

Body and Blood

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It's six o'clock, time for dinner and *Little House on the Prairie* reruns. I walk up the stairs as my mom is pulling some string beans out of the microwave. She asks me if I'll set the table while she gathers everyone for dinner, and I say yes. After my dad, brother, and sister show up, she turns the television down for family prayer. I can see the television glare flickering off the silverware and windows, but it's quiet while everyone kneels down.

My dad gives the prayer himself. He asks Heavenly Father to watch over my sister at college in Price, Utah, and says thank you for the food and the gospel and the prophet. I haven't figured out whether I want to say Amen at this point in my life so I just mutter something—not Amen, but not silence either.

The dinner is a Mormon casserole with cornflakes on top of cheese potatoes, and the episode is the one where Mr. Edwards ends up reluctantly housing a chimpanzee circus refugee. The chimpanzee's name is Rose, and she's a burden at first, spilling flour everywhere and pulling down the shelves in the Edwards's kitchen. Like all *Little House* episodes, it's a rerun on KBYU.

I've seen this one before and know that Rose and Edwards eventually develop a bond, but I don't feel like enduring the glares and dropped forks that would follow a request to switch the channel two turns to the right and watch *The Simpsons* instead. Sure, and maybe while we're at it we can ask God to cancel church this Sunday and we'll stay home and gamble on football games. Missing family dinner altogether is also out (*If that's how you want to repay your mother for making this meal for us, that's your choice*), so I'm here. But I eat my potatoes fast.

By the time Mr. Edwards has to fake Rose's death because she has been declared a danger and a menace for hitting Nellie in the face, I am finished and ask if I can clear my plate and be excused. I am sixteen years old, and I've been waiting all day for night to fill

the city, for family dinner to be over so I can meet my friends at the park.

* * *

We meet at Anderson Park because it's private. The sign says there's a dusk-to-dawn curfew, but no police patrols ever come by, and there are ten-foot lights beaming into the pavilion at every angle. The lights shine all night long, so at any hour you can read the insults and numbers to call for a good time etched into the metal benches, and you can see bodies moving on the grass, too.

The park is hard to find if you haven't lived in Pleasant Grove your whole life. It's pocketed at the back of a residential neighborhood and can easily be mistaken for a rich person's yard if you don't see the green sign. It takes twenty minutes to walk there from my house. I walk through the orchard, always on the lookout for deer, and then up Locust Avenue. I cut through the grounds of Pleasant Grove High School, across the football field, and up the bleachers. I cross the street and take Anderson Way. The park is the dot of a question mark at the end of a curving dead end.

I am the fourth one there. Travis is in the pavilion pouring a small bottle of something brownish that he must have stolen from his brother into a half-empty one liter bottle of Pepsi. Steve is showing Charles how to punch and quickly move back into a defense stance. Steve is the one who owns the boxing gloves, which are what gave us the idea in the first place. He is also the only one who claims to know the approximate rules of boxing. The rest of us know only one fighting strategy: Try to hit the other guy somewhere in the face as fast and hard as you can. I have heard lots of times that if you hit hard enough, you can knock some nose bones or something up into the brain and can kill someone. I don't know about that, but a fast, hard hit will at least turn the electricity off most people. Even if the juice cranks itself back up, you get the pleasure of seeing the other guy's nose bleed while you get your ass kicked.

We spend on average three nights a week boxing in a park. I win a majority of my fights, which is a surprise even to me. In P.E. class, I spend my time taking frequent trips to the locker room where I walk the rows of lockers and look in the mirror until Coach opens the door and says, *Whoever's in there, you better get the heck back*

out here now! I don't get my ass kicked in school, but I don't win any fights or stand up for anyone either. I am skinny and tall with thick, sinister eyebrows. When I see my reflection in bus windows or in the bread aisle mirrors, my posture is slumped, and my movements look shadowy and uncertain. I look more like the type to sneak poison into your lunch than start a confrontation.

