoming an elite-level sniper in the Canadian Armed Forces, which proves that following your heart is one of the most fucked-up things you can do to yourself.

Shawn took me with him to the tattoo parlor on Queen Street East after school and tried to explain what he wanted to an old black man who refused to turn down the blues music on the radio. Monty the tattooist nodded and explained what happened when you got a tattoo: how the body's defense system entombed the pigment and kept it stable in the skin. He told us that over the years the ink would go deeper and the tattoo would blur. He asked Shawn if he really wanted this foreign thing sinking deep into him. It was a display of concern I found strange coming from a man who must have drawn a good part of his living from the recklessness of teenagers, but he didn't know how my brother's mind worked. Once Shawn decided, that was that. Shawn sat down in the old barber's chair without a word, and Monty prepared his needles.

I sat off in the corner of the tattoo parlor and watched the tattooist bring the nickel-plated gun to Shawn's forearm. The machine thrummed the way insects do in summer forests. There was a big lamp above them that dropped a circle of bright light, and the more I watched them the more it looked like they were wrestling. The tattooist, old and stoop-shouldered as he was, seemed to have Shawn in an arm lock. He only let up to swab blood away from the skin, and Shawn refused to pull off one of the explosive escape moves he'd become famous for. I recall thinking it was weird that the word for 'wrestler' should be

written on Shawn, each small wound flooded with black pigment and trapped by new scar tissue, because at that moment my soldier-king brother seemed all about submission.

I proved that God has a soft spot for wrestling just this morning while I was weaseling out of a fitness club membership. I should explain how I got tricked into signing a contract because I'm not the type you typically find at these places. First off, I'm not all that physically imposing. More than one woman in my life has told me that I could use a makeover and forced me to endure some fashion show on the Woman's Network to shed light on my problem areas. It's funny what some people consider to be a solution.

The second reason I was surprised to find myself the newest member of Acute Fitness's family is that I should really know better. I write scripts for cold-call telemarketers. Ever wonder how people with little more than a high school education can weave Socratic conversations which anticipate all your logical reservations about a limited time offer or improved service package? I'm why. Or I was one of the reasons why until Shawn left on his last tour and my scripts became apocalyptic, and I was asked to take a leave of absence. Now I live with my born-again brother in our family's old house on Logan Avenue. Our parents are down in Fort Lauderdale, far away from the cold winters and the spectacle of what their surviving sons have become. I'm glad they weren't around yesterday morning when Luke came down for breakfast.

"It's time to deal with things," he said.

I was eating a bowl of Froot Loops. A frosty pink one fell from my spoon and rolled into a gap between the counter and the fridge. I was still looking down there, trying to cope with my sense of loss when I asked, "Time to deal with what?"

"With your healing."

This made me laugh because Luke has done more damage to me than anyone else on the planet. When I was nine and he was ten, he stomped a jagged piece of ice from our front lawn and

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threw it like a Chinese star, splitting my left eyebrow in two. In junior high he and his friends would launch coffee creamers across the cafeteria at me for sport. In high school he got my first girlfriend drunk and slipped his hand into her panties. That's just what comes to mind. So I wondered who Luke thought he was, stirring his yogurt and smiling at me like he'd just baptized a camp full of dyslexic lepers with eating disorders. You'd have to believe pretty strongly in redemption to overlook his kind of past and speak on behalf of a big name like Jesus.

"My healing, Luke?"

"I want you to come with me today," Luke said. He'd been bothering me to go with him to his place of worship to pray and hold hands and shoulder our heavy crosses together.

"I'm not up to that, man," I told him.

"What you're up to isn't the point."

"What's the point, then?"

"The point is what your soul is crying out for: saving. You need to convert all this hurt into healing, and that's what we do in our church."

"First off, there's a difference between a church and a cult," I said, stabbing my spoon into the bowl. I hoped he wasn't going to call me on this because the distinction escaped me at that moment.

"It's not a cult," he said.

"A Christ-centered fellowship, then, is not a church. Notre Dame is a church and so is—"

"God is where you worship," he said.

"Okay, the truth is I'd like to come with you and talk to Jesus, but I've got an appointment."

"With who?"

