Chicago

by Rylan Morrison

There is a gym in The Loop that have live warthog fights on Friday nights. I knew about it only because I lent an ear to a couple of jock business guys on my flight. I flew to Chicago on a Friday with a meeting not until Monday morning. There was a deal on a flight and hotel combo, and I figured I needed to get away for a few days. I didn't have any real plans, and didn't know anyone, so it was an actual break.

“No, dude, they have real warthogs, like from the wild, in a pen, they are like huge hairy pigs, fighting,” the one guy explained leaning across the aisle to his friend who was still in disbelief. “It's gnarly bro…it's friggin' awesome.” I had written down the location of the gym on my legal pad alongside my notes for a client meeting; I circled “pig fights.”

It didn't occur to me until I was at the door of the dingy mixed martial arts gym that those guys might recognize me from the plane. I imagined one of them spotting me and tapping my shoulder amongst the din of the warthog fight; “ma'am, weren't you sitting behind me on Delta?” For some reason in my daydream he would use the formal “ma'am” to approach me, despite the fact that we were in a swarm of sweaty grunting men in the basement that smelled like feral animal feces and jock straps.

I had made my way through the street level entrance, still wearing my business casual outfit with sensible heels. I was the ma'am here, and perhaps the only woman in the place. Confidently, I directed my gaze to an obese Hawaiian gentleman sitting uncomfortably on a tiny stool. Beside him on another stool was a lock box. Behind him was a dented metal door littered in fliers announcing the fights between

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various men; some with fists locked in “put your dukes up” stance, kickboxers with their legs in 90 degree angles, even wannabe WWF men in tights sparkled amongst the announcements.

I approached him and began rattling around for my ID and some cash (was this thing going to cost me $5 or $100, I didn't know.) The Hawaiian was breathing like an elderly pug and had absolutely no expression on his face. I searched his face and the posters for any clues to tell me what happens next, was he even the ticket guy? I could see myself making this kind of assumption and throwing in the towel when even the slightest conflict arose. I felt heat rise up my neck, I was second guessing, I started imagining a night of room service and crappy TV, that might be more my speed, I thought.

“Fifteen bucks, avoid the front,” he blankly said looking past me. I handed him a twenty and debated asking him which warthog was his favorite. I mentally slapped the question out of my mind. His huge paw of a hand reached behind him and he opened the metal door for me to crawl into. A dankness shoved itself into my face and pulled me through a narrow hall. I was brought back to my first live band experiences; spending anxiety filled hours getting dressed up and crowding in front of my vanity with two of my girlfriends. We would then find ourselves holding onto each others shoulders down pitch black corridors into a sea of older, jaded, muddied losers staring blankly, and nodding along to the tunes of a miserable strung out guy singing about “ending it all.”

I was in the light, my life was good, I was single but totally OK with it. I had a good position at work, I was respected, was friendly with my co-workers, enjoyed outdoor activities and a few hobbies. I had dinner parties and liked shopping for gifts, I am normal, disease and drug free. But sometimes I would

slip into this “other” self, one that was safe inside dangerous places, attracted to sketchy individuals, could laugh hard and long with the saltiest of dogs, drink heavily, and could seduce and be seduced without concern of consequences. It was my darkness.

And as soon as I was pressed up to the bar of the fight arena I knew it was one of those nights. I ordered a drink and decided I would introduce myself as April instead of Irene, that is if anyone asks. Scanning the room I took inventory of the stock; in one corner were a pair of obese men in their late thirties, one wore a t-shirt that said “Silly Faggot Dicks are for Chicks” with the Trix cereal rabbit giving two middle fingers. His buddy looked stoned and distant, I was embarrassed for them. Beside me at the bar was a huddle of frat guys, each adorning some apparel with Delta Phi Upsilon emblazoned on it. They were discussing how lame their pre-party was at Denny's.

Fearing I was in some sort of homosexual nightmare sequence I scanned feverishly for what I would consider “a nice guy.” Standing next to a column were a couple of soft enough looking dudes; they even looked a bit shy and freaked out that they were here. One of the guys had his hands plunged into his jeans pockets, his blue checkered button up was tucked in, and he looked nervous behind a pair of black framed glasses. I ordered a second drink and walked over to them. I stood beside the column and waited to make eye contact with the guy in the glasses; we gave a polite nod and smile.

“Which warthog is your favorite?” I asked and took a sip of my gin and tonic. He laughed out loud and looked more relaxed. “Funny,” he said deadpanned. “How much do you think I should bet on…” he looked at his flier “…Pimp my Pig?” We looked at each other horrified by the name, and then laughed.

Regulars were already pumped and flailing about, in the corner of my eye I caught an awkward chest bump between two men of very different heights. The lights dimmed and a chubby twenty something year old guy in black pants and a red short sleeved button up shirt, that was a size too small, jumped around the ring clapping his hands above his head, yelling "ARE YOU READY TO PARTY?!!" into a wireless headset mic. He brought the audience to a dangerous energy.

What was the moment like for this guy when he was asked to be the hype man for a warthog fight? Was he just getting off his shift at Radio Shack and got a text message? Or was he trying to get a bag of Doritos out of a vending machine at his office job when he got the phone call? What are the series of events that have to take place to have that call be amongst the natural progression of things in one's life? Nothing on his face, however, made me think he was distressed over this life choice, it was my own judgement, and I decided to not go there further for my own sanity's sake. The lights dimmed even lower and a booming voice from above moved us into the next wave, an even deeper shade of energy bloomed in the crowd. "You are here for one reason, and one reason only...and here is the moment you have been waiting for...LET'S GET PIGGY WITH IT!!!!"