Most of the reason I win fights at Anderson is that my friends-turned-opponents are, for the most part, even lower on the spectrum of physical prowess than I am. Most of them have been getting picked last in every sport their whole lives. They can't throw a spiral, although they can beat your ass at *Tecmo Bowl*. Likewise, their *Street Fighter* skills don't translate from their thumbs to the rest of their bodies. I've spent a good portion of the last four, five years repeatedly losing at these and other video games in Charles's basement, the punishment made much worse afterward when everyone starts talking about how Stephen King's *Dark Tower* series has informed their life philosophies. This is what I get for having acne on choose-your-friends day in junior high. So even though we say the fighting is all for fun and nothing personal—no winning, no losing, no big deal—and even though I stay light and humorous between fights, I do take personal pleasure in what I consider to be my chance for long overdue vengeance. I think I look forward to boxing nights with more devotion than the others. I remember them more vividly. It's real winning or losing for me. I sit with Travis on the bench and ask him questions until the others show up. Lane drove his car and picked Chris and Jeff up on the way. That made seven of us for the night.

Usually we do just two or three fights each before people want to go steal sodas at Smith's or play guitar and video games in Charles's basement. My first fight is Jeff. Most of this is a joke to him. He says he "abhors" violence but doesn't mind playing along, just for fun. Every time I see Jeff these days he invites me to something he calls "Rock Church," which he describes as "God without the religion." The basic idea seems to be having church on Saturday in regular clothes and, sometimes instead of a sermon, taking hikes in nature. "Don't you think that's a better way to celebrate Christ's message?" he asks.

Hell, no. True, my Christian celebration is tiresome and lacks

zeal, but I haven't yet found a better option for being a Christian than doing what I've done all my life: put on a tie, sit in church for three hours indoors every Sunday, and then enjoy the six days and twenty-one hours until I have to do it again. It doesn't make my body hum; but if there's an alternative, it has to be better than driving up to hippie church in Salt Lake.

Jeff and I face off and start circling each other. His comical Popeye stance signals that this won't take long. I punch him right, left, then right again, the last one harder than necessary since he was just playing around. He drops the gloves and says, "Settle down, killer." I ask, "Where's your Rock God now?" He points out that his God is the same as mine but all I have to say is, "I should just do my second fight right now."

Up walks drunk Travis. A bigger guy, he has a lot of force behind his punch, but it isn't likely to connect if you keep moving. I run a few circles around him, and his fat, semi-drunk ass gets tired right away. His punches are as easy to avoid as snowballs from a five year-old. I only get in two punches before he needs a breather and gives up, too. I stop moving and notice that it's cold outside for spring.

While others fight, I relax in the pavilion, thinking I'm done for the night. I feel bad about hitting Jeff and say, "Sorry." He says, "It's cool, man." I'm talking with the others in the pavilion when Lane asks me if I want to go one with him before we take off.

I don't know the best way to say this, so I'll just say it like this: I hate Lane. When I complain about him to the other guys, they say I just don't like him because he's new, which is maybe a little true. He moved here eight months ago with his family from California into one of those huge Ivory Homes up on the mountain. We have to wind through a private driveway and park behind two SUVs just to get to his house. There's a pool table in his basement, and he owns every video game system ever created. Besides that, he wears bandanas all the time and talks about California as if it's the Garden of Eden. "Until you see the Pacific, you don't know the immensity of water. If you want to see real hardcore, go see a hardcore show in L.A.—all the best bands go through there. Mormonism is just, different in California. I think it's simply that you see diversity all the time."

But I think mostly I hate him because I've never beaten him at boxing. I already know I'm going to lose but agree to fight anyway.

He holds his gloves up in front of his face like I can't see him back there. I am too frustrated to wait for his first move, so I just try to hit him as hard as I can between the gloves on the chin. He blocks it. He's fine. He hits me a few times playfully, asks if that's all I've got. Like I mentioned, it is. So I take a few more wild-ass swings and he hits me back, still playing. There's nothing more frustrating than tasting blood in your mouth, throwing your fists as hard and fast as you can, only for the dust to clear and reveal the target of your fury smiling back at you.

He hits me three times in the mouth and I give up. I say, "Well, it's been fun, but I better take off." I'm in a bad mood, so I decline Steve's offer for a ride home. I don't pay attention to the night spilling over the city as I clench and unclench my fists all the way home.