"With Joanne Marquez," I replied. She'd been my first girlfriend, the one I caught Luke fingering in a laundry room. I was sure this would shut him up, but he's an evangelist, and in my experience they don't discourage easily, so I added details for story realism. "We're going to see a matinee at the Regent."

"No, you're not," Luke said.

“Why not? Did you give her some peach schnapps and lock her in your room?”

“No,” he replied, looking at me like he’d just pinned me cleanly. “The Regent’s a health club now.”

Luke would say it was an act of God, the chain of events that delivered me to the doors of Acute Fitness, and he’d probably be able to hook it up to some psalm or gospel that illustrated the greater plan at work all along. Luke’s a resourceful bastard and likes to show it off, usually by tying his personal rants up with a good piece of Judeo-Christian fantasy. A few days ago, when he was breaking my balls about the evils of telemarketing and saying that, despite my many sins, there was still hope for my soul, he launched into a reading of the Good Samaritan: *A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers.*

I walked away. Don’t get me wrong. Luke is good at presenting and also has a good package for Bible thumping: he’s powerful in the shoulders and has a great head of hair. He’s one of those guys who just seem accomplished in a useless kind of way, like he could lead a government or coach in the NFL with no prior experience. I guess he’d be a church’s wet dream, someone who looks capable of any worldly success but has chosen the higher road frequented by saints. Like all eager saints, however, Luke is a bit rhetorical. I wanted to see if the part about the Regent going under was more rhetoric, so I went over.

It wasn’t. The Regent had disappeared. Instead of the teenage ushers and sticky plush carpet I remembered, there were sculpted human beings getting into the zone, watching motivational videos on flat screen TVs, and drinking shakes that looked truly disgusting. I observed the situation. The old coming attraction displays were now occupied by promotional posters featuring the same airbrushed girl training in a semi-pornographic manner. I was quite aroused by one where she was doing a spread eagle high kick. It drew my eye down her suntanned leg to the limited-time offer. I went inside to see if any similarly flexible women wanted to make a sale.

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One of them did, of course. Her name was Samantha. She was pretty new to hard-sell tactics, I'd guess. When I asked how they managed to keep a place of this caliber afloat with such a limited inflow of monthly capital, her eyes wandered, like she was searching for her pitch script among the stair climbers and crunch machines. I let her off the hook partly for humanitarian reasons and partly because Samantha looked capable of doing spread-eagle high kicks of the kind I saw on the poster outside. You never want to insult someone with that skill set. She talked about different rejuvenation programs and asked if I'd ever trained seriously or played any sports.

"High school wrestling," I said.

"You're in high school?"

"No," I said. "I thought you asked if I'd ever played any sport. I mean, in my life."

I was never a high school wrestler. I didn't even try out for the varsity team, and I don't think training in the basement with Shawn was what Samantha had in mind when she asked me about sports. It was closest thing I had. Shawn had put a bench and power racks and a few mats down there when we were all still living together, and he taught me the basic stances, take downs, and exposure moves. The idea was to toughen me up, but we spent most of the time just talking. He'd list all the great historical figures who wrestled: Zeus and Hercules liked it; Gilgamesh, in his epic, proved his leadership by beating Enkidu in a match. Don't ask me who Enkidu is, but it sounded pretty impressive.

Despite being built like Shawn, I didn't have much talent for wrestling except for one move they call par terre. The par terre position happens when you lose advantage in a match and have to lie down on your stomach while the other wrestler tries to flip you over to win a point. It's desperation defense. The objective is to hold onto the mat and brace your weight on your toes, shifting your centre of gravity by swiveling your hips. That way the other wrestler can't flip you over. Shawn said I was a natural.

As Samantha talked me through the fitness club, it occurred to me that everyone exercising there was in some kind of par terre

position, clinging onto the earth as a greater opponent worked him or her over. It struck me that they were going about it all wrong. It's hard to explain, but I felt like helping them with technique. Maybe it was an act of God. The Holy Spirit might have been hovering inside Acute Fitness yesterday, setting up my appointment with revelation. Luke is always saying that the Lord is pulling strings everywhere 24-7, so I assume that this puppetry reaches corporate gyms with hip-hop music thumping and a platoon of dick heads spinning turbines, hanging upside down and throwing dumbbells around to surprise their muscles into inflammation.

