

Kramer vs. Kramer

by Andrew Roe

Kramer wraps himself around Kramer's legs, from behind, then lifts him and tips him up and over and down, per their rehearsed routine. There sounds a thud of permanence as both men (bearded, burly) hit the mat. The crowd wakes up, a little—a light sprinkling of “ooohs” and “aaahs” among the less-than-half-filled room. Kramer thinks he smells Mennen Speed Stick tonight. Kramer usually uses Old Spice. What's up with that? The sweat. Every night Kramer marvels: the sweat.

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They don't remember the names of the towns. They're on the circuit, fighting in places they'd never go to on their own, places where the women look tired and the men carry an anonymous anger in their eyes. They both have the same manager and he thought it would be a good idea, the same last name and all. Bill it as Kramer vs. Kramer. Ha-ha. “Angles, guys, angles,” their manager said when he called them into his office, which wasn't an office but the manager's studio apartment in West Hollywood, off Melrose. “You need angles if you want viable careers in this industry. Any industry. And I'm all about angles. Even with extreme fighting. Extreme isn't extreme enough. You gotta have angles.”

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First names Robert and Anthony.

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They drive together, eat together, sleep together in the same chain motel rooms that smell the same unnamable smells.

“I think I was here once before,” Kramer might say.

"Really?" Kramer might answer.
"But maybe not. I'm not sure."
"We see a lot of towns."
"Just like rock stars."
"Only we're not rock stars."
"And there are no girls or drugs or anything."
"Just us."
"Just us," Kramer might repeat, for emphasis.

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Kramer is older than Kramer. He's been around the block and back. He has scars, deep and profound. They snake across his chest and down his back, punctuate his face with tiny marks, multi-shaped diversions for the people (not many) who let their gaze linger for longer than just a quick glance. The older Kramer wants to tell the younger Kramer to seriously reconsider. This is no way. This is no way to live your life if you have even an ounce of soul/spirit left.

Get out while you can, kid, Kramer wants to say.

But that's something you'd hear a guy in a movie say. So he doesn't say it, only thinks it, as they spend just about every waking hour together, more like husband and wife than fight-to-the-finish, kill-or-be-killed Xtreme opponents.

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Now that Kramer is on his stomach, sprawled face-first, incapable of movement, Kramer finishes the performance: he bites Kramer's shoulder, then he bites the capsule in his mouth that contains the blood. Kramer grimaces, begs for mercy. The crowd doesn't appear to notice. The blood always seems so puny and inadequate. Kramer releases him and stands, arms rising toward a sky that nobody can see.

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Kramer was married once—younger Kramer, that is.

"What happened?" Kramer asked one night when the free HBO wasn't working.

"I still don't know," Kramer answered, and it was quiet until the picture unscrambled and came back to life. Then they just watched TV.

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Under the lights, it is over. The MC's microphone isn't working so he cups his hands and yells: "That's it, ladies and gentlemen! Kramer defeats Kramer! What a match! What a night! Talk about extreme! It doesn't get any extemer than that! Now it's time to go! You can go somewhere else but you can't stay here! Good night!"

And he leaves. The crowd, however, stays. They don't want to go.

Kramer and Kramer are already in the back room. There isn't even a shower. They'll have to do that back at the motel room.

"I think I was a little off," says Kramer.

"Really? When?" asks Kramer.

"Right at the beginning."

"I didn't notice."

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Kramer sets the alarm for 5:30. That's when they'll wake up and drive to the next town, which he's pretty sure is Tacoma or Olympia. They might be in Oregon. They might not. There's been lots of rain and people seem floaty and disconnected. Oregon. Sure.

Kramer snores when he sleeps. It's always hard, always a race to see who will fall asleep first. Kramer closes his eyes and does his best. He always does his best even though sometimes—most of the time, actually—it doesn't feel that way. There is so much left behind.

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The next morning on the road, forty-five minutes into their drive, Kramer answers his cell phone. It's their manager. The manager's name is Speedy Beers. He swears this is his real name but neither Kramer believes him.

"Don't worry about getting to the next gig," the manager says.

They are on a long stretch of straight highway lined with trees. These trees are very green and very tall and would seem to suggest hope but somehow they do not.

"Why?"

"Tour's been cancelled."

Kramer looks over at Kramer, who's dosing in the passenger's seat. Get out while you can, kid.

"Why?"

It's a stupid question. The manager doesn't even bother answering.

"Can you tell Anthony?"

"He's asleep."

"Just let him know. Just tell him. And guys. There's one other thing."

"Wait."

Kramer slows the car down, comes to a complete stop. He hates talking on the phone in general, talking on the phone while driving even worse.

"Okay. I'm listening."

"When you get back to L.A. I think it would be best if we, you know, went our like respective separate ways. Nothing personal. But I mean the whole extreme fighting thing—I think it's on its way out. Don't get me wrong. You guys are warriors. Pure and total warriors. And you, with your history. You practically invented the sport, the whole fucking what—genre. There from like day one. I mean you've been there. I mean like been there, man. But bid-ness is bid-ness, know what I'm saying?"

Kramer looks over at Kramer again. Still asleep. His mouth open, like a child's. No drool though. It's for the best, for the best. Life

works out the way it works out. Count your blessings. He'll do something. He'll take a class. Learn a new skill. Turn the page. Something. All he knows is that he can't keep doing what he's been doing. That part of him is dead now.

"Robert? You get that? You copy?"

Kramer will thrive. He'll land a job. He'll meet a woman. She'll understand. She'll have some kind of accent, maybe. She'll understand everything. Him. His issues. His past. Their future. The world will change and he will be healed.

"Yo? Robert? You still there?"

Kramer starts driving. He turns on the radio. The phone is still going. He hears voices and static and wonders about all the towns they'll pass through, if one could lead him to something if he simply pulled over and decided to stay. Kramer stirs a bit but remains asleep. He watches him for as long as he can before he has to turn his eyes back to the road ahead.