There's a little blood on my lip, but I don't worry about that too much. My parents chalk up minor bleeding to boys being boys. They've been worried about me since our sit-down the day after I bought a women's coat from Savers last winter, so as long as I'm clear that the blood on my mouth came from boxing and not as a result of cross-dressing, we'll be fine.

I walk through the front door and straight to my room, too angry about getting my ass kicked to sleep. I pace my room, open my closet, then fall into bed and think about hitting Lane's face into one of the linden trees that circle our self-made boxing ring. Then stand again. And repeat.

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Kylie lives on Locust Avenue, which connects to the football field at Pleasant Grove High School, if you're willing to hop a fence. She and I go this way often during school to download music and eat food at her house because her mom works days. She's the only girl I hang out with regularly. I am in my post-acne days by now and looking forward to a life of slightly above average looks, but it is hard to talk to any girls without (a) having to introduce myself in some dumbass, awkward way or (b) hearing them point out that they haven't seen me at any Church activities lately. ("You know, we're playing broom hockey this Wednesday at the cultural hall, and I really hope you can make it.") It's much harder

to tell Jill with green eyes that I'm busy than that plank-faced Young Men's leader, Brother Peters, even though I doubt God cares whether I spend Wednesday playing broom hockey in the cultural hall or boxing with my friends.

Anyway, Kylie is my age and beautiful. She has already designed and got her own tattoo—a fish bending over her left foot and ankle, like every step for her is an arc out of water—and she has no problem letting laughter take over her body like spirit possession. I should be writing about her in my journal at night while trying to think of ways to accidentally bump into her at school in the morning. But it isn't like that: I've avoided making any advances. Reason number one is we're friends. I don't want to be messing up my only hanging-out option during school besides riding in Steve's truck to get bean burritos from Taco Amigo. Reason number two is she's dating Jacob Pelton from West Valley. I hated him at first because he's twenty-three and because there's been more than one occasion where I've been in the kitchen helping Kylie's sister with math when a tickle fight breaks out between those two in the next room. I didn't even think about giving him a chance until I learned that he was a kickboxer. And not a kickboxer like I'm a boxer—a real kickboxer, with a winning record, who wins money for his fights.

Jacob has black hair, green eyes, and a tattoo on his left bicep of a skull with a banner that says CTR draped underneath. He describes himself as Straight Edge. I have some idea what he means by that. I go to punk/hardcore shows, and I've heard the term on the news reports about gang violence in Salt Lake. But Jacob says most of the media coverage of Straight Edge has been lame. He says, even when I don't ask, that Straight Edge is just a way of living clean—no drugs, no alcohol, no casual sex. He points out that the principles are consistent with Mormonism and that just because he was Mormon didn't mean he couldn't be Straight Edge, and vice versa. Straight Edge gives him “a positive outlet more than one day a week.” He uses the word “positive” a lot.

Kylie summarizes Salt Lake City Straight Edge as “sexually repressed Mormon dudes substituting violence for getting no sex.” I know Kylie likes to smoke and sometimes drink, but I guess those two like each other enough that ideological differences aren't a problem. Jacob brings over a lot of new zines about Straight Edge

and hardcore for Kylie to read; but since she isn't interested, I end up reading most of them. The wording in the zines is similar to that of the Boy Scout manual in that both suggest the most intense, vivid experience can only be had by a sober mind. I've heard that sentiment in church, too. They're big on it in seminary. After reading enough and asking enough questions, I asked Jacob if he could teach me to fight and he seemed excited about it. Me, too.

Good idea. Kylie rolled her eyes when we told her the idea but said we could use her garage in the afternoon while she did her homework. The first time we train, we make some space by moving the tiller, a tool box, and some gas cans to the side of Kylie's garage. There's a dusty punching bag her dad never used in there.

Jacob watches me punch the bag and gives me advice on balancing my stance. I'm glad that he's training me, glad also that he isn't taking it too seriously and trying to make me do any one-handed push-ups or chase a chicken. After punching the bag for an hour and sparring with him for a little while, his basic summary is that, as someone who's "skinny and not too coordinated," I need to use my long arms and legs to my advantage and not let anyone close. This is how you throw a kick to the ribs without letting your defenses down; this is how to defend in the first place. Since you are not the strongest, wait for the other guy. Most people will leave an opening. Just wait.