I woke up the next morning with the sensation that I'd been screwed. It dawned on me that \$79 dollars a month over a year and a half was not the same as eight dollars a month with no obligations. The ten-day-free-trial-no-risk-option I'd agreed to with Samantha made all the muscles in my body tense up at once, like waking to the sound of a prowler on the stairway. I wondered how I'd been taken by an amateur. The communion I'd felt with the other fitness club junkies was gone too, and I called myself a stupid asshole various times in the shower.

Everybody in sales knows that a no-risk trial period is pretty full of risk. Salespeople bank on a combination of consumer sloth and the labyrinth that is modern billing to make some easy cash. You'd be surprised how many people just forget the end date of a free trial and are stuck paying for the super glue or subscription to *Elle* they have no interest in whatsoever. I was pissed off to find myself among the suckers and went straight down to Acute Fitness to take it out on some complete innocent.

The girls at the desk took my complaints in stride. They told me in their carefree way that Samantha wasn't in and that if I wanted to cancel my membership I'd have to speak to the manager.

"Is he in?" I asked.

"I'll make a call for you," the receptionist replied, but it felt like she was lying to me. She showed me to a waiting area with

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leather chaise lounges positioned in a circle. I sat down and watched male members swipe their magnetic cards and chat up pretty towel girls while the personal trainers bantered away with shapely mothers who were gravely concerned about the proximity of bikini season. Making me wait was a sales tactic too. It gave me time to consider how empty my life would be without Acute Fitness and all those endorphins. It's their business. But it was my business to get out of the contract I'd signed, and after five minutes I was getting twitchy with anticipation.

"Steve-O," someone finally said. The guy must have dropped in on cables from the ceiling because I hadn't heard anything. Towering above me was a bald man who looked like he should be playing semi-pro hockey in Finland. His skin was a pigment or two shy of an albino's, and he had no eyebrows.

"No," I said. "My name's Andrew."

"I'm Steve-O," he said, smiling.

"Okay," I replied. His tight clothes and huge smile were making me suspicious. I wondered what kind of club I'd joined here.

"I'm the manager."

"Oh," I said, standing up. I squeezed his outstretched hand to show him I meant business and said, "Thanks for making time to see me."

"What can I do for you?"

"I'd like to quit," I told him.

"How long have you been with us?"

"One day."

Some essential wire holding his smile together seemed to come undone. He looked around, I assume to check if anyone had overheard my request. Then he told me to follow him. His office had a sliding glass door, which he pulled closed behind us. He walked around a desk made of tempered glass and I saw his meaty thighs bulging at the stitching of his pants when he sat down. He reached behind to adjust the lumbar support on his chair and said, "One day. You haven't given us much of a chance, have you, Mister—"

"Johnson," I said. "Andrew Johnson."

He typed that into his computer and spent another minute sliding his mouse across the table millimeter by millimeter.

"Do you have your contract?"

"Right here," I said.

He reviewed the contract and chewed on some gum. Each time he clamped down, a spasm of tendon rolled from his jaw up to his forehead, like white waves onto a salty coast. He looked at the back of the contract and underlined some microscopic footnote.

"Why are you terminating?" he asked.

I told him that I valued my health, but I had gotten a little ahead of myself as I was between jobs.

"What kind of work do you do?"

"I want to open my own business," I lied.

"What kind of business?"

"I'm into tattoos," I replied. I have no idea why tattoos came to mind, but I guess I didn't feel like getting into my problems with a complete stranger, and I'd been thinking a lot about Shawn's tattoo since he shipped out to Afghanistan.

"Really?"

"Yes," I said. "Is there some problem?"

"No. Well, you don't seem like a tattooist, but I am surprised by the world every day," he said in a philosophical way. This answer seemed to please him enormously. "You realize that a fitness membership qualifies as a tax write-off for small business owners."

"I'm in the early stages," I said.

"How early?"

"Pretty early," I answered. "I haven't secured financing for my venture yet."

Steve-O nodded. "Have you considered the impact a physically fit man brings to bear on a loan application interview, Andrew?"

"Not really."

"Don't underestimate it."

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"I won't."

"Looks matter," Steve-O said, like he was leveling with me about a substance abuse problem. "How would you feel if I lowered your monthly fee from seventy-nine to fifty, all in?"

"Like I was getting screwed."

