

## ALLIGATOR WRESTLER

Once again, Lloyd Storney, nineteen years old, started his life over, slipping out of his apartment under cover of darkness, tiptoeing down the back stairs and tossing his possessions onto his truck. Stealth is the way to go when you're breaking a lease. He paused on the stairs to take stock. Something called, who knew what? Lloyd drove to his mother's apartment. What would she say of his plans to move south?

"I'll help you pack the last load," she said as they shared a send-off Wild Turkey.

"Thanks," Lloyd said, "there's just a few things left and I'm ditching them. Fewer things, fewer strings."

"Your call," his mother said. "Hitting the road like this, reminds me of your crazy father, our mutual ex."

"Mom", Lloyd protested.

"Forget I said that," his mother said, pulling a cigarette pack from her blouse. "Cigarettes and no regrets. That's me. But you miss him. Go chase your dream. Write, call or stop back."

"All the above," Lloyd said, leaning over and kissing her on the cheek.

The interstate took Lloyd south to the gulf. Soaking in the Florida sun, his mother's dismissal of his father haunted him. Then an echo of ocean waves, the scent of salted ocean air floating over a mound dotted with scrub grass and a lone palm tree, raised his spirits. At a crossroads corner, a billboard read: Bob's Alligator Rodeo Arena He stopped for a look.

Inside the arena, the stands were half full. A banner proclaiming Alligator Bob as World's

Greatest Wrestler hung limp at one end of the field.

"Alligator wrestling," Lloyd asked a boy in front of him. "What's the point?"

"Don't get bit," the boy said.

Three rows down, two young boys chanted "We want Old Bob!" and "Hooray for the gator!" As if on cue, a middle-aged man bounded into the arena, chest and arms bare, pipe-stem legs wrapped in knee-high leather boots. A yellow cape lay flat across the man's back.

"Welcome one and all," the man shouted, "what you are about to see will amaze and astound as you have never been astounded before." Turning to an opening in the stands, he cupped his hands :

"Without further adieu, present the monster!"

Two young men, leather-tan and tall, entered the arena, each pulling a rope fastened to a frantic alligator. The men dragged the animal to the center ring; the wrestler bowed and extended his hands, one of them missing parts of two fingers. With a nod to the audience, he grabbed the ropes and held on.

Lloyd moved down two rows for a better view. He squinted into the sun, searching for something.

"Behold," the wrestler shouted, dropping the ropes and releasing the alligator. "Prehistoric, prehensile, preternatural, possessing jaws that can rend a man helpless in one bite. What doesn't kill me, makes me a man!" The alligator crouched in the mud, sunken eyes shining. Alligator Bob circled counterclockwise, then clockwise. "Hey gator, hey gator," he chanted. With a lunge, the wrestler dipped his shoulder, wrapped his hands around the alligator's tail, flipped the animal and wrapped a rope around its wrinkled jaws.

"The deed is done!" the wrestler shouted, foot on the gator's stomach, the rope taut, Bob's gnarled hand curled dramatically on his hip. When the handlers returned, he bowed once more

and left the ring.

“Wow!” a little boy exclaimed.

Not certain what he had just seen or what he thought of it, Lloyd lingered outside of the arena.

In minutes, Alligator Bob emerged. He glanced at Lloyd.

“Sorry kid, no autographs today. I’m on my way to a watering hole.”

“And I’m buying,” Lloyd blurted.

“Really?” Bob said. “My kind of fan. Fourth and Verona. Palm Tree Inn. Meet you there.”

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At the dimly lit table, Bob waved for a refill.

“What’s that you’re drinking?” Bob asked, pointing at Lloyd’s orange juice and rum. “Tang, the official drink of astronauts?”

Bob raised his wounded hand: “Punch press in Muncie, Indiana,” he explained. “Took the settlement money, moved to a warm climate and remade myself into the man you see before you. Found I liked the limelight. The ever present danger of the ring. And, yes, the young women. Mostly young. What brings you here, boy?”

“Something,” Lloyd said.

“Be more specific,” Bob said.

“Well,” Lloyd said, “I’m thinking I’d like to wrestle.”

“There’s few can do it. Damn few.”

“You could teach me,” Lloyd said.

“I’m not the mentor type,” Bob said.

“You might surprise yourself,” Lloyd said.

“Got a son back in Muncie,” Bob said. “The distance works fine.”

“Your job,” Lloyd said, “you make people feel good. I’d like that.”

“ Feel good? I hold people in the palm of my hand. There's a difference.”

“Maybe I've been sent here for a reason,” Lloyd said, leaning forward.

“You're starting to scare me, kid. I like anyone who buys me a drink, but I'm the professor of hard knocks so I'll tell you this: get a job. Kick ass. Get a girlfriend. You look okay, you're tall. Enjoy palm trees and coladas.”

“I could learn,” Lloyd said . “The moves. How you handle the crowd. ”

“You're not listening. Get out there, figure things out.”

“ Teach me!” Lloyd demanded. “You have a debt to society.”

“Not that I know,” Bob said and drained his glass. “Cheers,” he said. “ Gotta go.”

“ You can't go,” Lloyd said. “You owe me.”

“ Got the late show to do. Be good, do bad. Sayonara.”

“You can't go,” Lloyd stammered. “Have another drink. On me.”

Bob stood and moved off.

“I forgive you,” Lloyd shouted as Bob disappeared into the smoke.

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The next day Lloyd sent a picture postcard to his mother that showed a dolphin soaring out of the water, defying gravity. Lloyd wrote his mom things were going good. He was getting things straightened out. That night he phoned his father, but no one answered.

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