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THE OTHER SIDE OF FUN

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Bachelor of Arts in English

Cleveland State University

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree

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at the

CLEVELAND STATE UNIVERSITY

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We hereby approve this thesis for

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THE OTHER SIDE OF FUN

DAN FORKAPA

ABSTRACT

“The Other Side of Fun” is a collection of creative non-fiction essays that examine the relationship between several cultural pastimes and our society as a whole. The thoughts, feelings, and observations made throughout these essays are reflections of my time spent working various jobs pertaining to some form of entertainment.

“Mayflies” explores my time as a game-day security worker for the Cleveland Indians, examining the relationship between unionized labor and the lifestyle that encompasses it. “Spiders” chronicles my time spent as a Resident Assistant at Cleveland State, investigating the deep web and the potential dangers that technology can bring. “House Rules” details my experiences at the Jack Casino, exploring society’s obsession with wealth. “Ghosts” looks at society’s use of tradition, documenting an evening spent working as a bouncer at one of the busiest bars the night before Halloween. Last is “Cutting Weight”, an essay that discusses the world of organized cage-fighting and the impact it has had on both our culture and my own life.

These essays serve as a critique to the way our world operates; a collection of observations that look to challenge the reader’s perception of our societal ideologies and values.

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CHAPTER I

CRITICAL PREFACE

“I was not proud of what I had learned but I never doubted that it was worth knowing.” This quote from Hunter S. Thompson’s *The Rum Diary* is perhaps best representative of what I believe to be an essential component of creative non-fiction writing: the truth. Writers of non-fiction are inherently truth-seekers; inquisitive minds that thirst for knowledge, thriving off of questioning the very fabric of society. These questions lead to answers, and these answers lead to truths, both universal and personal. This journey – the path of the truth-seeker – is, at its core, the basis of creative non-fiction.

As a writer, my style has followed a similar course in terms of its development. From a young age, I was driven by curiosity. If my head wasn’t buried in a book, I was constantly questioning why things were the way that they were. My early education taught me that if you want to know something, you can find an answer if you look hard enough. Research papers in middle-school became the first stepping-stones on my path to truth-seeking, providing me with a guideline of sorts as to how to arrange my questions, thoughts and findings coherently on paper.

As I grew older, I realized that there were more and more aspects of society that I didn't understand; questions about life that didn't seem to have sufficient answers. While many of my peers seemed to accept things for what they were, I was never able to quell my curiosity. I would continue to research the topics that pervaded my mind, resulting in an ever-growing trail of questions and answers; one inquiry stemmed several more, branching out in all directions at once. There was something satisfying about working my way through a chain of questions; a gratification that came with the acquisition of new knowledge, however positive or negative that knowledge may have been.

My interests in reading, writing, and research would lead me to my undergraduate studies at Cleveland State where I would discover the world of creative writing. An introductory course focusing on fiction, non-fiction, and poetry was my first taste, with non-fiction being the genre that most interested me. I would go on to double-major in both English and communications with a focus on journalism – both areas of study that came together to help mold my writing style and aesthetic.

While my early collegiate years were spent finding my own niche within the world of creative writing, my experience reading and studying the work of others didn't really start until graduate school. Writers such as Hunter Thompson and Truman Capote were a couple of the names I came across in essays or discussions throughout my undergraduate studies. In fact, *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail* and *In Cold Blood* were the first two non-fiction titles I was made aware of. While I never actually read these titles, I learned of their widespread success and use of journalistic style and

technique. My own training in journalism, courses such as Media Writing and Media Criticism, shaped the way I viewed non-fiction writing. While I was taught to approach topics with a critic's eye while following a set of ethics and formalities, Thompson and Capote seemed to deviate from this formula, adding a creative element to the journalistic world. Because of this, these authors and their works, in my mind, became the image of what non-fiction writing was all about.

My time spent truly analyzing the works my contemporaries is a fairly new component of my education, having comprised much of my graduate studies. The *Touchstone Anthology of Creative Non-Fiction* was really the stepping stone that opened the door to my exposure of the vast amount of styles, forms, and techniques that can be utilized within the genre, and the breadth and depth of the authors and content were quite eye-opening for me at the time. From seeing the academic essay approach of "Getting Along with Nature" by Wendell Berry to the dream-like, poetic language and imagery of "The Glass Essay" by Anne Carson, the amount of diversity in each author's writing style helped alter my perception that all non-fiction writing was essentially creative approaches to journalism. This knowledge gained from my first few semester of graduate school was invaluable in regard to my coming-of-age as a writer of non-fiction.

For my thesis, I decided to assemble a collection of short non-fiction essays centered on society and my thoughts, feelings and experiences associated with my time spent living in Cleveland. A majority of my observations stem from the various jobs I've worked at, usually involving some form of entertainment value or cultural past-time. "The Other Side of Fun" is my attempt to peer into what I see as a skewed reality of

society's values and ideologies; a series of discovered and uncovered truths that walk the line between personal and universal, fact and opinion.

For my first piece, "Mayflies", I leverage my experiences as a union security worker for the Cleveland Indians against the lives and mindsets of most of my co-workers. In some ways, it is similar in vein to *Working* by Studs Terkel, offering insight into what work means for different people; a job that is nothing more than a means to an end to ensure my rent gets paid is an entire lifestyle for others – it becomes their identity. The piece also contains inspiration from the poem "Mayflies" by Richard Wilbur, exploring the mortality of mankind while contemplating what life means to those who experience it. This thematic thread also lends itself to the style of "Living Like Weasels" by Annie Dillard, mirroring the musings of the lifespan of man to that of another living creature: The way Dillard's weasel encounter raises questions of life is similar to the way in which the mayflies cause a narrative pondering of purpose. My observations of these topics result in the uncovering of a simple truth – while work is a part of life for some, work *is* life for others. That is not truly living *life*; your existence consumed by labor until your job becomes a permanent identity, going through the motions day after day.

My next piece, "Spiders", chronicles a few of my most uncomfortable experiences while working as a Resident Assistant at Cleveland State University during my undergraduate years. While this essay is more personal in nature than some of the others, the theme of overcoming various fears and apprehensions is a truth that everyone must face throughout their lives, and is an integral part of personal growth

and development. The investigative feel of the technological component of the essay lends itself to the style of Charles Bowden and his essay “Torch Song.” The rawness of his language – the uncomfortable truths he creates with his writing – work towards pulling back the veil that obscures some of the darker aspects of society and mankind. The resulting numbness of these revelations is similar to how I felt while stumbling across some of the more disturbing places on the deep web. I chose to use the spider metaphor throughout the piece because of what they represent; both the darkness of mankind, tucked away unseen in the corners of society, and as a symbol of my own fear and discomfort manifested in physical form. There is also the connection between browsing the deep web and working in a dormitory; you learn more about people than you’d prefer to sometimes. On top of that, the privilege and authority that came with the position was easily exploited; going up onto the roof was strictly prohibited, but our job gave us access to break those rules without any real repercussions.

The next piece in my thesis, “House Rules,” looks at society’s obsession with money and the pursuit of wealth. By framing the piece with several logical fallacies and the Greek myth of Sisyphus, I attempt to explore the shortcomings of a culture fueled by false promises of riches; while most settle into routines of stability and security, the risk-takers who step away from societal constraints are often the only ones who are able to truly profit. The fact that these introspective thoughts occur within a casino and are partially fueled by alcohol harkens to elements of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* in which Hunter S. Thompson witnesses the gambling scene under the influence of several types of drugs and alcohol while covering the national convention of attorney generals.

The feeling of disconnect that pervades the piece also lends itself to the pseudo-undercover type of reporting seen in Thompson's work; I don't belong, but nobody seems to think otherwise.

Originally titled *A Divine Tragedy* based on the thematic similarities it shared with literary works such as *Dante's Inferno* and *The Divine Comedy*, "Ghosts" is a piece that attempts to capture the surrealistic experience of working as a bouncer at one of the busiest bars downtown on one of the biggest party nights of the year, the night before Halloween. The intentional use of language rife with double-meaning throughout the first half of the piece works towards blurring the line between fantasy and reality, attempting to capture the dream-like qualities of the whole ordeal. Like most of my work, my thoughts and observations throughout the essay culminate with a scrutinization of society's practice of ritual and tradition; a personal truth pertaining to a misguided cultural ideology of fun.

The last piece in my thesis is titled "Cutting Weight." This piece is a revisiting of the first work of creative non-fiction I ever wrote; a memoir of sorts compiled with the history of Mixed Martial Arts, my own history and with it, and segments of introspective musings sprinkled throughout. It contains my personal thoughts and feelings about why people are drawn to unarmed combat and sanctioned violence, and how these things are often misinterpreted by society as senseless or barbaric. While I thought this idea was unique when I wrote it in 2013, an English professor from Pittsburg named Jonathan Gottschall published a book a couple years after titled *The Professor in the Cage: Why Men Fight and Why We Like to Watch* which essentially does much of the

same, with a larger focus on the history of violence as a whole and his experiences with sanctioned amateur fighting. There are also older works like *A Fighter's Heart* and *A Fighter's Mind* by Sam Sheridan, who chronicled his experiences as a professional fighter traveling the world. Even pieces like *Paper Lion* by George Plimpton share similarities with the piece, attempting to capture the experience of high-level competition through participation. As stated earlier, I am a firm believer that the best way to find the truth is by experiencing it, and this piece perhaps best exemplifies that mantra which pervades much of my work.

When it comes to inspirations and literary contemporaries for my overall body of work, one of the first that comes to mind is Hunter S. Thompson. While I have only recently discovered his body of work, friends and peers have long compared my writings to his. Because of this, his style and influence are undeniable when it comes to my own. Years before I would first read *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, while sitting in an introductory creative writing class in 2013, I would learn of the term he coined: "Gonzo journalism." This type of pseudo-investigative participatory journalism would become the initial foundation for my growth as a writer. My first piece of non-fiction writing was a gonzo approach to learning about the world of organized cage fighting, a task that allowed me to blend journalistic research with my own creative take on the subject matter being experienced first-hand. This first piece, fueled by Thompson's definition of gonzo journalism, helped shape my early development as a writer and truth-seeker.

Much of the writing in this thesis also highlights another important aspect of Thompson's work; the sense of displacement and alienation that comes with gonzo

journalism. A perfect example of this is seen in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, particularly when Thompson infiltrates the police convention. The overwhelming sensation of not belonging, and not particularly wanting to belong, is a theme that runs through several of my pieces, and provides a key component to my writing style. The act of partaking, whether willingly or otherwise, allows the façade to be pulled back, enabling a richer exploration of the underlying truths. One such truth is the theme of masculinity that runs throughout. Oftentimes surrounded by trained killers in the gym, hulking muscle-bound behemoths at the bar, or blue-collared alcoholics at the ball park, the perceptions what it means to be masculine alternate with my surroundings. Things such as keeping cool after getting bludgeoned outside the head by an elbow, dragging out a drunken patron in a headlock, or throwing back shot after shot at the bar are all baseline requirements of masculinity for their respective crowds. Being a writer? Well, not so much to them. Because of this, my writing comes off as pseudo-investigative; I blend in, I partake, and I write about the experience. Circling back to Thompson's quote from "The Rum Diary," this act of participation allows me to learn much more about the topics at hand, at the cost of learning things that might reveal the ugly truths behind them.

In regard to the form of my thesis, the decision to focus on shorter narrative vignettes that come together to create an overarching feel and thematic unity were partially inspired by the late fiction writer Breece D'J Pancake. I remember reading a collection of his work several years back, and the efficiency of his writing, the subject matter, and overall style of his body of work stuck with me. Each of his short stories

blended in such a way that seemed to encompass an entire culture out in the country of rural West Virginia; capturing a slice of life that is often not discussed. In many ways, I tried to do the same within an urban setting, attempting to capture aspects of the culture and society that many might not immediately consider, or to portray it in such a way that might be overlooked. His portrayal of accumulated personal truths, while different from the experiences that have helped shape my own, share many similarities; each life, regardless of where or how it experiences existence, shares truths on some universal level. The key difference here is what they choose to do with the knowledge they have obtained. Whether they accept it or reject it, they are aware of their circumstances and the struggles they have with them.

Looking further into the exploration of culture present within my essays, two other authors come to mind in regard to stylistic similarities: Anthony Bourdain and John Jeremiah Sullivan. While Bourdain is perhaps best known as chef and food critic, his body of non-fiction work, particularly *No Reservations*, focus on an outsider's perspective to the various cultures and sub-cultures he experienced traveling around the world. While Bourdain whole-heartedly embraces the role of outsider up front throughout his experiences, there are still moments in his travels in which the isolation he feels in these groups shines through, sharing similarities with several of the works in my thesis. One of the more obvious examples of this is seen in an excerpt from his book *No Reservations: Around the World on an Empty Stomach*. While exploring the culture in India, Bourdain writes of an experience he had while resting in a desert outside Jaisalmer:

I remember this moment: I was listening to a sad song on my iPod, and looking out at the desert while the crew shot B-roll footage of camels and landscape. I lay down and closed my eyes for a few seconds, thinking about how strange my life had become how far away I was from my old life, how distant from my old friends, how difficult it had become to connect with anyone who didn't do what I did, hadn't seen what I was seeing (39).

In many ways, this mirrors the sentiments I express in pieces like "Mayflies" and "Ghosts," alienated by both circumstance and self-observed truths.

While Bourdain goes the interactive tourist route, Sullivan takes a more gonzo approach in the vein of Hunter Thompson; rather than investigating other cultures around the world, Sullivan explores facets of American sub-cultures that often go unnoticed or fly under the radar. In many ways, his collection of essays, *Pulphead*, feels reminiscent of a non-fiction take on Breece D'J Pancake's work; both create insightful vignettes into slices of life that an average person from the hustle and bustle of city life might not be aware of. An example can be seen in his essay "Upon this Rock," a piece in which Sullivan was assigned to cover the Cross-Over Festival, a three-day Christian rock concert in Lake of the Ozarks, Missouri. Instead of just covering the festival, Sullivan decides to investigate the culture of the people that are drawn to it, traveling with them and essentially going full-blown gonzo. My work follows a similar thread, exploring components of city life and urban culture that might not be considered from an outsiders' perspective, all while bringing to light some of the flaws and shortcomings I have perceived within them.

Another aspect of the writing within my thesis worth discussing is the overall tone of the work. Walking the line between pessimism and indifference, there is a sense of narrated numbness that comes with frequent exposure to the negative or unsavory. In some ways, this is reminiscent of the style of Charles Bowden – a writer and journalist whose experience with the worst aspects of humanity resulted in an emotionally disconnected style of writing. While part of that style is undoubtedly due to his time spent as a journalist, some of the distance and objectivity seems to stem from constant subjectivity. I don't think I have quite reached that point, but my style seems to be developing along the same course. Exposure to constant violence, drug and alcohol consumption, and the gut-wrenching content that is so easily accessed online all slowly desensitize a person to their adverse effects and potential to cause harm. While one could easily avoid these things, doing so would obscure the truth, and, as Thompson once said about the truth: "I was not proud of what I had learned but I never doubted that it was worth knowing."