"How much would you pay for heightened fitness and confidence in the here and now?"

"Not too much," I replied.

"You came to us for some reason. We didn't come to you, did we, Andrew?"

"No, you didn't," I admitted. "I just came to see if the movie theatre was still here.

"But you left with a trial membership."

"That's true," I said. "I got drawn in by those samurai swords in the foyer. That's a nice touch."

Steve-O didn't pick up on my refined sense of humor, which happens on occasion. "Is money the only factor?" he continued.

"Being locked into eighteen months isn't helping your cause," I told him.

"How would you respond to a three-month no-obligation student's package at \$199.99?"

"I'm not a student."

"I realize you're not a student," Steve-O replied. He seemed a little disappointed that I didn't want to play ball.

"I think I'm just going to do sit-ups in the basement for the time being," I told him.

"Seriously?"

"Why not?"

"There are scores of scientific reasons why that type of training is discouraged by most professional trainers' associations, mildew and air quality chief among them, but it might be more instructional to review this information while we do your exit tour."

"Do my what?"

"Your exit tour," Steve-O answered.

"I don't understand."

"It's part of our cancellation procedure."

"Is canceling my membership part of your cancellation procedure?"

"I just have to walk you through the club."

"Samantha told me that I could cancel the contract in the first ten days," I said.

"You can," Steve-O replied, gathering some forms from a file cabinet. "After an exit tour."

"She told me no risk."

"There is no risk," Steve-O said. "But I'm required to walk you through and maybe we can tackle the differences between sit-ups in the basement and having a regime tailored to your body type at a 21st century Acute Fitness facility."

Acute Fitness was starting to sound like a painful disease, and I may have moaned.

"We do this, Andrew," Steve-O explained, "to improve service quality. As a prospective business owner, you surely see our point of view."

"Certainly," I said.

"It's also in your contract," Steve-O added, sliding the page across the table to me.

"Make it quick," I said. "I'm a busy man."

That was a lie. It didn't stop me from looking at my watch like I was a busy man. I even considered making a fake phone call to an up-and-coming tattooist who, I'd tell Steve-O, I was trying to recruit away from my competitors, but I thought that would be going a bit far. I don't know when lying became second nature. Luke has always been perplexed by my fabrications and the extravagant way I build them. Even before he became Jesus' cheerleader, Luke would get preachy if he caught me being too inventive. He'd make it a point to try to flip me on it—for my own good, he'd say—but I'd just shift back and forth. Par terre him. Luke has a yen for the truth that borders on obsession. It looked like Steve-O was suffering from a similar fixation because

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five minutes into the exit tour he was trying to look me in the eye and clearing his throat like there was a grave confession in the works.

“What is it?” I finally asked.

“I’d like to tell you an anecdote,” he said, rubbing his scalp and producing a sound like a lint brush over a jacket shoulder.

“Will you let me tell you one of my instructive anecdotes?”

“If it’s necessary,” I said.

“I believe it is.”

“Okay.”

“What do you think about this?”

I looked around the gym. “About what?”

“About my head,” Steve-O said.

“It’s alright,” I replied, pushing up on my toes to get a better vista. “It’s pretty smooth and well-proportioned.”

“I’m bald.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Sorry about that.”

“Don’t be. I’ve accepted my baldness, Andrew, but that wasn’t always the case.” He threw in a measured pause and looked over my shoulder for so long that I looked too. I saw the old movie theatre stripped of its seats and filled with lines of new exercise equipment. The gym looked like a giant machine, with its belts spinning and cords tightening. We watched the cogs clasp together as Steve-O admitted that he had once owned one of the world’s most expensive hair piece systems, one that required quarterly retreats to a resort up north where other bald men went to discuss the teachings of grooming workshops and have their wigs touched up by top European technicians.

“I know about wasted money,” he concluded.

“I see that now.”

“Let me tell you something else: an investment in Acute Fitness is not a \$300 hairpiece retreat. I feel more natural now, Andrew. I feel like myself.”

“It’s a good look on you,” I told him.

“I don’t tell this story to everyone.”

“I appreciate it.”

“But I’m telling you about this for a reason,” he said, turning to face me. I was looking into his enormous chest so Steve-O dipped into a half squat and continued preaching, “I think you need to hear something from an objective third party: stop hiding behind that underutilized body.”