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It's Sunday and I'm sitting with my family at church. I can see Lane's family sitting a few rows ahead of us. I don't know why we are in the same ward since they live half the face of a mountain away and it's not like there's a shortage of wards in Pleasant Grove.

Lane himself is up on the stand getting ready to bless the sacrament. He is wearing an X-Men tie that I would probably like, except for my commitment to despising him. It's been a few weeks since he last kicked my ass, and I think I am turning into a better fighter. After the song, Lane gives the prayer for the bread. "O God, the Eternal Father, we ask thee in the name of thy Son, Jesus Christ, to bless and sanctify this bread to the souls of all those who partake of it; that they may eat in remembrance of the body of thy Son . . ." I am at the age where I should be up on the stand saying the prayer; but for a while there, I stopped going to church and I

haven't been ordained a priest. I gave my parents the usual reasons, the ones a lot of my friends were giving: I told them I was worried about polygamy being an eternal principle, and did they know black people didn't get the priesthood until 1978, and don't they see that the whole structure of the Church is patriarchal, just look at the way you two act, and so on. Not that I've figured out the answers to those problems—just that I pay more attention to the kinds of places those comments are thrown around. In the spotlight booth of the auditorium during Light and Sound class, for example. Dudes get high, then start talking about everything that's wrong with Mormonism. Fine. But I'm finding the only thing more boring than Mormon martyrdom is ex-Mormon martyrdom. So I started to feel bad about annoying my parents and sort of dissing my mom, and now I'm back to missing church the old way: by getting sick an uncanny number of Sundays. In turn, they let the excessive sicknesses slide so I don't go total heretic on them again.

I'm not sure what to do with the sacrament when it reaches me. Some weeks I take it, some I don't. Hunger is a factor, along with my sense of spiritual self-worth for the week. Today I pass it to my brother without taking any bread.

It is the first Sunday of the month, which means that, after the sacrament, it will be time to hear the testimonies of the congregation. I never waste sick days on testimony meeting. Regular sacrament meeting is set up this way: your basic organ accompaniment and Sister Parry singing with too much emotion, adding her own unnecessary harmony instead of just muddling through the song with everyone else, then partaking of the sacrament, a few scheduled talks, another song, a closing prayer. But during testimony meeting, it's open forum after the sacrament.

In our ward, that means Sister Eldridge time. She walks up every month, and then the person who stands up at the same time to share her testimony has to act like she was just tying her shoe. This is because Sister Eldridge tends to talk about her personal problems for a long time, and she's hard to follow. When I was nine, she got up there and talked about how she had received inspiration in a dream that it was time for another child. The Eldridges' marriage was apparently one where you didn't have sex except to procreate, and looking at Brother Eldridge makes that rule seem

more divine than it would usually sound. So she wakes him up, says, It's time, I just had a vision, whatever. Surprisingly long story short, Brother Eldridge's surprise is so great that he "spilled the seed!" and now Sister Eldridge was in front of us, unpregnant, nearly crying like always.

That was the first story about sex I can remember hearing, and I don't know how I pictured it at the time. But I've been looking forward to her testimonies ever since. Today I vocalized my excitement on the car ride over, and my mom said I shouldn't talk like that. Sister Eldridge is going through a hard time. I thought she was always going through a hard time, I said. Well, this time she just got divorced. Her husband cheated on her and moved to Denver with another woman. Oh.

So this month, I was thinking, she wouldn't stand up. Church wouldn't be cathartic enough. But toward the end of the service, she walked up and stood in front of the podium like usual, looking like an old statue. "Since I lost all that money in the divorce and have been working two jobs, it's been tough on the kids. But you've all been supportive. And most important, I still have faith. I still have the Lord to help me fight through this. I don't know where I'd get strength without that faith."

When she finishes the chapel is quiet. I am not sure where to put my eyes, so I open up the hymn book and start thumbing through the pages.