Continuing the discussion of tone, there is a conscious effort to explore the struggle with empathy that occurs throughout my work. Cage fighting teaches you not to invest emotions because it could result in serious personal injury. I have to emotionally detach myself from the bar scene or I would lose my sanity, but the girl in the yellow dress challenges that thought process. My other musings on society observed at the workplace at Progressive Field and while experiencing the casino push me towards feelings of anger and disgust at how ideals and values are held and perceived. The shocking nature of the content on the deep web further numb me to empathetic

feelings when the realizations of what humanity can be capable of come to the forefront. In some ways, my personal struggle with these issues shares a thematic unity with *The Empathy Exams* by Leslie Jamison. While Jamison attempts to explore the nature of empathy and questions how it is experienced amongst people in various contexts, my work delves into empathy on a personal level and how I struggle to find its meaning throughout different aspects of my life.

When looking at “The Other Side of Fun” as a cohesive literary experience, my initial goals were to utilize my background in journalism and research to uncover the truth about aspects of society that warranted further exploration in my mind. “Mayflies” explores unionized labor and what work and life means to different sects of individuals. “Spiders” delves into a layer of internet culture not easily accessed, also touching on sub-themes of authority and overcoming anxiety. “House Rules” attempts to highlight the shortcomings of a society obsessed with the pursuit wealth and the illusion of happiness it aims to provide. “Ghosts” explores the way that the meaning of Halloween has changed over the years on both a cultural and personal level, introspectively commenting on how society’s ideas of fun have become lost in translation. Lastly, “Cutting Weight” documents my participation in a culture of organized violence, highlighting the meaning this competition carries to its participants versus the way society sees and depicts it. As a whole, each piece chips away at preconceived notions of life as we know it. Throughout these documented experiences, I grapple with my thoughts, feelings and realizations as well my struggles with succumbing to the resulting numbness that increases with constant exposure to negative stimuli.

Stylistically, I draw inspiration from many different authors. The journalistic, investigative “gonzo” approach pairs with the narrative alienation of Hunter Thompson, Charles Bowden, and more contemporary authors like Jonathan Gottschall and Anthony Bourdain. The form of the short story-like segments and use of cultural introspection throughout my thesis lends itself to the work of Breece Pancake and authors such as Studs Terkel and John Jeremiah Sullivan. The use of narrative voice and tone which carries through each piece is reminiscent of Bowden’s dry, detached style, and in some ways thematically relatable to Leslie Jamison.

All in all, *The Other Side of Fun* is a culmination of several of the most impactful moments of my time spent living in downtown Cleveland. My education and upbringing as a writer helped me approach these pieces from an angle which allowed the most fruitful exploration of what they mean to me, and, on a greater scale, what they tell about our society as a whole and culture(s) surrounding it. These essays work through thoughts of curiosity, delving into a deeper level of questioning about the world I live in. While I still believe the best way to understand something is to experience it, the truth can only be revealed if one steps back from the experience – to think, to observe, and to write about it; the truth, whatever it may be, must be told.

CHAPTER II

MAYFLIES

Watching those lifelong dancers of a day

As night closed in, I felt myself alone

In a life too much my own,

More mortal in my separateness than they –

Unless, I thought, I had been called to be

Not fly or star

But one whose task is joyfully to see

How fair the fiats of the caller are

-Richard Wilbur

“The guy tried to bring in six different wrenches through a metal detector.” I listen in as one of my coworkers tells of the absurdities he witnessed during his last shift. “When I asked him why, he just told me that there’s a nut at the end of every bolt. He wasn’t wrong, so I just let him in.” The metaphor unravels in my mind; a nut at the end of every bolt. A night at the end of every day. A death at the end of every life.

We all crowd into an elevator which will take us from the employee entrance to the service level, packing ourselves in like canned fish. I'm surrounded by a bunch of heavysset old men with stale breathe, trying my best not to breathe as they talk about batting averages and ticket sales.

We clock in and make our way back through the employee entrance, past the detectors and check-in tables. Through the red metal door that weighs a ton. Down the staircase past all the corporate brain-washing plastered on the walls.

Start with HEART!

Every memory begins with YOU!

YOU are in the Tribe!

Considering I get paid to mostly stand around, I have troubling believing any memory involving anyone entering the ballpark starts with me, unless that memory involves someone getting kicked out. We're just expendable bodies they use to plug holes in their stadium design flaws. Luckily they pay just enough to keep people like me around, but not everyone is immune to the propaganda. Take my fellow security worker Ken for example: the guy's been working at the stadium for almost twenty years now. Couldn't imagine himself doing anything else. Or there's Tom, a blue-collar worker that juggles three jobs and loves every second of it. I asked him what he does for fun once, and he just said "this." These guys live to work, revel off the feeling of grinding down their bodies and minds to secure a decent paycheck. People like Ken or Tom might be in the tribe, but I certainly am not.

As we reach the terrace and head to our posts, groups of winged insects engulf the concrete walls. Mayflies. Swarms of them, all clamoring about in waves. I watch as a gaggle of them attempts to take flight, rising a couple inches only to stumble back to the ground once the breeze catches them and their wings fail. "Hate these fuckin' things," A voice from behind me blurts out. "Really, I mean what's the point of a bug that dies within a day? Why did God make them?"

I start to wonder what a day feels like to a mayfly. Do they know that their only lease on life will last them a mere 24 hours? Is a lifetime to them just a day, or is a day to them a whole lifetime? I guess there isn't much of a difference, especially considering most end up crashed underfoot by the stampede of security workers heading to their designated posts.

I arrive at right field. On the other side of the steel cage is the usual Friday night pandemonium. A sea of red and blue. Fans comes crashing to the gate in waves; ravenous mobs craving dollar hotdogs and two-dollar beers. I wait as the supervisors finish hooking up the metal detectors, listening in on a conversation between two of my more seasoned colleagues.

"This shit's a train wreck nowadays. Working the gate used to be all about flirting with girls back when I started and now we gotta be fuckin' TSA. It's a nightmare getting everyone in and it's all because of those damn metal detectors."

"Everything changed on 9/11...that day changed the world."

I begin to think back to that day. I must've been in fourth grade, right around 10 years old or so. I can still remember the way my teacher described it to the class. *Bad*

men are flying planes into our buildings, so the president is trying to make them stop. I knew nothing about the bad men, nothing about the staggering number of people that lost their lives that day, or how it would forever alter the way the world operates. But I knew I was disappointed that I wouldn't be going to see the Indians close out their season. There was no place I'd rather be back then, a kid at the ballpark. Now that I work there, I'd rather be anywhere else.

Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to Progressive Field! Home of the Cleveland Indians. As you enter the ballpark, please empty your pockets of all metal objects, keys, cell phones and other electronics devices. You do not need to remove wallets, belts, or change.

The gates open and the waves come rolling in. Amidst the dinging of metal detectors finding pocket knives and cans of chew, vendors call out their wares. Loudspeakers boom out the newest radio pop while fans that must've forgotten how to read shout questions about where the closest beer stand is. I point to the impossible-to-miss "\$2 beer" sign directly behind me and receive a pat on the back in return. "Stay vigilant my son" he yells into my ear before stumbling to the drink line. Most of these people are coming directly from the Thirsty Parrot, a cheap dive bar across the street from the stadium, so the general lack of common sense is no surprise to me.

I look on as the stadium slowly fills to capacity. Clusters of mayflies attempt to flee from the onslaught of footsteps pouring in from the gates. It must seem like a reverse biblical plague to these bugs; swarms of giants crushing everything in their path as the insects attempt to flee in futility.

Ladies and gentlemen, please rise and remove your hats for this performance of our National Anthem.

By time the national anthem ends, most of the initial rush has died down. By the top of the third inning, things are situated enough that we are able to go on break. As we close up our entry gates, we take inventory of the items we confiscated from fans: 6 pocket knives, 2 bottles of Coke, one miniature bottle of wine a lady claimed was perfume, a handful of screws, and a dangerous-looking metal thingamabob to top it all off. Our supervisor lets us stake our claims on the loot. The Cokes are quickly snatched up, and 2 of the knives are pocketed by other workers. The wine is taken to the managerial office, where word is the supervisors all get together and drink the confiscated alcohol after the game. I'm no fan of soda, and I never found myself needing a knife. I decide to sit out the scavenging.

We all head down to the break room, eager to separate ourselves from the crowd for a half hour or so. "That's my fifth knife this week," I hear someone say. "I'm thinking about stockpiling these things and taking them up to the flea market at the end of the season. Should be able to cop a couple bucks."

"Beer money for sure," someone else responds. It seems like all anyone ever cares about is drinking nowadays.

Beer after work?

Come crack a cold one after we get off.

Down for a brewski or twoski?

I got you on the first round.

Every shift ends with some iteration of the question. My response is always the same: “Nah, I’m good tonight.” I don’t fit in with these people. I don’t want to – to become a member of the tribe. Pissing away paycheck after paycheck night after night with a bunch of union workers is exactly what I’m trying to avoid doing with my time, my night, my life. They all seem to get roped in, stuck in a loop. Start to feel like some kind of family; happy because the higher-ups loosen their collars and buy them shots every night after work.

We reach the break room, which is one of the most depressing places I’ve experienced in all my years on earth. Graying men of various levels of out-of-shapeness line the tables. They sit in silence, slowly chewing their wife-made meals. Some stare blankly ahead; lifeless robots recharging their batteries. The room smells like rust and body odor, with subtle hints of home-made chili and a splash of Windex for good measure. I grab my lunch from the community fridge and make my way out to the service tunnel to eat atop one of the many golf carts that line the hall. *I felt myself alone. In a life too much my own, more mortal in my seperateness...*

“Smile Daniel.” I look up from my meal of leftover pizza and see one of my supervisors, Yolanda, making her way down the tunnel. She always seems to be glowing with positivity when I see her. I crack a half-assed grin while attempting to avoid choking on masticated dough. “See, I knew you could do it.” Yolanda is different than most of the people I work with. She always sees the good in people, has faith in them. She has that spark that the others don’t. Optimism. Energy. *Life.*

I finish my food and head back up to the terrace. The rest of my night consists of posting at a blowout gate. These gates are positioned throughout the stadium and remain closed until the seventh inning stretch, opening intermittently as more and more people leave. My perception of time starts to fade; the night bleeding away as I stand at my post. I watch as both people and mayflies stumble about, fans trickling out of the stadium as the game nears its end.

The Indians are down to their last out here, looking to keep their streak alive. Full count on Lindor. The setup, and the pitch... a swing and a miss, got him on the outside corner. Ballgame.

The humid night air hangs heavy with the scent of muddy lake water and spilled beer. The mess these people leave behind as they exit the ballpark is worse than the aftermath of a weekend rush at the dive bar I work at. Empty cups and cans litter the pavement amongst the crushed carapaces of mayfly corpses. The union boys start to lock up their gates, eager to pressure out the last few drunken stragglers so they can make their way to the bar, Victory Alley. "Come with us," they ask, "bosses are buying the first round." I resist their offer, volunteering to stay for the police sweep so I have an excuse to stay back. "Suit yourself." I watch as they head down the ramp, laughing and cracking jokes while I wait for CPD to make their way around the stadium and clear the ballpark.

Thank you for attending tonight's game. At this time, the ballpark is now closed. Pleased make your way to the nearest exit gate. Tickets are still on sale for tomorrow's game against the Chicago Cubs. Drive home safely, and, as always, go Tribe!

The lights slowly dim as the police start their scan on the other end of the plaza. The stadium is quiet now, but tomorrow I'll have to do this all over again. On the ground in front of me, the last few mayflies struggle to take flight, fluttering in pitiful somersaults across the pavement. In less than one full rotation of the earth, I witnessed the entirety of their existence, a blink of the eye of the cosmos and they're gone. I wonder, why on the verge of death, they struggle so hard to keep flying. I wonder where they could be trying to get to. What their purpose is. What *my* purpose is.

I look up at the sky, at the black sheet specked with tiny dots of starlight, and I wonder if God – stuck up there in that black void of infinite nothingness, watching us stumble and lurch our way to the grave – ever gets lonely up there all alone.

CHAPTER III

SPIDERS

The first thing I noticed when I moved to Cleveland was the spiders. Knuckle-sized nightmares that clung to the surface of any structure they could attach themselves to. The ones that scale skyscrapers are about twice the size of the garden variants from back home; Quarter-sized compared to dimes. I've always been inexplicably terrified of them – tucked away in dark corners, unseen by the unobservant eye. My family used to take advantage of this knowledge when I was younger, chasing me around the house if they ever managed to catch one.

“Quit being a bitch” my brother would taunt as he threatened to toss a freshly-caught basement-dweller in my direction. “Man up” my dad would say as the peanut-shaped body of a daddy long-legs crawled across the stack of firewood I was carrying out back. I never understood why I was so terrified of these tiny creatures, but their existence was the bane of mine.

Upon first moving to Cleveland in 2013, I accepted a position as a Resident Assistant at Cleveland State University, taking up residence in a dorm called Fenn Tower. The building is twenty-two stories high (by the way, I'm also terrified of heights) and the

outside is literally coated in spiders. I lived on the 6th floor, which I imagined was too high for arachnoids to explore. Unfortunately, this was not the case. There would be days where I was writing at my desk and I could look out my window and see two gumball-sized spiders scuttling across their webs, stuck up into the corner of the stonework. Luckily for me, the solution for avoiding these monstrosities was a simple one: Don't open your windows. Ever.

All throughout my childhood, I remember my dad telling me that I would need to find a way to overcome my fears. "You gotta find a way to get over these things" he would say. "They'll just end up holding you back later in life." I never understood how tactfully avoiding arachnid assassins or saying no to scaling sky scrapers would hold me back, but there was some level of truth to what he was telling me. They say that the highest potential for personal growth occurs outside of your comfort zone. Fortunately for me, I would find myself coming face to face with both one night a couple years after moving downtown.

Like all of my greatest decisions, it began with a night of one too many drinks back in 2015. It was a Thursday night early on in the semester, and a couple co-workers and I had just gotten back from some "staff bonding" at a local bar. It was my third and final year on the job. Graham was a second year, although he had previously been an RA at Central State for several years, and Joey, who we decided to call Woodstock, was the new guy. The three of us were tasked with living in the dorms, making sure the freshman didn't do anything too stupid while they fucked their neighbors and pissed

away their parents' savings. Ironically enough, most of the stupid things being done were being done by us.

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My friend Woodstock also happens to be a computer science major that aspires to work for the FBI tracking down child pornography rings. During our night out, he told me about something called the Deep Web, explaining it as the seedy underbelly of the internet; a place rife with cyber-crime, drug dealers, and alleged hitmen for hire. Accessing the deep web is almost a rite of passage for these techy types, and simply having the know-how to get there is something that all virtual bounty-hunters acquire, one way or the other, over the course of their education. This immediately piqued my interest, as I had never heard of it before our conversation. He told me how he had ventured to the deep web on several occasions, detailing his findings. He spoke of an incident in which, according to his story, he stumbled onto a heavily-secured and highly private site:

"Bro, I've seen some fucked up shit on there. You gotta be careful."

