

Mankind vs. The Undertaker

by Lindsay Tigue

Her boyfriend is into U.S. presidents and professional wrestling. He is reading biographies of both occupations and says this helps him to appreciate gray area, decisive action. Lives of great men, he explains.

I'm having a wrestling party, he tells her. We will all be wrestlers for Halloween and you can be Mankind.

Come over tonight, he says. I want to see you seven times this week.

She goes to work and it turns out to be a big day. There is a new toaster oven in the office break room, an extravagant stainless steel Cuisinart. A guy from sales tells her his plans to cook elaborate side dishes during lunch. She nods as if this is brilliant, and he, full of brilliant ideas.

The empty box the appliance came in sits on the table and someone, hungry perhaps, has labeled the images of cooking food on the packaging. Greek Chicken it says, with arrows.

She hears Charles, in the adjacent cubicle chewing on toast. He has recently found God. Though he rarely speaks to her, he posts updates about his spiritual development to an online profile that she regularly checks. Today his posts are quite exalted, screaming JESUS and SAVED while he sits with his toast.

She has been at her first job for less than a year. In meetings, she has trouble articulating herself, says *sexful* when she means *successful*. In memos, she has trouble spelling *disappointment* and *rhythm*. She remains nervous and guarded.

In general, she has lots of fears. She worries about the gas smell of her stove, about sharp pains in her chest, the side effects of vaccines. She hates the sound of fireworks, the way she flinches as if slightly hollowed with each blast.

It is like post-traumatic stress, a woman told her, for imagined or future trauma. To this woman, she thinks, trauma must come strictly in booms and pops.

She recalls meeting her boyfriend's internship coworker a few years before. She remembers, during their introduction, he shook her hand with his left and held a beer with his right. You're twenty? he asked, sticking the beer under her nose. For now, you can smell.

A year after the internship finished, the man blew his face off with a firework. Her boyfriend read in the paper all about his miraculous survival.

During lunch, she walks around the block. She hears a man say insistently into his phone, Everything is *fine*, and a woman say to her friend, That must feel good! Two other women pass her overcome with laughter. One says, in tears, And then the horse died! All the way down the street, they carry on this wheezing, happy fit.

When she returns from lunch, she is tired and full. She rinses a coffee mug in the sink and notices a new sign: *Hand Washing. Not Just for Doctors*. It depicts a cartoon of a man in a surgical mask. He looks responsible, she thinks.

Two men stand near the fridge discussing Phillip, the colleague who was terminated the previous week. We're in a recession, one man sighs.

She nods though she is sick of talking recession. She's also tired of people telling her tomatoes are a fruit. She longs to put her shoulders down, feels they are constantly shrugged. She knows now why people do yoga. She does yoga even though she hates yoga-people with their mats and lotus talk. She doesn't talk about *practicing yoga*, just likes the muscle yield and arch—feeling the back do its work.

Most of her coworkers are older men and she's had trouble connecting. She asks about their kids, their weekends.

She thinks about her one male friend from high school, now out-of-touch, who at seventeen professed repeatedly he was the wisest man of their generation (in North America). That was his major claim, in addition to his purported frisbee golf prowess. Later, he was one of her first friends to have children.

Your face is like a quarter, he once told her. She thinks now he was right; it's shiny and round. She remembers him laying pictures out on a desk and sticking coins over her face. He wasn't trying to be mean. She remembers him sneaking up from behind while she stood at her locker. She slammed her head into the metal and dropped her books on the floor.

He laughed. You scare so easily, he said.

She remembers, at a high school party, people talking about spooning. She didn't know what it was, assumed it was dirty. What is it? she asked. Lie down, he said and wary, she obliged. Cupping her into him, sideways on the basement carpet, he put his arms around her waist; she felt his chest against her back. Oh, *spoon*. They were surrounded by teenagers holding Solo cups. Helping her up, he asked, You liked that, didn't you? Of course she did.

Within the first several months at her job, three employees had deaths in the family. One put his Parkinson's-afflicted wife in a nursing home at age fifty-five. Would you like to offer your condolences? the receptionist had asked. She signed all the cards.

After work, her parents take her to eat. Thanks for dinner, she says at the end.

Of course. Love you, her mother says.

Her dad, lost in a televised football game, looks over absentmindedly. Of course we would love you, he accidentally says.

On the way to her boyfriend's, she thinks about her father, who believes in divine intervention. He used those exact words on the phone recently after reading a presidential biography borrowed from her boyfriend. Thomas Jefferson and John Adams both died on the 4th of July, he said.

When she goes into his apartment, her boyfriend is wearing a wig. I'm going to be the Undertaker he tells her, brushing aside the long black hair. He describes the rest of his outfit: black boots, long coat, a bowler hat with a big rim. He shows her his wrestling entrance; he's practiced. Stand over there, he says and he walks toward her painfully slow. He puffs his chest and clenches his fists, his skinny arms held stiff and away from his body.

He puts in a video saying, we have to watch this. It's our epic battle, he says. Mankind vs. The Undertaker. Hell in a Cell. The most infamous match of all time, he says to the screen.

They watch a steel, fenced cage descend from the ceiling, enveloping the ring and surrounding area. There is music and

strobe, cheering.

It is custom built for injury, the announcer says.

Her character, Mankind enters the arena, disheveled and drunk-seeming, weaving and carrying a chair. He wears a loose tie, a ripped shirt, boots, and a mask. His hair looks greasy and slept-on.

That's you, her boyfriend says with a slap on the back.

Can you imagine what this human being will do to himself? the announcer asks.

Mankind throws the chair on top and then heaves himself onto the cage. The Undertaker enters in blasts of fire. She recognizes his signature, slow walk and his fists that seem permanently clenched.

Shortly after the match begins, her boyfriend's character throws hers off the sixteen-foot cage. *Oh my God*, an announcer pleases. Somebody get out here.

Don't worry, he gets up, her boyfriend says, patting her leg.

The throw is replayed until the quick thump upon impact feels part of her body.

Once Mankind is back on his feet, the match resumes. She half closes her eyes.

This is when I chokeslam you through the cage, her boyfriend says before Mankind falls again, this time into the ring. Her boyfriend leans over and kisses her on the cheek.

After, he shuts off the TV and turns to her. So you'll do it? he asks, leaning in close to her nose. You'll be Mankind?

Sure, she says smiling.

When she gets home, she sneaks into her bedroom before her roommate starts talking. She feels guilty, but just wants to sleep. Her roommate tells longwinded stories about eating habits, previous pet names, preferred detergents.

Eventually, she thinks, there will be no roommates, just two wrestlers, beefy in boots. Something will send her careening sixteen feet, or propel her through fence. After, he will draw her in, whisper in her ear. It will be *fine*, he'll say and then *That* must feel good. He will say, And then the horse *died*, and it will be hilarious. They will roll on the floor in hyperventilate breath, in a jumble of laughter and clutch.