“I’m not hiding behind anything.”

“Be honest with me,” he said.

Something flashed up inside me at the word honest, like a flare torn open at a traffic accident. I remembered failing Theology class on three separate occasions. We all went to Catholic school. To pass grade-nine Theology, everybody had to memorize and present a passage of scripture in front of the class. I flunked the class three times for quite legitimate reasons, but my teacher usually pointed to the disaster of my scripture reading as the final straw. He said it was ‘emblematic.’ Of what, I’m not sure. But I always went against his advice and chose a passage from Revelations, which Shawn claimed was the weirdest and most graphic of the Bible’s many subplots and therefore the sexiest read.

When the time came to present in front of the class I’d start off well, but I would soon begin stumbling around and getting way off track and making things up. It wasn’t that I’d forgotten everything. It’s that better things would occur to me as I spoke—things that made the scripture more complete or honest—and I’d go with it. When my parents cornered me later about how I’d gone from the Four Horses of the Apocalypse to the pattern on Joanne Marquez’s bras, I’d tell them that I was possessed by the word.

It was actually Shawn and not Jesus-freak Luke who wanted to hear about my scripture fiascos. He was the only one who thought there might be more to them than just sarcasm. He’d call them “the gospels according to Andy Johnson.” I’d take him through everything I could recall of the presentation, and he’d smile and ask questions about what I meant by this or that. It might seem like an older brother screwing with his kid brother, but it wasn’t. It was a conspiracy we had. I’d describe what came

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over me, and he'd even write some of it down in his workout journal. Then we'd get back to wrestling and training, and he'd tell me other things between holds. While reading about wrestling in ancient Rome, Shawn had come upon some other things. The Christians, for example, were a just sect at first and the Catholics a sub-sect in this breakaway movement. He told me it was important to remember how churches begin and to bear in mind that the gospels all started off with a couple guys shooting the shit in some catacomb under Rome, and they might have even been training for wrestling.

I missed Shawn a lot right then, and thought that maybe Luke would have missed him too, talking about honesty with Steve-O in Acute Fitness.

"Whose idea of honest?" I finally asked.

"Yours," he said.

I had to laugh at the possibilities. Steve-O must have caught wind of something hostile in its pitch because he straightened up and started reaching for other openings to his spiel.

"This is also about the people you share your life with, Andrew," he said. "What about your significant other? What does she think?"

This was a nice bit of maneuvering on Steve-O's part, and I admired the construction of the segue. Regardless of my answer, I knew we were going get right back to me finding a solution at Acute Fitness.

"What's that got to do with it?" I stalled.

"Everything," Steve-O replied, getting back into squat formation. "What's her name?"

"Whose?"

"Come on," he said.

"Joanne Marquez."

"Isn't your name Johnson, Andrew?"

"Marquez would be her maiden name," I explained. "Latin women keep their maiden names, and besides I never said we were married."

"Latin women," Steve-O repeated, nodding his head. He

raised his fist, and I ignored it.

"Oh, come on," he insisted.

"No, it's okay," I said, but he kept his fist hanging there so I eventually tapped it with mine.

"Latinas," he said, looking me up and down like he was trying to pinpoint the misdirection in a good trick I'd just pulled off. "I'm sure that Joanne Marquez wants you to keep the engine humming under that tiny hood. With a tailored plan and acute commitment to it, we might be able to up the ante in the physical realm."

"Up the what?"

"Up the ante, Andrew," Steve-O said. "You know what I'm saying?"

"I know what you're saying," I said. "I just don't like that you're saying it to me."

"Am I crossing some line?"

"Yes."

"Well, where there's smoke, there's fire."

"What fire?"

"Here's what fire," Steve-O countered. "If you're sensitive to these trite jibes, Andrew, then deep down, maybe at some subconscious level, you believe them. Part of our regime deals specifically with jibes and cleans out negative responses from your physiology."

"I don't want to clean out negative responses, man," I told him. "I like negative responses."

"Oh, please."

"This is negative," I shouted. "It calls for a negative response. Tit for tat, Steve-O. I'm not a Buddhist monk watching trees grow."