"Careful of what?"

"People can track you down man. It happened to me once, swear to god. I ended up on some site, probably Vietnamese based on the looks of it. I needed a password to access it so I decided to fuck around and just type some shit in and hit enter. No luck so I left, but someone fucking messaged me man. My name, parents name, address, where I lived, all that shit. They told me they would find me and kill me if I ever ended up there again. I

was like 'Ok, bye' and got off as fast as I could. I was so paranoid that I smashed my hard drive man."

"Someone actually messaged you? Like for real right?"

"Swear to fucking god man."

While I have no way of verifying the authenticity of his story, at that moment, I was sold. It sounded like the perfect marriage of technology and potential danger. I asked him if he could show me the deep web for research purposes – I wanted to see what all the fuss was about. After much debate, he told me would get back to me in two weeks; the time in which it would take set up the necessary precautions to prepare his computer's security measures. When the time came, he would take me to the deep web.

(UPDATE: While Woodstock was preparing his PC for another journey to the deep web, I was doing some research of my own. I stumbled across some key terms, compiling a glossary of the terminology; a preliminary account of my research while I waited for preparations to be completed.)

Deep Web

The Deep Web is a term used to describe the content on the internet that is not indexed by traditional search engines such as Google or Bing. For whatever reason, these sites are "hidden" from the public eye and require special software to access. It is said that roughly 95% of all content that exists on the internet is located within the deep web. For

the 20 terabytes of data on the surface web, there are over 6,500 terabytes of data on the deep web. *Imagine an iceberg, with the tip being the portion of the internet that can be reached by normal means. The rest of the iceberg, sitting underwater, is the deep web.*

Tor

When it comes to safety and security, Tor is an essential component for exploring the deep web. An acronym for “The Onion Router”, Tor is free software that provides an anonymous network to help you defend against traffic analysis, a form of network surveillance that threatens personal freedom and privacy. This works by bouncing your communications around a distributed network of relays run by volunteers all around the world: it prevents somebody watching your computer from learning what sites you visit, and it prevents the sites you visit from learning your physical location. It is known as The Onion Router due to the vast number of “layers” that make up the network (over 6,000 relays in total). *Tor would be the submarine needed to access the ocean floor; the vehicle needed to navigate.*

Sandboxing

Another important element of deep web security, sandboxing, as it was described to me, is the act of allocating your computers’ RAM to create a virtual computer within your physical computer. This creates an emulator which is capable of running the same software and programs that your physical PC is able to run – a valuable second line of defense; if someone were able to back-ping your IP address, you could “blow up” the virtual PC, leaving no trace of activity and saving your physical PC from being

compromised. *I envision sandboxing to be like pressuring the cabin of the submarine, allowing deeper diving without succumbing to the outside forces of the deepest waters.*

Bitcoin

Bitcoin is the currency of the deep web – a peer-to-peer payment system, free from regulation and central authority. It is valid around the world; one bitcoin is currently worth \$4,150.02. Because of this, transactions often involve fractions of bitcoins and are stored in something called the “block chain,” a public ledger which records transactions by printing them into a block (a list of accepted transactions), which is sent to all computers within the network and published to the ever-expanding block chain. A series of complex algorithms is ran by each computer to ensure that the block chain is consistent and up-to-date. Bitcoins can be only be spent by the person whose address they are associated with, verified by entering a digital signature called a private key. If the private key is lost, the bitcoins become unusable as the key is the only way to verify them. In 2013, a deep web user reported losing over 7,500 bitcoins by accidentally throwing out a flash drive which contained their key. The monetary value of the loss was estimated to fall around \$7.5 million at the time (\$37.5 million by today’s pricing). *I think of all the gold coins lost to the ocean’s claim; they’re able to be found, but doing so requires special preparation.*

(UPDATE #2: *Due to a highly unfortunate and very serious battle with a bleeding stomach ulcer, Woodstock was out of commission. Either hospitalized or back at home, he was unable to act as my guide for this journey. Luckily, he still provided me with the*

essential information and programs needed to prepare my own computer for a venture into the vast unknown of the deep web. While he was “preparing his computer”, he had actually been creating a virtual PC on a CD. This disc, containing the Tor browser and an operating system known as TAILS (The Amnesic Incognito Live System), would allow any PC to access the deep web. Complete with all necessary security precautions enabled, all I had to do was boot my laptop from the disc at startup instead of letting the computer launch normally. Before heading out, he passed one of these CDs on to me, a few Christmas ales, and told me to search for the “Hidden Wiki,” which is where my virtual tour of this strange new world would begin.)

It was a Friday night around 6:30pm, and I had just gotten back from meeting up with Woodstock. I tossed my bag onto the couch, removed his CD, along with the four remaining Christmas ales he had bestowed upon me (thank you, bleeding stomach ulcer), and prepared myself for a night of deep web delving. I decided that I would give myself a few hours digging around, documenting any interesting findings as I went. I was admittedly nervous; my knowledge of all things technical was rather limited, and I was now tasked with undertaking this project alone. I had no idea how to nuke a virtual payload if a disgruntled cyber-criminal crossed my path.

As I booted up my laptop, Christmas ale in hand, I was laced with feelings of both fear and excitement. The sensation was similar to the one I experienced the first time I ever stepped foot into an MMA gym; the risk, the inherent danger, and the unfamiliarity of the situation all juxtaposed themselves against my scholar-like willingness to learn

about this new world. I was eager to dive into the deepest parts of the internet, but I had to be careful; would I be the spider, navigating this web with ease, or the fly, trapped by his latent curiosity?

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I remember the first time I saw her – a simple passing in the hallway; I had no choice but to turn back and look. She bore the mark: an hourglass, both deadly and beautiful – how many mates had she consumed? I stepped carefully to avoid her silken strands, but it would only be a matter of time.

As the grains of sand sifted, I would sense her presence more and more – lurking out of site, tucked away in the dark corners of my mind; always there, but never visible. I yearned for more – even just another glimpse, knowing the only way to rouse her from her web was to trap myself in it.

We crossed paths again at work; fate brought us both to Fenn Tower as resident assistants. It started with a night out, inviting me to get drinks. Staff bonding; I couldn't resist. One drink turned into ten, but I had to keep up. She invited me back to her lair at the top of Fenn Tower. I agreed, the poison clouding my mind. I navigated through the mental cobwebs, careful to avoid the terrifying temptations. Upon her couch, she crawled up next time, the hourglass as entrancing as ever. I felt her fangs sink into my leg, heart racing, thoughts swirling, paralyzing me as the toxins spread. Make a move. Man up.

At that moment, I decided to become a man. Resistance gave way as I swallowed the last dregs of fear. She consumed me that night, leaving the empty shell of my former self cocooned in the cobwebs of memory.

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Ding. After roughly a five minute wait, the TAILS operating system finally kicks to life, leaving me with a very minimalistic, archaic-looking interface on the screen of my laptop. It strongly resembled something you would see in the early 90's; a plain blue background with several small icons on the left-hand side of the screen. The taskbar was located at the top of the screen instead of the bottom, containing only three visible applications: Pidgin Messenger, Claws Mail, and Tor Browser. I clicked on Tor, and watched as a small, yellow onion icon came to visualization at the top right of the screen. *Tor is not ready, Tor needs an accurate clock to work correctly. Please check your time and date settings!* I had no idea how to do this, so I decided that I would just sit there, finish my beer, and watch the yellow onion spin for a while. After a few minutes, it turned green, the on-screen time changed to 12:07am, and a message popped up: *Tor is now ready to access the internet!* Game time.

The first leg of my virtual journey could be summed up in one word: waiting. Tor took several minutes to connect to its blank slate of a homepage, but I guess that is to be expected when it is bouncing the signal around thousands of relays across the world; a web of cyber-waves, my signal being the spider that navigates them. Once the page was finally loaded, I recalled my computer friends' advice, typed "hidden wiki" into the search bar and hit enter.

The Hidden Wiki was essentially a portal containing a list of some of the more popular URL's that have been discovered on the deep web. The problem is, there is not one hidden wiki, but numerous. While there was an original at one point in time, many replicas, mirrors, and variations, have been created, leaving me with no way of knowing if I was on the legitimate hidden wiki or a fork of some sort.

As soon as I loaded up the page, I felt a strange tension deep in my stomach that can only be described as the feeling you get when you are doing something you know you shouldn't be; fear, curiosity, and excitement intermingling within. I had essentially stumbled upon the black market of the internet – a plethora of links, mostly leading to illicit underground services, crowded the entirety of the page. There were links, accompanied by brief descriptions, that led to money laundering services, counterfeit currency shipments, used guns and ammunition, escort services, hit men, stolen credit cards and social security numbers, a plethora of drug markets, hackers for hire, tutorials on how to make explosives, fake US citizenships and passports, various types of porn sites, and even, disgustingly enough, links to *jailbait* and *hard candy*, both well-known terms for child porn. There was even a link to the “uncensored hidden wiki,” which, based on what I found on the normal one, probably was the virtual gateway to hell.

Considering this was my first stop on the deep web, I was astounded that something containing so much corruption and criminal activity could be so easy to access. With that being said, amidst the moral deficiency existed some seemingly benign links as well. There were links to live streamed radio, a plethora of search engines that were capable of sniffing out hidden pages and services on the deep web, various blogs

and chat rooms, a vast collection of eBooks, political news, and a dozen or so email and messaging sites. The amount of information, both seemingly safe and potentially dangerous, was daunting. And it was all only a click away from my disposal...

After much hesitancy, I decided that I would adopt a look-but-don't-touch policy while exploring the various links. From my understanding, it wasn't a crime to stumble onto a page selling illegal drugs unless you tried to buy something. A knock at my door snaps me out of my investigation. "Dan are you in there? I need you to sign something so I can switch rooms." A resident I promised to fill out paperwork for. Now was not the time though. I decided to sit in silence until the knocking stops. Go away.

The roommate transfer sheet slips under my doors like a ghost, settling itself upon my welcome mat as I downed the rest of my Christmas ale. Outside my window, I look on as an eight-legged nomad continues on his quest to reach the top of the tower. I decided I would get back to mine and dove back into the seedy cyber-world I had just begun to familiarize myself with. I started clicking links. Not indiscriminately though; I made sure to avoid clicking myself into prison. Strangely enough, most links are dead ends; *Tor could not load the page you requested.*

(UPDATE #3: It turns out that a good portion of these sites linked on the Hidden Wiki were hosted by a service known as "Freedom Hosting." The owner, some scumbag named Eric Marques, was arrested in 2013 for being the largest distributor of child porn on the planet. The activist group, Anonymous, was responsible for the attack against child porn: "Operation Darknet" they called it. After Marques arrest, over half of the

sites sponsored by Freedom Hosting were shut down or moved; however, the Hidden Wiki still points to their original location; a virtual ghost town buried deep in cyberspace-time).

The first working link I stumbled across was labeled “hitman network.” *C’tulu Resume*; The top-left contained a picture of a skull and crossbones, and an illustration of a tentacle-faced man in a trench coat holding a paper covered in satanic-looking symbols sat in the top-right.

Solutions to Common Problems! We are an organized criminal group, former soldiers and mercenaries from the FFL (Edit: French Foreign Legion), highly-skilled, with military experience of more than five years. We can perform hits all around the world.

Affordable murder at \$45,000 a head. Public figures can be taken out for \$540,000. Need someone raped, beaten, bombed or crippled? \$3,000 to \$360,000 depending on publicity level and size of entourage. All they ask for is your name, country, city, and a clear, recent picture of the target. I wondered who came up with the prices, and on what basis were they founded? Seems suspect, likely a scam. Still left a bad taste in my mouth though.

My next stop was NLGrowers; coffee shop grade cannabis. They offered 24 hour odorless shipping, and 1% cash back if you referred people to the site. Seemed like a pretty standard bitcoin-for-bud site with pyramid scheme elements sprinkled in for good measure. Sites like this seemed a lot less interesting when you’ve had to deal with kids on your floor doing the same thing out of their dorm rooms...

The next link took me to a site called Parazite: *~4.5k RANDOM .ONIONS, PICK ONE, AND LET'S SEE IF YOU END UP IN A SLAMMER ...OR WORSE ...OR JUST PLAIN NOTHING. DON'T DARE?*

An outline of two red dice sat in the center of the screen. To click or not to click? That is the question. I decided to click.

Digital goods marketplace. Facts about cats (*there are over 140 known ways to skin a cat. According to recent surveys, cats enjoy none of them*). The blog of a journalist. A tour of the steam tunnels beneath Virginia Tech (where college-aged Dungeons and Dragons players would venture to slay giant spiders and plunder lost treasures. A student died doing this at MSU). The Human Experiment: *In this web site, we attempt to illustrate several experiments that are being conducted by our group on human subjects. The people chosen for this range of experiments are usually homeless people that are unregistered citizens. Things were getting dark. Experimentations range from: starvation and water/fluid restriction, vivisection/pain tolerances, infectious diseases and organ effects, transfusions, drug trials, sterilization, neonate and infant tolerances to x-rays, heat, and pressure.* A numbness spread through me, and it wasn't the Christmas ale. *The bodies of the dead are dissected then disposed of in dumpsters of meat shops where their bodies will not be found.* Maybe I should stop clicking. I wonder if the nomad spider finished his pilgrimage to the top of the tower yet? Darkscandals. *Real rape videos, pack 4 out now.* It was too dark to see any further. My journey had taken me too far. It was time to come home.

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We stumbled back into Fenn Tower around 3am, not quite ready to call it a night just yet. The same could not be said of the security guard snoring in the corner, or the desk attendant whose head kept bobbing up and down, drifting in and out of consciousness. Graham and I decided that this would be the perfect opportunity to show Woodstock the tricks of the trade and take him up to the roof – top secret stuff. Due to the nature of our job, we were granted access to a key box that holds the master keys for every floor of the building. An oversight by maintenance also allowed us access to the #14 key, which could open any and every door in the building. It was the holy grail of master keys. The fact that we had access to this key was classified information amongst resident assistants, passed down year to year to only the most trustworthy of individuals; Like a baton in a relay race, it was passed down to me, I passed it down to Graham, and now we were passing it down to Woodstock.

We pulled the #14 key, made our way to the elevators, and set our destination for the 19th floor. The elevator ride seemed to take an eternity, and Woodstock started humming a tune which I immediately recognized as “(Don’t Fear) The Reaper.” I imagined the tinny, repetitive *ding* of the cowbell in my head as the elevator finally slowed to a stop. We stepped out and made our way up the staircase towards the door that leads to the roof. Woodstock was still in his own little world humming 70’s music, and Graham was struggling to make it up the stairs; a task undoubtedly challenging for an intoxicated, 400-pound former division II offensive lineman with bad knees. We all find our ways to the series of doors that access the roof. The #14 key works its magic, and we step out into the humid, mid-summer night air.

The view of the city from twenty-two stories up was more breathtaking than I remembered it. The abandoned ghost town we walked through earlier looked like the Vegas strip the way it was lit up as far as the eye could see. I stepped from the doorway and immediately caught a spider web straight to the face. Internally, my panic alarm was going off, but I didn't want to lose my cool in front of my friends. I wiped it off as nonchalantly as I could; my heart nearly beating out of my chest. I turned around to identify the booby-trap that nature set for me – bad idea on my part. In my state of altered consciousness, I failed to account for the coating of spiders that covered the outside of the building, but I was quickly reminded of this when I saw dozens of them dotted across the brickwork. I found myself sandwiched between the two things that terrified me most; a wall covered in spiders and a ledge twenty-two stories high with no real safety railing.

I chose what I considered to be the lesser of two evils and inched my way towards the edge of the rooftop. I looked down and felt the familiar ping of terror swell up inside me, but for some reason I chose not to look away. The longer I stared down the side of the building, the less I felt afraid and the more I felt curious.

How long would it take to hit the ground if I fell?

What would that feel like?

Was anyone awake inside Fenn Tower? Would they see me falling from their window?

I wondered what was going on beneath me, the unheralded happenings in alleyways and dark corners that go unnoticed from the surface. The #14 key unlocked more than just a door, opening my mind to the layers of coexistence concealed

beneath the surface. I wondered how so many spiders were able to reach the top of the tower. Could they ever get back down, or did they regret completing a pilgrimage that took them too far?

I turned and saw Woodstock climbing a rickety metal ladder that lead to the very top of the building. Once he reached the peak, he walked to the edge and threw his arms out to his sides. Standing there in that pose, overlooking the city in his tie-dye tank top, he looked like a psychedelic recreation of the Christ the Redeemer statue.

He made his way back down the ladder and pulled out two expensive looking cigars. "The view up here is rad man," said Woodstock. "Smoke one with me." We burned through them like they were cigarettes. The combination of nicotine and alcohol had me hazy, but I was drawn into conversation with Graham and Woodstock. It was the deep, contemplative kind of conversation that lasted for hours, and the blueness of the morning had started bleeding into the blackness of the night.

Eventually we decided we had spent enough time elevated above the city. Making our way back towards the door, I noticed a cherry-sized spider dangling from his stem of web. It must've been the one whose web was strewn across my face earlier that evening, still rebuilding from our collision. We all stopped and watched as it worked tirelessly to patch together its' inconveniently located home. I had reached an impasse; I could've gone under it, but the fear of it dropping down on my head stopped me from doing so. Woodstock walked right up to it and pulled out the torch lighter he used to light the cigars, his face within inches of the spider. He brought the

torch right up it, looked at it for a couple seconds, then clicked the switch and set it ablaze.

The spider instantly fell from its web; its eight legs retracted around its flame-encased glowing orange body as it fell to the ground like a meteor. As if it were the last star in the night sky fading away, we stood around as the fiery glow dimmed. All that remained was a charred, black husk splayed out on the cement step beneath us, just as the first rays of sunlight peaked out over the horizon.

CHAPTER IV

HOUSE RULES

“Insanity: doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.”

-Albert Einstein

“I thought you weren’t drinking tonight?”

“I thought so too, but fuck it.”

I knew that I would essentially be throwing away money tonight, so I figured I would treat myself to something remotely enjoyable before the stack of bills in my pocket was no more.

“Blue Moon, two orange slices please.”

The beer costs more than it should. I look around the room and take in my surroundings as the bartender slides me my drink. I’m surrounded by people from all walks of life. Some look defeated, drinking out of disappointment perhaps. A man dressed in an old leather jacket sits at the bar and stares into his glass. He looks as if he had just lost everything. Not far from him, a couple celebrates as they guzzle their

highball mixed drinks. Based on their vibrant outfits and infectious happiness, you would think they just won a million dollars. Who knows? Maybe they did.

The dim lighting in the building makes the plethora of flashing neon lights from the game machines stand out like signal flares against a night sky. To my right is a corral of crowded black jack tables, \$25 a hand. I focus my vision on the table nearest to me and watch as a gaggle of eager gamblers follow the dealer's every move. They sit there; transfixed like dogs eyeing scraps of food on the dinner plate of an owner, just waiting – hoping – to be fed. As the cards are dealt, some knock on the table, calling for more. Others wave their hand once, signaling that they have had enough. As I sip my libation, I think about how foolish they look, mesmerized by false promises of wealth and riches.

I look to my left and notice the sea of machines that span out almost as far as the eye can see. The uniformity of their placement, the flash of colors, and the constant echo of clinks, clanks, beeps, and melodic, broken jangles gives off the impression that an army of malfunction robots is fighting valiantly to kick back into action. I watch as a man sits in front of one and repeatedly pulls a lever with a red handle. The slots spin, resulting in a whirl of colors and noises.

Nothing.

He pulls again.

Nothing.

I watch this cycle for several minutes, both amused and bemused by the monotonous process. The occasional *ding-ding-ding* rings out from the machine, signaling that that particular pull of the lever was inexplicably luckier than the last. Poor sap must think *he's* the one winning, oblivious to the knowledge that the house *always* has the edge.

I look on as the man sits there, pumping more and more change into his machine. As his incremental victories keep him stuck in the loop, I recall a term I once came across while reading about logical fallacy: *Gambler's conceit*. The idea is that your average gambler, sucked into the heat of the moment, starts to believe that their winnings are an act of skill rather than of luck. Because of this, they bet more money, therefore increasing their chances of losing more money. Twisted, simplistic insanity – pretzel logic at its finest.

I break free from the trance of swirling lights and rhythmic tinkles designed to rope you in and look down at the carpeted floor. My hand-me-down dress shoes stand upon strands of chain-like patterns which stretch out from wall to wall. I put down my empty glass, pick out a section of carpet, and decide to follow the length of chain through the sprawling maze of man and machine.

The Jack Casino, formerly known as the Horseshoe, opened in Cleveland, Ohio on May 14th, 2012. Added on to Tower City in place of the old Higbee building in Public Square, the Jack features 1,609 slot machines, 119 table games and 39 electronic tables contained within 100,000 sq ft of gaming space. This was my first visit to the place, a couple of years after it opened its doors. I decided to come with a friend of mine, a man

named Graham. He always seemed to have greater-than-average success when it came to gambling, as if he found a way to beat the system – a near-impossibility from my understanding. If he could do it, I figured I could too. I was curious, so I decided to come with him on one of his trips to experience the whole scene for myself.

As I travel along my path, I notice how deceptively large this place really is. From the outside, it looks like nothing more than a tacked-on addition to the side of a building. The inside tells a different story; multiple floors of money-hungry gamblers, all battling the house against nearly insurmountable odds while they chase that ever-elusive payday. Everyone around me looks bleak and emotionless, stuck in a trance-like state as they stare into colorful monitors, pressing buttons and pulling levers over and over and over again; *insanity*. I feel as if this place could pass as an art-deco recreation of hell; a bunch of poor souls bound to flashy machines that suck the life and happiness out of you, occasionally giving just enough back to keep you playing. Textbook intermittent reinforcement. It's like an addict chasing the dragon – one step forward, ten steps back.

The casino reminds me of how much I've always hated the importance of money. Without money, you have nothing. A tiny piece of green paper holds such an incredible amount of power over humanity. People are killed every day for less than what is being eagerly fed to the rows of one-armed bandits that surround me. It's sickening really; seeing so many people essentially throw away their cash against such

tiny odds – the average slot machine pays out only 0.16% of the time, with a jackpot being closer to 0.032%. I think about how foolish they all are, and then how much of a hypocrite I am as I find myself walking towards one of the machines and sitting down. Time to test my luck.

I insert a twenty into the machine and contemplate the many ironies of the situation. Ironic that the president that hated paper money ended up on the face of the \$20 bill. Even more ironic that the president with a gambling problem just got fed to a slot machine. I set my bet, pull the lever and watch as the three reels on the screen spin to life.

Nothing.

Pull.

Nothing.

This cycle is extremely short-lived, as sending one Andrew Jackson to the gambling gods only gets you so far apparently. The last pull of my current offering was upon me, so I finished my drink and shook hands with the bandit one last time.

The wheels spin to life.

Seven.

Seven.

Seven.

Lucky 7's across the board. Logic would tell you that I just cashed out big time, but only I didn't. There were no jingles or jangles, no *ding-ding-ding* or flashing lights to signify a jackpot. The center seven was offset ever so slightly, which must've offset me from winning, as well as offsetting my emotional stability.

"Tough break there, Skip." The voice from the machine next to me pulled me out of my rage-induced stupor. An older man that strongly resembled Jim Brown dressed for a Sunday golf outing had evidently sat down next to me at some point during my war of attrition with this robotic robber. "You treat her right and she might just show you her cherries." He let out a gravelly chuckle and gave his own lever a pull as I pondered his comments. The man, who referred to himself as Mr. Leonard, was a local east-sider that claimed to come up almost every weekend to play on the same exact machine. "Best chance to win that way," he figured. "Odds'll come 'round your way sooner or later." While it sounded good on paper, I couldn't help but doubt it to be true.

I look back at the 7's lining the screen. The payout would've been enough to cover my drinks, my losses and still line my pockets with some paper. I wanted to punch a hole in the fucking thing. Knowing that I almost one-upped the House (*edit: all the Blue Moon*) fueled me to keep going though.

Retrospectively, the machine did its job; it had me latched on. I was roped in like the poor saps I passed earlier, taunted with winnings that seemed to be just ever-so slightly out of my reach; a modern-day Tantalus stuck trying to get that fucking apple down from the tree. Never having been one to go down without a fight, I ordered another beer and offered up a couple more bills, preparing myself for battle with a

machine programmed to beat you 99.5% of the time. Another term comes to mind: *Gambler's fallacy*; a phenomenon in which an individual assumes that something happening frequently in a short span of time, such as a losing streak, will have to happen less frequently in the future, and vice versa. This phenomenon, alongside gambler's conceit, results in the players that are getting the short end of the stick to keep on playing.

Another bout with the slot machine left me at 0-3 against the house. While this offering of Andrew Jacksons lasted much longer than the previous two attempts, the \$20's I put into the machine slowly but surely turned to \$0, putting me at \$120 in the hole for the evening. The gambling gods were not smiling upon me that night; their attention was obviously invested elsewhere, as the *ding-ding-ding* of victory rang out loudly from within the sea of colorful machines. The sound of success was like a spark igniting the competitive fire inside me; the alcohol in my blood just helped it burn hotter and faster. If someone else could win, then so could I. I pulled another bill out of my wallet and fed it to my opponent. Maybe there was an Andrew Jackson-themed gambling curse that had fallen upon me, or maybe I was just a drunk dumbass who was force-feeding his money to a flashy, interactive paper shredder. The latter seemed more likely.

It was half-past midnight when I pulled out my last twenty. At this point, I realized that I had been sitting there for well over an hour and had nothing to show for

it, my level of intoxication steadily rising while my wallet became steadily lighter. As I sat there, hesitant to shove any more cash into the machine, I surveyed my surroundings and noticed how unhappy the people were in a place designed to exude happiness. The only semblance of it could be seen in the people that knew when to walk away; the smart, intuitive few that figured out how to beat the system – by stepping away from it. The ones that stay put inevitably experience *Gamblers ruin*; a player with finite wealth playing against an opponent with infinite wealth will *always* go broke if they stick around too long.

I come to the realization that for most people, life is a lot like a casino. Imagine waking up every morning with your life on autopilot; you drive your shitty car to your shitty job and sit at the same shitty desk doing the same shitty tasks for a shitty boss day after week after month after year. The time starts to bleed together. You've spent most of your life pulling the proverbial lever, hoping for a raise and a nice paycheck, thinking you'll get lucky and receive that big promotion you always wanted. Maybe then you can afford a new car, or a nice flat screen T.V. Maybe then you'll be happy.

It'll never happen though.

Everyone's just working for the house, too caught up with the inadequacies of life to realize it. Most end up like Mr. Leonard; a regular old 9-to-5er working quarter slot jobs because they're safe, familiar even. If you're willing to put in the time, they'll pay just enough to get you to stick around. Might even offer you nifty perks if you keep coming

back – free drinks or a complimentary buffet on the house, whatever resources they can expend to keep you compliant.

Then there are the risk takers. The ballsy fuckers that go for broke and often times end up there; the somber-looking sap I saw on the way in, sitting alone and staring into the bottom of a bottle. The type that invested all their money in the wrong stock maybe, life savings on 12 red but the ball landed on 13. Dreamed a little too big and then reality hit them like a ton of bricks, knocking them right back to square one.

Last but not least are the bread winners – the 1% that hit the jackpot and were smart enough to pocket their winnings and walk away; the high-ball big-wigs sloshing around expensive drinks at the bar. They invested in the right stock at the right time. Struck while the iron was hot, or chased a dream that people told them not to and proved them wrong.

Everyone within the walls of this building all just wants the same thing, but very few are going to find it here. The workers will work and the drones will drone on, grinding out their existence in this Technicolor hive. All the flashy neon lights and cheerful jingles are just a front, a façade obscuring the reality of situation and circumstance; life is a game and most of us are playing it wrong, following the House's rules and expecting to walk away ahead. Some of us may never walk away at all, but those who do have realized that the dice are loaded and the decks are stacked.

I left that evening with an empty wallet and an empty feeling in my stomach, clutching a cash voucher that read \$0.20 in winnings. *Winnings*. The irony speaks for itself. I wanted to rip the fucking thing into a hundred pieces, but I thought otherwise

and shoved into the pocket of my dress pants. It currently hangs tacked to my bedroom wall, serving as a painful reminder that when you play by house rules, the House always wins.

CHAPTER V

GHOSTS

“Better to reign in Hell, than serve in heaven.”

The tolling of church bells shakes me from my evening slumber. I wipe the sleep from my eyes and throw open the curtains, squinting out into the horizon. The sky smolders its last few embers as the sun begins its descent; brilliant strokes of magenta burn streaks across the sky as a maze of skyscrapers – towering stone and steel – casts shadows over the landscape.

I begin preparing myself, consuming a cup of coffee to nourish my body and sustain my mind throughout the evening. I have a job to do, and I’ll be journeying to my personal hell to complete it. I won’t be allowed past the gates unless I’m wearing the proper attire, so I dress myself accordingly; a simple cloth shirt, emblazoned with the company logo and stained with the blood, sweat, and tears of countless hours of harsh labor – enough sacrifice that even the devil himself deems me worthy of entry into his domain.

As the sun sinks lower and lower, I begin my own descent through the concrete jungle, cutting through crowds of costumed creatures that roam the city once every

year. Bands of skeletons, devils and demons masquerade all around me. My thoughts drift back to my past; a child-like apparition amongst the monsters, not fearing them, but embracing them. I was safe behind my plastic mask, pillowcase of candy in hand as I paraded the streets with ghosts and goblins. These tortured masses surrounding me put their existential sufferings on hold under false pretense. Samhain, a Gaelic celebration marking the end of harvest and start of the darker half; a liminal eve in which sprites and spirits can transgress the boundary between our world and the otherworld with ease. These paganistic roots, buried deep and forgotten, have given blossom to falsified religious festivities. Ironic how a day dedicated to slaughtering cattle before the first frost became a day to pay respects to dead saints. Even more ironic that these cattle will inevitably slaughter themselves.