"No one's asking you to convert to Buddhism," Steve-O said, a little like he was hushing a child. He waved at the members hyperventilating on a row of treadmills and observing us with interest. He put his hand on my shoulder and lowered his voice. "I'm asking you to consider converting to a healthy lifestyle, and Acute Fitness is the way to this end."

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“Convert?”

Steve-O was about to clarify something but then stopped, and I felt the momentum swing. I went at him hard. “I’ve got this brother, Luke, who says that God is where you worship.”

Steve-O stared straight ahead.

“You want me to join up here, right?”

“That would be ideal, Andrew,” he said carefully. “I was thinking maybe we could start you off with one of our complimentary fitness assessments.”

“Do you go to church?”

“No.”

“Temple?”

“No.”

“Don’t tell me.” I raised my fist. “Your whole body’s a temple.” He didn’t tap it. I could tell that I was out from under him now and that he was a bit winded, and I moved on him. “Can I take you somewhere?”

“That’s not a good idea,” he replied.

“Why not, Steve-O? Luke has a church near here. Well, it’s kind of like a church. It’s actually more of a Christ-centered fellowship.”

“Fellowship?”

“They basically teach other people on their way of thinking about Christ and related things.”

“Right.”

“I guess my brother specializes in a kind of fitness too. Kind of like spiritual fitness.”

“Like the priesthood?”

“I think they call his position shepherd.”

“Everybody needs beliefs,” he said, trying to keep things as casual as possible. But the skin had gathered where Steve-O’s eyebrows should have been, and I understood that he was raising them.

“Let’s go down to the Faith Temple and see what kind of deal my brother can cut us,” I said.

“No,” Steve replied.

“Why not?”

“That’s not for me,” he said.

“Just like Acute Fitness isn’t for me?”

“Apparently,” Steve-O finally conceded.

I caught the Broadview streetcar south. I wanted to talk to Luke about my wrestling revelations, how I felt rejuvenated and full of light once I’d gotten out from under my fitness club contract. The Faith Temple was at Gerard, and it looked a bit like a bingo hall from the streetcar window. Then I realized that bingo is usually played in churches, so maybe it looked like a church after all. There was a cheap notice board with wheels on the bottom and big plastic letters that read: No God, No Salvation. Know God, Know Salvation. Luke was always repeating slogans like this, and I decided that this was probably why he wanted to save my soul: to get some help with his marketing campaigns.

I watched the Faith Temple slip by and stayed on the streetcar until it turned downtown at Queen. I couldn’t remember where Monty’s was exactly because the east end has changed so much recently, filled up with organic bistros and vintage furniture shops. I kept walking east. Once I passed under the CN bridge, things started getting rundown and familiar. Monty’s was wedged between a coin laundry and a rough sports tavern on the far side of Pape Avenue. City workers were peeling up the chunks of asphalt out front with jackhammers. The storefronts were covered in a layer of dust, and I saw that Monty’s was no longer a tattoo parlor. It was a Caribbean diner. I went inside and asked the woman behind the counter if an old guy named Monty would still tattoo you for the right price.

“No,” she told me. “He retired now.”

“Do you know where I can find him? I’m thinking about getting into the tattoo business, and I’d like to bring him on as a consultant.”

“A what?”

“Someone to show me the ropes.”

“Well, he’s back there,” she said. “Go see if he’s interested in

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such a thing as rope showing.”

I looked where she was pointing. There were black and white shots of tattoos hanging in gold frames on the wall that fed into a narrow hallway. At the end of the hallway was an open door. The sun lit up the cracked linoleum on the threshold. Blues guitar was brushing up against the old brickwork outside. I found Monty in his barber's chair, peeling potatoes.

“Hi, Monty,” I said from the door.

“Look how she got me workin’,” he replied, laughing and looking at me like I'd appreciate the irony of his position. He tossed the cleaned potato in a blue plastic bucket with the others and said, “Man.”

“What happened to the parlor?”

He raised his big hands, which I noticed were trembling slightly, and said, “Arthritis.”

“Do you remember me?”

“Nope.”

“I came with my brother, Shawn,” I said.

Monty massaged his chin and thought about it a moment. “Shawn,” he said. “Still nope.”

“That's okay. I'll remind you. He got a tattoo of the Greek word for wrestler.”

“Greek for wrestler, now?”

“Yes.”