In my efforts to circumvent the masses crowding the streets, I encounter a fairy in a yellow dress, wings fluttering about as she emerges from one of the steel structures dotting the landscape. Her beauty is unparalleled; hair like copper silk gave way to glowing bronze skin. Her eyes burned like fire. She looks at me and flashes a smile that hides a million secrets, rounding a corner and disappearing further into the labyrinthine metropolis. Every fiber of my being wants to follow her, but I have a job to do.

As I approach my destination, heavy drops of rain spill steadily from above. The spirits parading around the streets flee to nearby shelters to stay dry and begin their ritualistic consumption of poison. The passageway to the underworld is guarded by a collective Cerberus of security; three heavy-set heads chomping at the bit to chew up

anyone that doesn't belong and spit them back out into the rain-soaked gutters. They recognize my shirt, nodding as they step aside and allow me access to the stairs that will lead to the devils doorstep.

As I descend the cracked concrete steps, the all-too-familiar smell of stale beer and Pinesol invades my nostrils. A steady pulse of bass grows louder and louder with each step, like an excited heartbeat pounding through the thin walls of the establishment. As I reach the front entrance, I prepare myself for the task at hand. *Just do your job and go home. No bullshit tonight, please.* I reach for the handle, pulling back the heavy steel frame of the door, and step into hell.

...

Smoke fills a dimly lit room as multi-colored lights swirl and flash against the walls. An overflowing crowd of tangled limbs, writhing and flailing to the pounding of music, occupy the entirety of this tiny space. I push my way through the heaping masses of flesh in search of the ruler of this underworld – Satan, also known as Justin. He's a tiny man, but his horns give away his location easily from across the room. I approach him in the far corner to sign in, offering another fraction of my soul for a pocketful of cold coins. T's crossed and i's dotted, the next eight hours of my existence belong to him.

He hands me a small glass of liquid; *something to take the edge off before the crowds come pouring in*, he tells me with bloodshot eyes. His breath reeks of fire and brimstone; thick wreaths of smoke spew forth from his lungs. He's bound to this place;

trapped here for an eternity while he plots to regain his former glory. He once saw great success in the district above, managing a respectable establishment with a close-knit staff reminiscent of a family. When the business fell apart, his fall from grace landed him here, struggling to claw his way back to the top.

I throw back the liquid, throat burning as it passes my lips. Fireball. I hate it, but there's no sense in turning down an offer from the devil when he already has ownership of your soul. I thank him and fight my way back through the crowd, working my way towards my usual post near the front door. Mobs of painted beauties and masked beasts continue to pour into the enclosure, clambering for glassfuls of poison to ease their pain, if only for an evening. My job is to remove the fools that consume too much, losing control of their faculties or allowing the temptations of sex and violence to consume them.

From my vantage point near the front of the room, I survey my surroundings: To my left, a princess cries tears of whiskey, wiping her eyes while a lumbering elf locks a sultry-looking skeleton into a romantic embrace behind her. Not far from them, a vampire desperately tries to guard a case of Budweiser, fending off a gaggle of thirsty witches as a thief slips in and sneaks one away from behind his back. To the right, a zombified Jesus elicits cheers from the crowd as his group of apostles simultaneously waterfall their Coors Light down his throat. In the far back corner, I watch as a knight and a monk go at each other's throats over spilled Miller; the scene is short-lived, however, as several of my fellow henchmen swarm them like buzzards attacking a carcass, pulling them apart with ease.

I help carve a path through the crowd, clearing the way as the men are restrained and dragged out, pleading for forgiveness. The pleas fall upon deaf ears. One slip-up is all it takes to be removed from their tainted slice of heaven; excommunicated from this hellish Garden of Eden. To the tortured masses dwelling here, each of us henchmen is a god. Our word is final, capable of banishing those that are deemed to have consumed too much of the forbidden fruit. Overconsumption poisons their minds, mistaking purgatory for paradise – this cesspool for a celebration. Lucifer said it best himself: *“the mind is its own place, and in itself can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven”*

The crowd continues to grow. From amongst the masses, a familiar looking fairy flutters towards me. Her yellow dress cuts through my drab surroundings like a match in the darkness. She looks at me and smiles; yet again I fall victim to her spell. She speaks, but the sound is drowned out by the deafening heartbeat of bass reverberating off the walls. I offer up a half-assed smile and nod, oblivious to whatever message she was trying to convey to me. A look of frustration falls upon her face as she beckons me closer. I lean in and her arms wrap around my neck, pulling me toward her.

“You don’t scare me, baldy.”

I feel her kiss me on the cheek, face burning as she hovers back into the throng of bodies and disappears from view. I want to follow her, but I have a job to do. From across the room, Satan laughs and gives me a thumbs up as I wipe at the spot on my cheek with the back of my hand, smearing glitter and lipstick into my beard. The poison

continues to flow like water as the clock ticks and tocks away the time. Soon, my soul will be my own again and I can leave this forsaken place.

. . .

By midnight, this underworld has reached maximum capacity. Spirits and sprites are packed body-to-body from wall-to-wall. A thick musk fills the air; flesh, rainwater, and stale alcohol. Like a precursor to death and decay, the scent reeks of mortality, reminding me of how finite our time here really is.

Up to this point, my night has been filled with the forced removal of several soulless husks that overdosed on poison, dragged out to the street where Charon awaits to ferry them back to their pitiful lives. By this point, every living thing has had too much to drink, giving way to a grotesque orgy of man and beast. Satan stands atop his outpost, scotch in hand, pointing out the rule-breakers. A gigantic unicorn that was caught trying to steal a keg is carried through the crowd by red-shirted henchmen, futilely trying to resist until he is lugged out into the gutters.

The fairy in the yellow dress appears once again, but this time her magic seems to be wearing off. Her wings are lopsided and her eyes are glazed over and bloodshot. The scent of booze is seeping through her pores. She speaks and the words are garbled, almost unintelligible, but I'm able to make out her message this time.

"Listen, I know I shouldn't ask you this since you work here and you're the big, bad wolf and all, but my boyfriend just broke up with me and I just really want some cocaine. Please don't be mad at me. I'll fuck you if you can find me some."

Just like that, the spell is broken. I stare at her for a few seconds before telling her that I can't and won't help her; that I have a job to do. I watch as she zigs and zags, stumbling from guy to guy in search of sex and drugs. She disappears into the crowd once again, and that is the last I see of her for the remainder of the evening.

After an hour or so of more of the same, last call is announced and the drunks that managed to hang on long enough to make it to closing time start to wobble their way out into the streets. The pounding music has quieted; the booming bass has stopped reverberating off the walls. We are ordered to herd up the stragglers like wolves, crowding them towards the exit as they stumble amongst themselves. We group up in pairs and drag away the ones that refuse to leave, tossing them to the curb so we can begin cleaning up their mess. Broken glass covers the floor like tiny shards of shrapnel; puddles of amber liquid have collected in the cement, which is now littered with various pieces of costume that didn't make it out with their owners. Glasses, masks, gloves, wings – all are strewn about the room as if a bomb went off.

As I sweep up the tiny crystalline shards of glass, Justin calls me over to the women's restroom. "Looks like your Tinkerbelle couldn't handle herself. She's passed out in one of the stalls, see if you can get her up while I call the EMS." I approach the stall and see her lying there, crumpled up in a tiny heap on the floor. Her left wing is broken and her yellow dress is stained with vomit and beer. I nudge her with my boot, trying to get her to come to. She stirs a little, enough of a reaction to reassure me that

she isn't dead. I can't help but to feel guilty, like I could've saved her maybe. In a different life, perhaps, but right now I have a job to do. I lift her up with one of my co-workers and carry her outside. We set her down on the sidewalk next to a police officer, where Justin awaits on his phone to deal with the medical personnel. It must be such a strange sight to passerby; a tiny man with horns standing over a battered fairy with broken wings. I wonder if that is how angels' looks when they arrive in hell; something once so beautiful now so tarnished and deformed.

I'm completely covered in glitter now, spreading it all over myself as I try to wipe it from my body. I write it off as a lost cause, heading back inside to finish cleaning up after the ghosts and goblin that trashed the place. By time we finish returning the bar to its former glory, the first rays of sunlight are peaking out over the horizon. Homeless scavengers take to the streets like birds of prey, searching for loose change and half-smoked cigarette butts. Standing there on the street corner, I look over to where the fallen fairy was laid down. Her broken wings were left behind, and tiny sparkles of glitter dot the pavement.

One of the bar-backs steps out to the patio with a case of Bud Light and a plastic baggy of weed. Justin pulls up a chair at one of the circular tables, beckoning us to join him. We all sit there, like some crude inversion of the last supper, throwing back bottles of toxic liquid and breathing in clouds of musty smoke. They all laugh and tell stories about the evening, about the elf that kissed a skeleton and the fairy that asked everyone for cocaine. I look down at the glitter covering my body and can't stop thinking about

the yellow dress and the broken wings. I stay quiet though, inhaling a thick lungful of smoke. I don't usually partake, but *when in hell, do as the devil does.*

...

The sky sparks to life as the sun begins its ascent; brilliant strokes of magenta burn streaks across the sky as the maze of skyscrapers casts shadows over the landscape. I breathe in one last mouthful of smoke and my thoughts drift away with the breeze. I see the spirit-like apparition of my former self wandering the pathways of memory; a time in which fear was only an afterthought to the terrifying creatures that existed within the halls of imagination.

Never go up to a house alone; you could be kidnapped. Check your bag for razor blades; people have been putting them in candy bars. Make sure to keep your black cats inside; they might get stolen and killed by devil worshipers. These things never happened, but yet the warnings stayed the same each year; *the monsters might be scary, but watch out for bad people.*

Year after year, the masks got less scary, but I came to realize that the real monsters existed behind them – terrifying, misguided creatures caught up in the act of pretending while their time ticked away. Like the ones tonight, all just looking to get lost in a bottle – just trying to find themselves, to forget their mortality. Or maybe just to feel.

Somewhere behind me, a tiny gust of wind shakes me from my reverie, kicking up the flecks of glitter dotting the pavement and carrying them away, scattering them amongst the land of the living.

CHAPTER VI
CUTTING WEIGHT

I start off the day by weighing myself upon waking up -- 187.5 pounds. The goal is to ultimately cut down to 170 pounds over the course of the next 14 days. A daunting task, but not one I am unfamiliar with. Some immediate lifestyle changes need to be made if I am going to go through with this:

- Cut carbs. Carbs store water, and that's no good.
- Drink water like a god damn fish; two gallons a day, bare minimum to flush out the kidneys.
- No food after 8pm. Gotta keep that metabolism in check.
- No booze. Empty carbs and empty calories.
- Enough protein to keep my muscles from cannibalizing themselves.
- R(est).I(ce).C(ompression).E(levation) as deemed necessary.

My body was inevitably going to go through hell, and I had to prepare it for such; A test to see how tough I was. How far I was capable of pushing myself, both physically and mentally.

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Have you ever wondered who would win a fight between a boxer and a wrestler? How about a hypothetical bout between a 200 pound karate black belt and a 600 pound sumo wrestler? For years, combat sports fans have debated which style would prevail as the most effective martial art discipline to utilize in a real fight. Like the age-old debate of Batman vs Superman, it is a war of words based solely on speculation. Boxers boxed and wrestlers wrestled. They existed in two very different worlds and that was that. With that being said, All of this would change soon after one unassuming businessman picked up an issue of Playboy magazine in 1989 that contained one very intriguing article.

The unassuming businessman was Art Davie, and the article that appeared in the magazine was a piece titled "BAD" by Pat Jordan. The focus of this article was on a Brazilian man named Rorion Gracie, the son legendary martial artist Helios Gracie who, along with his brother Carlos, invented the art of Brazilian jiu-jitsu (BJJ) back in the 1920's. Rorion, like his father and uncle before him, was extremely confident that BJJ was the most effective martial art in the world. In fact, he was so confident in his technical prowess that he was willing to compete against anyone in the United States in a no-holds-barred fight-to-the-finish for a modest winner-take-all prize of \$100,000. These invitational competitions came to be known as "The Gracie Challenge", and many fighters of various martial arts disciplines slowly but surely fell victim to the Gracie's and their masterful application of BJJ.

The article instantly piqued the interest of Davie, inspiring him to conceptualize a tournament that pitted practitioners from each individual martial arts background against one and other in order to determine which discipline was truly the most effective style of fighting. The possibility of seeing a super-fight between combat sports icons such as Chuck Norris and Mike Tyson was all the push that Davie needed, so he went to visit Rorion at his Gym in Southern California to share and discuss his vision.

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“So you wanna be an ultimate fighter?” I vividly remember hearing those words blare out from the television in my living room. It was the spring of 2005, right before my freshman year of high school. My dad and my younger brother were watching The Ultimate Fighter finale, a live broadcast of several bouts of a sport that resembled boxing with less gloves and more hugging. I remember looking up at the TV and seeing two men, visibly exhausted and covered in each other’s blood, beating each other from pillar to post for the better part of fifteen minutes. UFC commentator Joe Rogan called it the greatest act of unarmed combat he had ever witnessed. I could care less. It was all just senseless violence in my book. As they showed highlights from past contests, my views only solidified. One fighter got kneed so hard in the face that one of his teeth flew out. Another fighter’s arm popped at the elbow after he refused to tap from some type of arm lock. The images of battered men covered in each other’s DNA, doing whatever they could to incapacitate the opposing fighter, was ingrained in my memory and has been ever since.

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I grab the gallon jug of water from the fridge, unsure of where this journey will take me. Nerves, fear, anxiousness, excitement; a million sensations start firing off at once. It had been a while since I last stepped foot into the gym, and I knew it was not going to be a walk in the park. For the next two weeks, I had to force myself to embrace pain. Knock the proverbial rust off my unconditioned bones via blunt force trauma. Showing up at gym in my current state of physicality would be my baptism by fire.

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After much discussion between the two, both Davie and Gracie were able to come to an agreement about their conceptual tournament. Once the details were ironed out, they were able to find a promotional organization that would sponsor the event, which adhered to the following set of rules and regulations:

- First and foremost, there would be no rules. In order to best replicate a real fight, this would need to be treated like one, and real fights followed no rules.
- The fights were to be held inside of an eight-sided, steel-fenced cage, which came to be known as "The Octagon." Davie and Gracie had originally considered putting a moat filled with alligators around the cage, along with barbed wire atop the fence, but ultimately decided this was too risky of an idea to go through with.
- Eight men of varying martial arts backgrounds would fight against one and other, with the match ending only if a fighter was knocked out, surrendered or died.
- The event was originally going to be held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, but was moved to Denver, Colorado, as it was one of the few states that would sanction such an event

within the U.S. It would be televised via pay-per-view and featured a team of commentators that included former Cleveland Brown's running back Jim Brown and karate world-champion Bill "super foot" Wallace.

- This tournament was originally to be called "The War of the Worlds", but was later changed to "Ultimate Fighting Championship" (UFC) after it was decided that the original name was not as effective in terms of advertising what the event was truly trying to promote.

This event would take place on November 12, 1993. No one really knew what to expect going into the event, but promotion was deemed fairly successful, as a decent amount of pay-per-views were sold (86, 592 to be exact). However, it did not take long for any questions to be answered, as the competition set the standard for what would become a truly violent spectacle.

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"So you wanna be an Ultimate Fighter?" The answer to that question was an easy one for me. "No fucking way". There was no chance in hell that I would ever want to do something as crazy as that. I never understood why my dad and brother sat around for six hours every Saturday to watch grown men pummel each other. I couldn't comprehend why these guys were willing to lock themselves in a steel cage and beat the snot out of each other for fifteen minutes at a time while drunken, bloodthirsty spectators cheered them on. I couldn't figure out what was keeping them standing after an opposing fighter's elbow, thrown with surgical precision, opened up a huge gash on their forehead. In my opinion, it was all just a bunch of senseless violence.

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I arrive at the gym, Evolve, in Medina, Ohio. I step in and am greeted by the familiar scent that I have come to associate with training; the way the cleaning solution mixed with the hot, stuffy air was such a unique smell that it was almost impossible to forget. All around me, aspiring unarmed combatants honed their crafts; kick-boxers slammed shins into thai pads while Judoka rag-dolled their opponents through the air with ease. As I look around, I feel out of place around these trained killers; a lamb walking himself to the slaughter. At the same time, however, I can't help but to feel right back at home.

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The first ever fight in UFC history saw a lanky Dutch kickboxer, Gerard Gordeau, taking on a 400-pound sumo wrestler in Teila Tuli. The fight ended in brutal fashion, with Gordeau kicking Tuli in the face and sending one of his teeth flying into the commentators table. Spectator were shocked by both the violence of it all and the fact that such a huge man was actually knocked out by someone significantly smaller than himself. That night, the world of combat sports learned that size didn't win fights, which was also demonstrated that night by a small Brazilian man named Royce Gracie.

Royce was the younger brother of Rorion, the co-founder of the UFC. He was hand-picked to represent the art of Brazilian jiu-jitsu in the tournament due to the fact that he was the smallest of the Gracie's, weighing in around 170 pounds. According to Rorion, he figured that the effectiveness of BJJ would be made clearer if it was being demonstrated by a smaller man, and he could not have been more right. Royce was able

to run through his competition like a knife through butter, submitting everyone he faced in a relatively effortless fashion. This included the 230-pound Ken Shamrock, a highly-regarded catch-wrestler who looked like he was carved out of stone and had everyone thinking Royce was going to die in the octagon that night. Needless to say, the fight community was in a state of disbelief when Shamrock tapped out moments after the match had begun, with Royce Gracie going on to defeat Gerard Gordeau in the finals to be declared the Ultimate Fighting Champion.

Brazilian jiu-jitsu reigned supreme that night. People wanted to know how the hell Royce was able to do what he did, what his secrets were, what techniques he used. Fighters realized that this little Brazilian was on to something, that they could no longer focus solely on only one discipline. Because of this, everyone began taking BJJ lessons like it was the next big thing. History had been made that night, and thus “Mixed Martial Arts” was born.

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I remember back in 2009 how the UFC craze had hit my hometown. Kids would head up to North Park after football practice to watch in flocks as their peers tried to replicate the MMA they saw on TV. It was a bunch of angst-filled youths fighting unheralded battles in wooded glens; a hidden fight club that only highschoolers knew of. Kids were no longer fighting simply because they disliked each other – the violence became a part of our culture. Friends were putting their relationships aside, trying to knock each others’ teeth out for the sake of competition.

It was dangerous.

It was stupid.

But damn was it entertaining to watch.

x x x

I drop my duffle bag onto the cement flooring next to me and remove my hand wraps – Rival Mexican-style technical boxing wraps; 120 inches of jet-black polyester wrist protection that falls to the floor in streams as it unravels. I begin wrapping my hands, weaving the stretchy fabric around my wrist and looping it through my fingers while I try to acclimate myself to my surroundings. Jiu-jitsu practice is concluding right beside me, and I am approached by a burly, bearded man with graying hair that appears to be in his late 40's. "New guy eh? You ever rolled before?"

...

I remember how nervous I was when I finally decided to go head-to-head with someone in the hidden fight club. I stepped into the ring of bodies and was paired against a kid named Kevin – 150 pounds soaking wet against my 225 pound, all-you-can-eat-buffet and football-strength-training-induced frame. With no discernable set of rules or guidelines to follow, it was not what you would call a fair fight, or even really a fight at all for that matter. No punches were thrown; I just remember tackling him and making up a move on the spot. I called it "the juicer", which basically just consisted of me crushing his head between my forearm and my bicep. It lasted roughly 15 seconds. The thrill of competition was undeniable, but I didn't feel masculine, tough, or cool about the fact I beat someone 80 pounds lighter than me. I actually apologized to him

afterwards for visibly causing him pain. I felt like a bully, and knew I could never again approach someone in our group with the sole intention of hurting them.

x x x

Day 2: 4pm. Did I really just sleep for 16 hours? The soreness that plagues the entirety of my being is what I would imagine you would feel like the day after getting hit by a car. Welts and bruises run up and down my arms and legs, and my joints crack and pop as I try to get out of bed. I was repeatedly choked and strangled by a full-grown man last night; a crash-course into the world of competitive grappling with a BJJ purple-belt. He may have been “taking it easy” on me, but making the transition from spending my days sitting on a couch playing video games to having a trained killer constantly trying to crush your throat was like diving into the deep end without knowing how to swim.

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While the UFC was relatively successful in its first few outings, the late 1990’s were rough for the company, involving many critics and detractors. No one was more against the UFC than former presidential candidate John McCain. In 1997, McCain labeled the tournaments as “human cockfighting” and sent letters to each of the fifty states requesting that they ban the UFC from hosting events there. Of the fifty states, thirty-six banned the event, and several others required a strict set of rules that ultimately hampered the promotion and produced horribly boring matches. Only the most southern of states, such as Alabama, allowed the UFC to host events. What was once a spectacle, devoid of rules and deemed by most as too barbaric for society, was slowly

but surely forced to start implementing a set of regulations in order to be allowed to continue hosting events in the US.

The UFC's newfound set of rules were created on the spot by long-time referee John McCarthy. When he saw something he thought should not be allowed, he made sure it became a rule. Here are some notable examples:

- Bar-brawling fan-favorite Tank Abbott once tried to throw a man out of the Octagon. This was made illegal shortly after.
- Tank Abbott also once tried to fish-hook a fighter (placing your finger in someone's mouth and pulling towards the cheek in attempt to rip the skin). This was made illegal immediately after.
- Keith Hackney once unleashed a flurry of vicious strikes upon the groin of his opponent. Needless to say, deemed illegal instantaneously.

Slowly but surely, the UFC was moving away from a blood-soaked spectacle and finally was starting to resemble a professional sport. Weight classes were added to ensure fairer competition, a round-based scoring system was implemented, and a time limit was created to make the sport more closely resemble the structure and format of boxing. But after all talk of rules was said and done, even with several states allowing it, almost no one wanted to host or sponsor an event that was labeled as human cockfighting by a person of high political standing such as John McCain.

Between 1997 and 2001, dozens of court cases ensued, with the UFC winning most of them (one such court case that took place in Puerto Rico, which disputed the "human cockfighting" aspect of the sport, was ironically held in a courthouse directly

across the street from a cockfighting ring). But while they may have been winning the court cases, each “victory” did not make any progress towards social acceptance and only ended up costing the company millions of dollars. The future looked grim for the UFC, and many of its financial backers, such as Time Warner and Viewer’s Choice – two cable companies that aired the sport, withdrew support from the company, leaving little to no hope for MMA to grow and expand.

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Once winter rolled around, football had ended and the underground fight club scene had been shut down Kids were coming home with black eyes, and parents began to realize what was happening. The group was brought to the attention of the local high school and the curtain was promptly closed on the whole thing. Cops began to station themselves at all the local parks to ensure any bouts of after-school violence were stifled. That meant I needed to find something to occupy my evenings; Brunswick was a remarkably small town and I was nearly losing my mind out of boredom. I still had the competitive drive, but was left with nothing to compete in. By this point, 18 year-old me had already become fully invested in watching the Ultimate Fighter once a week with my brother and dad. What I once wrote off as senseless violence and testosterone-fueled drama turned out to be a rather entertaining look into the lives of these fighters; Guys like Rich Franklin, a math teacher from Cincinnati, exemplified the everyman that was able to chase and achieve a dream of being a world champion. Others, like Diego Sanchez, showcased the crazy side of the sport – from attempting to harness energy

from a lightning storm to repeatedly screaming “YES” while holding a crucifix to the sky, you never knew what you were going to get when Diego appeared on screen.

Once the show ended, I was left still wanting to know more about these fighters, how they would fair against top-level competition. This left me with no option but to start going up to the local Buffalo Wild Wings with my family to watch the UFC pay-per-views and cheer on the guys from the show as they continued their careers. A couple dozen fights and a couple years later, I started to view the fighting more as a form competition; a test of will-power against to two men who desperately wanted to win.

x x x

I finally manage to muster up enough strength to roll myself out of bed. My family is doing their best job to support my diet by ordering an unnecessary amount of my favorite pizza. By my calculations, there will be enough leftovers to last the rest of the week. Maybe they’re testing me...or maybe they forgot. Either way, it’s clearer than ever that I’m on this journey alone. I intended to go for a run today, but the soreness is too much. I settle with some intense stretching and try my hand at P90x yoga – the flexibility will help with grappling. This Tony Horton dude running the show reminds me how cheesy fitness instructors are (why are you asking people their favorite type of soup in the middle of a workout?). Given my current state, the yoga hurts; I can feel my already-sore muscle fibers stretching to their limits. I really don’t mind the pain after a while though – an appetizer of what is to come if I keep this up. I decide to grin and bear it, so I finish stretching and slam back the rest of my water jug. That’s two gallons down, so I celebrate by eating an Oreo.

The guilt pours into my body like blood from an open wound.

...

With death knocking on the UFC's door, it found salvation from the most unlikely of sources. It was scraping by because of the addition of rules, regulations, judges and ringside doctors. It continued to hang on, in part, due to the internet and its underground fan base. At the end of the day, it was fan enthusiasm that kept the company afloat, and no two fans were more enthusiastic than the Fertitta brothers, Frank and Lorenzo.

The Fertitta brothers were two billionaires from Las Vegas, Nevada who made most of their money from the numerous casinos they owned and operated. Frank and Lorenzo were huge fans of MMA and the UFC, and along with long-time friend Dana White, decided to purchase the dying company from Art Davie in 2001. For a price of two million dollars, the trio successfully secured the rights to a promotion that consisted of nothing more than three letters, "UFC."

The company had nothing in terms of assets, and many people thought the Fertitta's were crazy for making the purchase. However, the Fertitta's had three things that Art Davie did not: billions of dollars, numerous casinos, and a stable of fighters they could market. Their wealth allowed them to advertise the sport in a way that Davie never could have, and their casinos provided them with venues to host the events. Fighters they knew and managed, such as Chuck Liddell and Tito Ortiz, allowed them to create superstars to act as the face of not only their brand, but an entire sport. In its newfound infancy, a reality TV star opened the doors of his casino in Atlantic City to the struggling

company in 2001. That man was Donald Trump, and he used his platform and financial backing to help the UFC secure more established venues for their shows outside of Las Vegas. Slowly but surely, the UFC's popularity and fan base began to climb.

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By time I graduated high school in 2010, it had reached a point where watching was no longer enough. My younger brother, Matt, had started taking MMA lessons with a friend, and suggested I come with him for a week's worth of free classes. After much debate, I decided to tag along. To say I was nervous was an understatement. I expected to walk into the gym and get paired up with a professional right off the bat. Based on what I saw on the TV, most MMA fighters were cold-blooded killers when it came to competing, and I didn't expect them to have any mercy on the new guy in the gym. I attempted to make peace with the fact that I would probably die on my first day, but that did little to calm my nerves.

I remember walking into the gym for the first time. Evolve MMA it was called. I remember signing some paperwork and being introduced to the instructor, Ryan Madigan. A native of Cuyahoga Falls, Ryan made the transition to MMA after a successful kickboxing career, culminating in a one-time stint with the UFC; however, he lost his match and was cut from the promotion shortly after. He definitely looked the part of a killer – bald head, scars, chiseled physique -- but he turned out to be a surprisingly nice individual. My first lesson turned out to be a great experience, covering some of the basics of both stand-up and ground-based fighting. The group of newcomers I was corralled with learned how to apply some basic submissions such as a

kimura (a shoulder lock which involves isolation of the elbow and shoulder of an opponent via a double wrist grip, allowing for leverage to be applied while putting immense pressure on both) and the triangle choke (a blood choke performed by trapping the opponent's head and arm between your legs, which are locked in a figure-four position, allowing you to squeeze down and restrict blood flow through the carotid artery in the neck, cutting off blood to the brain which inevitably leads to the victim passing out). It turned out to be some of the most fun I've had since high school football ended.

After my free week was over, I started messing around in my cousin's basement with a couple guys. We called ourselves the Brunswick Fight Team, and our motto was "dream big, fight often." Ben was a wrestler with no quit in him. Khoa was a master at throwing flashy spinning kicks. Matt's lanky frame allowed him to set up submissions easier. Nate was the seasoned veteran; 8 years of MMA experience with tremendous efficiency in his technique, a prodigy of sorts -- truly the top dog of the group. There would be weekends where we started training around 9pm, only stopping when we realized the sun was coming up. We would sleep on the wrestling mats, too exhausted to drive home until we caught some shut eye.

I loved training. It kept me in shape, gave me something to do, and led to me truly appreciating something that I once wrote off as barbaric violence. I learned that fighting was not as simple as winging a punch at someone's head. It took serious dedication to master all the different aspects of MMA that were needed to be successful at even the most basic of levels; Boxing, Muay Thai, Jiu-jitsu, Wrestling, Judo, Kickboxing

– all of these disciplines, on top of the mental toughness and willpower, must be accounted for in order to develop a well-rounded skill set.