“Sounds like something I'd remember,” he said.

“That's what I thought.”

“When he get it?”

“I don't know. In the fall. In 1999, I think.”

“Hold on, man,” Monty said. He called to the woman inside, whose name was Rose and turned out to be his daughter. He shouted the year, and she brought out a binder with 1999 written out in pieces of white masking tape. She took her time crossing the yard, her hips swinging under a short summer dress and her flip-flops slapping on the brick.

“Oh, yeah,” he said, turning the cellophane pages with different tattoos and body parts in each photograph. He was

getting into it. I put my hand on the chair and looked over his shoulder as he told me how each tattoo was like a signature, like taking some seed from the inside and putting it on the outside to bloom for everyone to see. He warned me it wasn't always obvious. It took a great deal of skill to untangle the truth in each tattoo, but it was always there. Monty seemed to have perfected this kind of interpretation, and he went on about the people and their false symbols as if he were teaching a lesson on forensics. The potato juice dried to chalk on his hands, and he kept shaking his head in amazement at all the people that he'd forgotten, saying, "Lucky I got all these strange souls catalogued in here now."

The jackhammers started up on the street once more, the sound deflecting and echoing back off the broken fire escapes and shoulder-wide alleys. I thought about Monty's tattoo gun punching into Shawn's skin.

"How fast do those tattoo needles shoot?"

"Depends on the model," Monty said, looking up from his binder. "As fast as a hundred and twenty times in one second, the one I had."

"Fast," I said.

I'd done research after we got the news about Shawn, and I knew that the gas-powered AK-47 used by the Taliban could shoot six hundred rounds a minute. Up to ten bullets a second, by my math. Nothing compared to the speed of a tattoo gun when you think about it. I wasn't there when Shawn was killed in the hills outside Kandahar, so I couldn't tell you how many bullets flew down into the gorge where he was doing recon.

"Well, look at that," Monty said. I did as he told me and recognized the shape of my brother's forearm and the word *πάλη*, so close, just beyond a sheet of plastic. I felt something tightening in my throat.

"That means wrestler?" Monty asked.

"Yes."

"Well, how's the pigment holding up?"

"I don't know," I said.

Crawford: Par Terre

"He's not around no more?"

"No."

"Where did he go?"

"Kandahar," I replied.

"Middle East?"

"Afghanistan," I said. "He was a soldier."

"Was?"

"Yes," I said.

"Then he's out?"

"No."

Monty looked at me and then stared down at a spot in the brick for a moment. He rubbed his chin and he looked up at the sky. "Goddamn it."

I thought that sounded pretty accurate. That maybe God did damn Shawn when he got that tattoo. Having something like 'wrestler' written on your skin might make you a target for something, and once the words sank deep enough there'd be no escaping it. I remember Monty warning Shawn about tattoos.

"What happened to Shawn?" Monty asked, looking at me. "If you don't mind talking about it."

"He was in the desert," I said.

"Troubling things take place in deserts," Monty said. "Moses. Jesus. The good Samaritan. All those guys got pushed around in those deserts."

"True," I said.

"Tell me about your brother," Monty said.

"Shawn was a wrestler."

"That's good," Monty said, but he looked at me like he was waiting for something more. Something he could work with. He turned his ear to me and gave me a moment to speak my mind.

"He was walking down from Jerusalem for a wrestling championship in Jericho when he was set upon by robbers," I said.

Monty bowed his head and folded his hands. "What did those robbers want?"

"They wanted him to join them," I said.

"Why?"

"So they could prove they were right."

"People will do that," Monty said. "Now, what happened between Jerusalem and Jericho?"

"They pinned him down in a gorge."

"Go on."

"They shot at him from cliffs. They told him to lie flat on his stomach. Completely still. Then they climbed down and put their knees into his back. He was bleeding into the earth, and they told him to join up or else. Still Shawn wouldn't let them pin him. He kept shifting back and forth so they couldn't get under him. God loves those who know how to par terre. God's a huge wrestling fan, Monty—"

I wanted Shawn to win this match, but I knew that no matter what I said he wouldn't.

"What's wrong?" Monty asked.

"I'm a bit of a liar."

"No, you're not," Monty said. "You're just hanging onto this earth, boy, and praying for your brother whichever way you can."