More importantly perhaps, I learned that mixed martial arts was not about intentionally maiming your opponent. Underneath all the bloodshed, fighters respected each other. They did what they needed to do to win the competition, not to inflict unnecessary pain on each other. A deep code of ethics and honor was followed; with another person's life in your hands, you had to know where to draw the line. It was about pushing yourself to the physical and mental brink, testing your strength of will against one and other while seeing who would break first. It was undoubtedly intense, but the vivid imagery of violence that accompanied the sport covered up the primal sense of competition that mixed martial arts truly represented.

x x x

Day 3: Some residual soreness still lingers. Aside from the Oreo slip-up, my diet has been on point. I'm consuming significantly less food than I've been used to, so I'm constantly dealing with tinges of hunger pains throughout the day. Class is filled with people continually questioning me about my gallon of water. I don't feel like explaining to everyone that I'm emulating the life of a fighter for a creative non-fiction paper, so I just tell them that I'm really thirsty. Most laugh it off and leave it at that.

Training is focused on grappling again. I am competent enough to hang with most people close to my skill level in the grappling department, much more so than I am able to when it comes to striking. The session consists of the usual; large men trying to choke me or break my arm in a friendly-competitive manner. The resulting soreness

isn't as bad as it was last session. I weigh myself after I get home and shower – 185 pounds. Progress. Progress is good. All that water I've been drinking is really flushing out my system too; pissed a record 14 times throughout the course of the day. Lights out by midnight.

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At the end of the day, the Fertitta brothers had done enough to ensure that the UFC did not fade into obscurity; however, even with all things considered, the company was still taking financial hits, acquiring a debt of over \$34 million dollars within the first few years of being purchased. The Fertitta's may have been billionaires, but even billionaires know their limit, and the UFC was facing the very real probability of folding. In a last-ditch effort to save the company, the Fertitta brothers decided to make one final push towards advancing the company, turning the focus away from pay-per-view and venturing into the uncharted territory of public television.

The Fertitta brother's last \$10 million dollars went into producing a reality television show called "The Ultimate Fighter", a show that took sixteen aspiring mixed martial artists and placed them in a multi-million dollar mansion devoid of outside contact. No cell phones, televisions or computers; just living breathing and sleeping MMA. Their focus was solely on training, and they would compete against each other for a chance at winning a six-figure contract with the UFC. Unfortunately, the streak of bad luck continued to follow the UFC, as each television network that they pitched the idea to turned it down on the spot. One network, Spike TV, was intrigued by the idea,

but was not willing to pay for its production costs. The Fertitta brothers offered to cover the expenses themselves, and “The Ultimate Fighter” finally aired on Spike TV in 2005. The show was an instant success.

People were able to see into the life of a fighter and what it took to succeed at the highest level of competition. The show produced an element of drama amongst the fighters, adding back story and humanizing people who were originally thought to be blood-thirsty barbarians. People began to take a liking to the loveably goofy-yet-talented Forrest Griffin and his unique sense of humor. The always-cocky Josh Koscheck became the shows’ instant villain. Emotionally-unstable Chris Leben attracted droves of viewers due to his unpredictable nature, constantly having breakdowns and punching holes in walls. Diego Sanchez was, well, Diego Sanchez. The show was equal parts unadulterated violence and masculine drama, a combination that ended up being rather successful formula, as the show is airing its 25th season this year.

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I continued to train on and off as I began college at Cleveland State in 2010, slowly becoming a UFC fanatic and learning as much as I could about the sport of mixed martial arts. With that being said, there was still a huge divide between being a fan and actually becoming a fighter, and that was a line I had never crossed. By the second semester of my freshman year of college, I was a semi-professional football player for the Cuyahoga County Spartans, filling my competitive thirst by throwing my padded body into 300-pound lineman whilst blocking as a tight end. It was a near-impossible

task, but that is where my coaches needed me; constantly sacrificing my well-being week after week for the greater good of the team.

Unfortunately, my semi-pro career came to an early end after my team was involved in a bench-clearing brawl in the summer of 2011. I was subsequently suspended from the league for my actions that night; a strange turn of events considering I was on vacation in Italy at the time. Apparently, another member of the team involved in the brawl had the same jersey number as me, and the rules committee suspended everyone involved. Considering I was overseas, I didn't get the information for almost a week, at which point it was too late to do anything about. The suspension was a blessing in disguise though, as it paved the way for my transition from battering my body on the gridiron to focusing my competitive pursuits solely on MMA.

x x x

Day 4: Another night of far too much sleep. 14 hours to be exact. I would usually be pissed that I slept in this late, but I assume that my body needs it so I guess I'm fine. More soreness, but nothing compared to what it was a couple days ago. I decide to get some roadwork in today; 1.5 miles through the neighborhood in the pouring rain. Usually prefer sprints because they are short and explosive, but running was actually kind of refreshing and meditative. It let me zone out and take my mind off of the troubling trifecta of work, school, and training. The rest of my day is filled with schoolwork and regular work, because quitting my job and dropping out of school are not practical options.

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The first season of the Ultimate Fighter culminated with the live finale on April 9th, 2005; a match between the aforementioned Forrest Griffin and the man that would go on to become his career-long counterpart, Stephan Bonnar. It was the first time a UFC event had such wide-spread public exposure, and many people who had caught glimpses of the show were tuning in to see who would win the six-figure contract. My dad and younger brother were two of those people.

This moment in time also happens to be right where I came into the picture. (I look up at the TV. “So you wanna be an ultimate fighter?”) As soon as the fight started, fans knew they were witnessing something special. Griffin and Bonnar waged war for fifteen minutes, beating the absolute tar out of each other in the process. People who stumbled upon the fight while surfing through channels were amazed at what they saw, allegedly calling up friends and family to tell them to turn on their TVs; two seemingly ordinary men were pushing their bodies past the point of physical exhaustion, neither one wanting to give an inch to the other due to how bad they wanted to win. It was a back-and-forth war that is often cited as being the single most important fight in mixed martial arts history. The bout attracted drove upon drove of first-time viewers who instantly became hooked on mixed martial arts and the UFC. The contest successfully paved the way for the modern success of the UFC brand and established it as the biggest MMA organization in the world today.

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Fast-forward a couple more years, circa 2013. I had become (un)healthily obsessive with MMA and the UFC. I still trained whenever I got the chance, and my

focus on the sport helped me watch my diet. The combination of constant physical activity and healthy eating habits enabled me to shed my football weight, dropping from 230 to my current weight of 175 pounds. Most importantly, however, I found myself wondering more and more each day what it would be like to truly experience what a fighter had to go through. If seemingly normal guys like Griffin and Bonnar could do it, why couldn't I? I knew there was more to fighting than just going to the gym a couple days a week and fighting when the UFC calls your number, but I wanted to personally experience the life of a fighter. I just needed an excuse to go through with it, something to push me and hold me accountable...

x x x

Day 5: My diet is slowly consuming me. I had a dream about sushi and chili cheese dogs last night, and I don't even like sushi. I've adjusted to the routine by now: school, work, training, work, schoolwork, rest and recovery. Today is a special day though, as my friend is turning 21 and I found someone to cover my overnight shift at McDonald's. Flipping burgers from 10p-6a on the weekends is by no means optimal, but money is money and the gym isn't free.

I get my training in slightly earlier than usual. Friday means full sparring; exhilarating both physically and mentally, where bodily harm is very much a risk if you aren't careful. Because of this, we are required to wear a full set of protective gear: headgear, shin guards, boxing gloves, mouthpiece, etc... I'm paired up with a person who was relatively new to the world of MMA, so I limit myself to basic punches in order to establish the intensity level. I forgot that new people are generally not accustomed to

the rules of the gym, as the kid starts throwing haymakers while I pepper him with jabs. In the MMA world, sparring etiquette consists of a “hit as hard you get hit” mentality, but I’m not in an overly-aggressive mood today. I make sure to focus on my footwork so I can stay out of the way of his testosterone-powered bombs. Training ends and I remain injury free (knock on wood).

Later that night, I end up out and about with the birthday boy. We all go out to fancy Asian place, so I make my dream into a reality and order some sushi. Guess I do like the stuff, and it’s relatively healthy too. We all go back to his apartment afterwards for a house party. As tempting as it was, I could not drink though; too many empty carbs and calories. I make the most of the rest of my evening by watching my drunken friends make fools of themselves, which made me not want to drink even if I was able to.

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Since establishing itself as the premier MMA organization on earth in early 2006, the UFC has changed the landscape when it comes to legitimizing the sport. Recent improvements, such as uniforms and the addition of mandatory randomized drug testing, helped give the sport a more professional look in the public’s eye. Globalization of the brand sees events happening all over the world on a month-to-month basis. Acquisitions of lighter weight classes and women’s divisions helped legitimize the organization as housing the best talent on earth in all areas. What started as one man’s fevered pipe-dream has evolved into a multi-billion dollar, world-renown professional sport alongside the likes of the NBA, MLB and NFL; a spectacle that grew to surpass its own expectations.

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By my junior year of college in 2013, I could no longer contain my curiosity. I decided I would emulate the life of a fighter as best I could. I trained like a fighter, ate and managed my diet like a fighter, cut weight like a fighter, and yes, even fought like a fighter. I kept a journal of my day-to-day experiences during this time; fragments from the past that would forever alter my future.

x x x

Day 6: Start off the day by weighing myself – 183 pounds. So far, so good. I spend the day in a state of regression, sitting around playing video games and performing absolutely no physical activity. I even did the unthinkable – I caved in and ate Taco Bell. I instantly regretted the decision. After several days of eating pretty much nothing but egg whites, spinach, mushrooms, and chicken breast, consuming T-Bell was like putting sand in my gas tank. I felt horrible almost immediately after eating it. I always knew fast-food was bad for your body, but tonight really made me realize how similar it is to poison.

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In August of 2016, the Fertitta brothers surprised everyone when they sold the UFC to a company known as WME-IMG for over four billion dollars. After years of building their brand, they were able to cash out at roughly 2,000 times their initial investment of two million dollars. Under new ownership, the company would shift their focus towards polishing their professional image. They would also expand their

showings on a regional level, acquiring several smaller organizations and diversifying their venues. One such venue was Quicken Loans arena in Cleveland, Ohio.

...

I remember the first time I ever fought someone. No gym would allow me to fight in a sanctioned event with only a couple weeks of consistent gym time under my belt – most local gyms like Evolve, Griffon-Rawl and Strongstyle seemed to require a minimum of six months. My first unofficial opponent was Nate, the pack leader eight years of MMA under his belt. We fought in a basement-turned-training facility and proceeded with everything as though it were a sanctioned event. Three of the people we deemed knowledgeable about MMA were selected as judges, someone with what we considered medical knowledge acted as the doctor, and so on so forth. It was not as legitimate as I would have hoped for by any means, but the goal was to have the experience as close to authentic as possible. We forced each other to make weight. Forced each other to endure 16oz leather gloves slamming into our heads. Forced each other to fight like there was something to be gained for doing so.

x x x

Day 7: Back to the scale – 182.5. Considering how bad yesterday was, I won't complain. Today is basically reserved for catching up on school work; I have many books to read and papers to write, but such is the burden of being an English major. Tomorrow starts the intense stuff – training for a fight and cutting weight. This first week was basically used to get back into the swing of things and prepare myself for week two, so the extra day of rest is alright in my book.

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UFC 203 was the first UFC event held in Cleveland, Ohio. On September 10th, 2016, thousands upon thousands of fans poured into Quicken Loans Arena to watch Cleveland Native Stipe Miocic defend his heavyweight title against legendary striker Allistair Overeem. The excitement was palpable, as the city had never hosted a UFC event before, and many fans had never witnessed professional MMA in person. The opportunity to see a legend throw down against the hometown hero was enough to produce a near-sell-out crowd that night.

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My opponent was Nate, the leader of our little group. I'm nervous, but at the same time I feel like I'm ready for this. In order to mentally prepare myself for the beating I was inevitably about to receive, I had to change my mindset to make myself believe that this was just another training session, except we would be going 100% instead of 50-75%. I had known my opponent for a long time leading up to this, so that also played a factor in my preparation.

Round 1: The fight starts with kind of a lengthy feeling out process, as both of us were trying to establish range. I try to make the first move and step in to land a jab, but it was like walking into an airbag explosion. His punch lands square in the middle of my face, coming with such speed and precision that I honestly had no time to defend against it. I got a thick mouth-taste of iron and salt, which made me wonder if my nose was broken. I did not like that at all, so I kept my distanced and focused on circling away from his powerful right hand. He settles in and starts throwing combinations at me.

Luckily I was able to defend against, which still hurts, but at least none of them connected with my nose again. I try to keep him away with jabs, but get caught clean in the cheek a couple times; sharp stings and wobbly legs ensue, but it wasn't as bad as getting my nose smashed in. The first round ends shortly after.

x x x

Day 8: Feel like shit today. Looks like I caught whatever my brother was sick with, but I can't allow this to set me back too far. No school today – I spend most of the afternoon lying in bed feeling sorry for myself. When the time to train rolls around, I down a bunch of Tylenol and head off. Monday means striking day, and my performance is definitely not up to par with where it should be. My arms feel weighed down by cement and my punches don't have the same pop that they usually do. It's basically two hours of me getting beat up, which taught me an important lesson: don't train while you are ill, it is not worth it.

My water consumption is finally reduced to one gallon, but my body still expels water as if I'm drinking two. Research showed me that water retention can be caused by not drinking enough, so when you drink extra, the body retains less. By gradually decreasing your water intake leading up to the weigh-in process, your body pushes out a bunch of water weight, which leaves you slightly dehydrated but makes weighing in a lot easier. My calorie intake takes a hit; 2,500 to around 1,500. I'm constantly hungry now. I find that watching Man vs Food on the discovery channel helps curb my temptations to break away from my diet and eat unhealthy foods. I'm not sure how or why, but anything that will help me maintain my sanity is a welcome commodity. By time the day

comes to an end, I'm drained, sore, angry, stressed, and slightly disheartened. I weigh 181.5 pounds, and need to weigh 170 pounds by Thanksgiving morning. I'm starting to question the plausibility of it all; constant headaches, fatigue, and full-body soreness while I slowly dehydrate myself. Do I really need to go through with this? I could give up and quit at any time, and there would be no real repercussions for doing so...

...

Round 2: Nate opens up the round by throwing a powerful leg kick at me. I hear a slap and feel a sting, which means he probably just clipped me with his foot. A couple moments later he sends another leg kick my way. This time it's a dull thud and I feel my leg buckle; shinbone slamming into thigh muscle, which means he landed it perfectly. I've seen seasoned professionals succumb to only a couple kicks of that magnitude, so I knew I couldn't risk taking any more kicks to that leg if unless I wanted to give up walking for the next week. I was forced to switch my stance to protect the injured leg, which put me at a disadvantage; an orthodox fighter has no business fighting southpaw. Shortly after, I finally start to get his timing down and managed to land a couple good jabs on him, but he was too technically sound for me to do much more than that.

I remember seeing him cock back a punch, which came at me seemingly 100 miles per hour. This kid was trying to take my head off; this was obviously to be expected in a fight, but it still caught me off guard. I just barely got out of the way of his bomb, but he followed up with a powerful left hook that caught me square in the jaw. The next few moments are hazy, probably got flashed. When I regained full senses, he was on top of me trying to set up a submission. Luckily, I was better at grappling than

striking, so I was able to defend against it and even sweep him in the process. The round ends with me on top, and I was able to land a few shots worth of solid ground-and-pound.

x x x

Day 9: Lying in my bed, I started to think back to when I was younger. I remember all the times in life that I wanted to quit or give up on something. I especially remember the times I did quit, and how shitty I felt after doing so. I let not only myself down, but everyone else as well. I think about all the MMA fighters who have to go through this kind of stuff on a daily basis, year after year. I remember hearing about how one fighter, Chris Weidman, had to cut thirty-six pound in four days to take a fight on short notice. Being a fighter takes sacrifice, and that is something I was just starting to truly realize. I knew that you had to give up on eating shitty foods and partying, but the real sacrifice comes in the form of the comfort you are so used to having. No one wants to put themselves through near-starvation, dehydration, getting beat up and constantly being sore all the time, but these are all just things that one must come to terms with if they truly want to be successful in the sport. Cant quit. Won't quit.

...

Round 3: My leg is already badly bruised from his kicks and I still taste blood in the back of my throat from the initial nose-smash. Other than that, I have survived the first ten minutes. I'm gassing hard; Nate is fine, as he has always been a cardio machine. The final round starts, and he is quick to land a powerful kick into the vicinity of my liver. As soon as the kick landed, the wind was blasted out of me and I could feel my insides

slamming around. I wanted to shell up and step back, but my body didn't want to respond to my thoughts, almost like his kick hit an off switch. I am able to survive and regain my motor skills after a couple seconds, but I would rather get punched in the nose 100 consecutive times than eat a kick directly to the liver ever again.

Nate smells blood. He senses that I'm hurt and comes in for the finish. He is back to throwing rocket-propelled bombs at me, but by some miracle I am able to duck one and clinch up with him, eventually securing a leg and picking him up for a slam. I have never wrestled, but football taught me how to tackle, so I was happy that I could at least land one on someone as skilled and seasoned as Nate. This was a huge personal accomplishment in my book.

It also turned out to be a huge mistake.

With the fight on the ground now, it turns into a submission match, and Nate is eventually able to lock a triangle choke on me. The squeeze is extremely tight, and I could feel pressure building up in my head, like it was about to pop. I remember I started seeing a combination of bright white and sparkly-looking colors, which eventually turned to black with what I imagine to be what people see when they claim to see stars.

I was going to go out.

x x x

As the night progressed, fans were quick to get restless. Drunken hecklers demanded knockouts ten seconds into fights. Chants of "faggot" "bitch" and "pussy" were shouted anytime a fighter was able to keep his opponent pinned on the canvas for

more than a few seconds. The technical aspect of MMA was buried beneath the gross misunderstanding of the culture. Watching a fight on TV allows you to pick up on the production value and the effort made to promote professionalism. Seeing a fight live was a different atmosphere, showing the gritty reality of it all; appreciation of technique was out the window. The entertainment was all bloodlust for most.

It was a little after midnight when the participants in the main event finally made their way to the Octagon. First up was Overeem. The Pride Fighting Championship theme song blasted through the speakers as he made his way to the cage through a chorus of boos; the outsider entering to the anthem of an MMA culture long-since passed. Pride, a now-defunct organization from Japan that was swallowed up by the UFC, was all about respect. Fans remained mostly silent during the match, applauded for every competitor, and valued heart and determination over home field advantage. The same could not be said about tonight. As Stipe emerged from the tunnel, the building erupted. I looked up at the big screen and saw his face; pale as a ghost. His expression was blank, the look you make when you are trying really hard to ignore something but can't. You could see he was nervous. Hell, stepping into a steel cage with a legendary slayer of men would make anyone nervous.

The fight starts. Stipe appears to be gaining the upper hand through his use of constant pressure and cage control, keeping Overeem's back to the fence. He eats a hard kick to the body but fights his way through it. I'm on the edge of my seat; the conflict of interest I'm experiencing is taxing on my nerves. I want Stipe to win, but Overeem was a fighter I looked up to throughout my time with MMA. The crowd

suddenly goes silent. Stipe eats a straight right down the pipes that puts him on his ass. Overeem jumps on him with a guillotine choke. Stipe is in deep trouble, but the crowd roars him back to life. He finds a way to fight out of the choke. Most men would have tapped, but I was witnessing a man with truly unbreakable will. A few moments later, Overeem throws a lazy kick that Stipe catches, sweeps the leg, and puts Overeem on his back. He postures up, lands a few bombs from the top, and the ref steps in to stop the fight. Overeem is out cold. The building erupts louder than anything I've ever heard.

x x x

Day 10: After my near-breakdown, my determination has been reestablished. I was going to go through with this, and I was going to make sure I hit my mark. Today's training was focused on submission grappling. My water intake was reduced to 1/2 a gallon, significantly less than I'm used to drinking. I go for a couple two-mile runs, one in the morning, one at night. Calories are down to around 1,000. I weigh myself before going to bed – 179 pounds.

...

I don't remember tapping, but everyone told me I did. I wasn't going to argue because I literally had no idea of what happened. My body had enough but my brain wouldn't let me quit. The fight lasted 13:27 seconds, but I would have undoubtedly lost the fight anyways due to points if it went the full fifteen minutes.

This loss lit a fire inside me. I would train harder because of it, fully embrace the grind that wears down both body and mind. Find strength within my weakness. Explore the innermost nature of my being. I would evolve.

x x x

Day 11: Fucking horrible day today. Spinach leaves for breakfast. One bottle of water, rationed throughout the day. My mouth is sandpaper. I put on a pair of long johns, a t-shirt and shorts, a pair of sweatpants, two sweatshirts and a snow hat. I turn on the treadmill in my sister's room and start running. The sweat flows like water.

After a half hour I feel like I'm about to die. My body is basically devoid of energy and I am running purely on motivation at that point. After an hour I'm detached from the whole experience. Completely zoned out and my gas tank is several clicks past E. I remember stopping at about the hour fifteen minute mark to lay down next to the treadmill. I pass out before training; down but not out yet. A mouthful of coffee helps fuel me – more wood for the fire as my body continues to burn. I head out for training; sparring and more sweating. I prepare my mind for another day in the office, matching up with a partner in the process.

x x x

Feel the sweat stream down your face, collecting itself in a tiny puddle in the middle of the concrete floor. Feel your eyes burn. Taste the salinity on your upper lip. The garbage bags under your sweat suit cling to your body, adhered by a slimy layer of film between the skin and plastic. 175 pounds.

Drip.

Drip.

Drip.

Scientists claim that the average human adult body is composed of roughly 50-65% water, which it uses to build and repair cells, regulate internal body temperature, lubricate joints, and insulate the brain. By this point, you are undoubtedly below the average. Your muscles are wrung out like a dish rag, water-free and bone-dry. The brain fog had already set in, and your body is cooking itself from the inside thanks to all the layers of clothing you have on. Gaunt and pale, you look into a mirror and see a sunken face like a wax-covered skeleton looking back. If being composed of primarily water makes you human, you are significantly less human than when you started. 174.

...

The buzzer sounded to signal the start of the round. My opponent is a hulking mass of muscle and stretched sinews. I tried to keep my distance with jabs, but they were about as effective as poking a pissed-off grizzly bear with a stick. At this point I realized that I was terribly overmatched. Resistance was futile. The relentless forward pressure of my opponent suffocated me, leaving me pressed against the padded walls of the gym. When an opponent pushes the pace and forces his will on you, you can almost feel the walls closing in, turning an entire gym into 4x4 square with no clear escape route. It felt a lot like trying to stop a freight train with a pillow. Accepting that a beating was imminent, I braced myself for the inevitable hurricane of violence that was about to be unleashed upon me.

I was momentarily separated from my senses; I don't fully remember the next few moments.

I remember my eyes not working properly.

I remember not being able to breathe.

I remember my body not wanting to move when I told it to.

I remember asking god for help, but he wasn't there.

It began with his wrecking ball of a right hand smashing into my liver. The air violently exploded from my core as I let out an audible wheeze. A feeling of numbness spread from the point of impact, turning my legs to jelly as I began to keel over from the initial blow. Unfortunately for me, I happened to keel over right into an uppercut that caught me clean under the chin. Right hook body – right uppercut. The same combination that Mike Tyson made famous while pulverizing many a pugilist much more competent than myself.

Another punch landed and snapped me back to reality. I turtled up and pressed my back against the wall as hard as I could to brace myself and stay upright as his thunderous hooks collided into various parts of my torso. It couldn't have been more than a minute or two in and I was getting completely mauled by a trained killer. The end seemed to be nearing. I could beg for mercy and save myself at any second by tapping out, but the competitor in me wouldn't allow it.

It was obvious by this point that no one was going to save me. Not god, not a referee, and I was too stubborn to save myself. So I did what any living thing would do when their back was against the wall and fleeing wasn't an option – I swung back.

I mustered up all my pride, bit down as hard as I could on my mouthpiece and threw everything I had left in my gas tank into a looping right hand. The punch barely

grazed him, clipping his chin just enough to warrant a reaction. I remember seeing his knee buckle ever so slightly, just enough to show that I had caught him off guard.

Miraculously, the onslaught stopped.

My opponent stepped back as the buzzer signified the end of the round. We locked eyes from across the mat, neither of us willing to look away from the other. The stare-down lasted maybe four or five seconds, but the time spent locked in seemed like an eternity to me. Without saying a word, he nodded his head then retreated, unscathed; I slid down the wall and collapsed into a miserable heap on the floor. I was battered, bruised, and beaten down, both physically and emotionally. Five minutes of suffering.

I felt like I had just danced with death, but I've also never felt more alive.

I haven't felt anything quite like it.

...

The irony of the situation plays out as each precious drop of humanity added itself to the puddle on the floor. Here you are, slowly and willingly killing yourself, just so you can feel more alive for a handful of minutes. The only comfort comes from knowing your opponent was going through the same thing. You imagine him sitting there, watching as his family ate Thanksgiving dinner while he melts away into a salty puddle.

173.

Drip.

Drip.

Drip.

Time for pad work. Less pop than usual, but then again what do you expect from someone who is slowly evaporating? Your coaches always said combinations should be smooth and relaxed like water, only to tighten and become ice right before impact. Flow like water, harden like ice. Splash and smash. Each has a time and place, the importance is knowing when to use each one. 172.

...

Thud. Our gloves touch to start the round. Searching for openings, we circle each other like two lions sizing up their prey. I paw at my opponent with my measuring stick of a left hand, gauging his reactions while testing the distance between us. After a couple carousel-paced rotations, he throws a right hook that comes over the top of my outstretched left arm. I roll with the punch, keeping my right hand glued to my temple as the rotation of my left shoulder moves my head just out of range. We continue to circle and he throws a lazy jab. I make a mental note of this, aware of the split second his arm remains outstretched after punching. Another half-circle later and he goes to throw again, but this time I pounce, reacting with a heavy overhand right of my own. Swoosh. The punch whizzes past him as he turned his head just in time, his lips curling into a nervous smile. I nod my head in response and smile back. From this point on, I'm head hunting. The fight continues mostly the same way for the next few moments - we circle each other, he throws lazy punches, and I come back with haymakers trying to take his head off, only to have them graze past each time.

Unarmed combat is a game of adaptation. In order to be victorious, a fighter must be able to alter their initial game plan and react to the adversity their opponent

presents them with. After roughly 90 seconds of fighting, both of us are already making calculations, our minds running like computers to process the information as it comes in. My opponent realizes that he's leaving his hand out too long, so he starts throwing crisper punches in higher volume, closing the window that was previously open for counters. Because of this, I realize my "swing for the fences" mentality isn't going to work, so I start throwing combinations instead of loading up on bombs. The action heats up, and a solid exchange ensues. My opponent catches me off balance and throws a straight right down the pipes, but a well-timed shoulder roll shields my chin from the 16 ounces of well-cushioned cudgel that was thrust at my jaw. The impact sends me stumbling backwards, and my opposition smiles, as if to say I figured you out, dissecting my game plan as it unfolded before him. I shift gears, and focus my energy on parrying punches and creating angles rather than pushing the pace on him. A moment of brief inactivity follows. As I stand there watching him, I realize he's doing the same, sitting back on his punches and looking to counter rather than swing first. Ok, ok, I think as I drop my hands to my side my chin is right here. I lean forward, completely dropping my guard to try and force a reaction. He throws a half-assed uppercut, no commitment or power really, almost as if he wasn't sure he wanted to throw it.

Perfect.

I pop up with a right hook as my opponent throws another straight right. He ducks the hook, but the force of his punch rotates his body, leaving him angled perpendicular to my stance as he trips over his feet trying to regain his balance. I follow up with another lunging hook, catching him in the forehead as he stumbles backwards.

Like a lion smelling blood, I pounce on my prey, stalking him down as he peddles away to avoid me. I throw another one-two combination, which doesn't land clean, but sends him uncontrollably spiraling around like a spinning top. It was almost comical due to how over-exaggerated it looked. As he spun back to face me, I go to throw another overhand to seal the deal, but he had enough common sense to keep his hands up and his head down. So I pull the punch, feinting and leaning forward while I stick a lazy left hand in his face to distract him. He starts to come out of his hunched-over pose with a lead-hand uppercut, so I pull the trigger. The fake jab clears the way for an overhand right, just as his uppercut ricochets off my shoulder.

CRACK.

At first I thought I missed because I didn't feel anything. Usually when you punch someone, you get some type of feedback – a shockwave sent through your arm or a dull sting from the impact, but that didn't happen this time. Everything just gave way. My opponent let out an exaggerated groan as my right hand collided into his jaw, sending him corkscrewing into the air, landing face-first on the ground as his legs whipped into the air behind him. I slide back to admire my handiwork, guard still high and tight in case he had any fight left in him.

I watch as my opponent slowly pushes himself onto his hands and knees. It felt a lot like hitting a walk-off homerun, only the rush of adrenaline vanished almost as soon as it came pouring into my veins. My opponent was not my enemy; just a regular training partner that happened to make a mistake that cost him a few seconds of consciousness.

I wished no harm upon this man, but iron sharpens iron, and sometimes you have to break a sword in the process.

...

Over time, water erodes things. A river running through a mountain creates a canyon. Pressure and persistence. As it runs its course, it breaks down its surroundings, carries little pieces of rock with it. Its pace is relentless, unyielding. If your opponent is a mountain, you must be a river. Break him down. Carve your way through him. Drag him to deep waters and drown him. 171.

Drip.

Drip.

Drip.

The calm before the storm. Remember the teachings of the greats who came before you. Read the quote from the legendary martial artist Bruce Lee posted up on the wall. "Be like water making its way through cracks. Do not be assertive, but adjust to the object, and you shall find a way around or through it. If nothing within you stays rigid, outward things will disclose themselves. Empty your mind, be formless. Shapeless, like water. If you put water into a cup, it becomes the cup. You put water into a bottle and it becomes the bottle. You put it in a teapot, it becomes the teapot. Now, water can flow or it can crash. Be water, my friend." 170.

You are formless. You are shapeless. You are water, and your opponent is a mountain. Now go, it's time to let nature run its course.

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