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Jacob has been teaching me to fight for two months when he says I should ride with him, Kylie, his trainer, and his brother to watch him fight in Salt Lake. I am still boxing regularly with my friends at the park, but I'm holding back a little bit. I haven't used any kicking moves. By now I'm used to the crazy spontaneity that accompanies hanging out with Jacob and Kylie, but for once they're giving me advance notice. The Salt Lake fight is a pretty big deal. Someone is paying for Jacob's room and board, and he gets prize money whether he wins or loses. He won't tell me how much. I still haven't seen him in a live fight against anyone but me, and I have a month to come up with some reason to be gone for one weekend. I say, "Hell, yes."

I tell my mom I'm going camping up American Fork Canyon

that weekend and then ask Steve to back up the story in case she asks. She says, “Okay.” We’ve been getting along. She’s not thrilled that I dyed my hair black; but once she found out that Straight Edge meant no drugs or alcohol—especially following the incident last summer when the police brought me home for underage drinking in the parking lot of Smith’s, she seemed fine with it.

Less than an hour before his fight, Jacob’s brother and his trainer have their hands on the crown of Jacob’s head and are commanding his body—in the name of Jesus Christ and by the authority of the Melchizedek Priesthood—to be strong and fast, if it be God’s will. Kylie isn’t in the room. She said she was feeling too sick to watch and needed to get some air if she was going to make it through this. I am starting to feel sick, too, and offer up a prayer of my own, hoping that God, or Rock God, or some important associate of theirs is a kickboxing fan. It wasn’t so much an articulate prayer of words as much as a mash of thoughts and emotions nailed together with anxious hope.

“Amen,” I say as they remove their hands. Then Jacob stands up, straightens his shoulders, and starts shadowboxing in front of a chipped mirror. He turns away from the mirror and keeps punching, light and fast, at the bare, black wall. I notice that the floor is sticky and that Jacob isn’t wearing shoes. I hope there’s no broken glass on top of the various spills.

“Pelton,” calls the bouncer from outside the door. “You’re up.”

Outside the warm-up room, the club looks more glamorous. Earlier we saw the fight being advertised on the large marquee out front. The cheapest tickets were \$50. Jacob is the first fight of the night—the audience is still noncommittal at this point, moving between buying drinks and trying to find their seats. I wondered what the crowd at a fight would look like, but mostly they look the same as you would get at a Jazz game—a lot of middle-aged guys in khakis and polo shirts.

The ring is in the center of the venue, with chairs rippling out from the expensive seats up front to bleachers lining the perimeter. There are big-screen TVs in both corners. The announcer, a cameraman, and the judges sit ringside. Take everything out, and the space has the look and feel of a dance ballroom. Jacob’s opponent is waiting for him in the red corner. His name is Gomez, and

he's huge. The program says he's two inches taller than Jacob and thirty pounds heavier, but he looks much larger up-close.

Jacob climbs into his corner and waits. He jumps around, looking a little lethargic. The ref asks if he's ready. He says yes.

Two minutes later, the announcer yells: "In the blue corner, fighting out of Salt Lake City, Utah: Jacob 'The Bruiser' Pelton!" I didn't know that was Jacob's fighting name and made a fast vow to help him find a new one if he lived. The audience is still indecisive. The announcer suggests they take their seats. It's the first fight of the night; and besides the cash, the winner is awarded only the potential right to be an injury replacement in the later tournament fights.

After hitting sportsmanship fists with Gomez in the center, Jacob turns around, looks back at us. The freaky crocodile grin from a mouth that hadn't expressed much of anything all day gives no hint that he shares the nervousness I'm feeling for him.

"You ready?" his trainer asks, pinching his mouthpiece.

"Yeah," Jacob says, and he looks like he is holding back laughter.

The fight is supposed to go three rounds. If there's no TKO along the way, the winner will be determined by the judges' decision. "Only three?" I'd asked Jacob earlier. "Someone gets knocked out before three almost every time," he said.

As the bell rings, Jacob starts out defensive, mostly knocking down Gomez's midsection kicks. Gomez's legs are thicker than the young poplar trees in my mom's yard, and every time his foot connects with Jacob's hand there is a sharp, slapping sound. Kylie finds her way back, asks, "How's he doing?" I say, "I don't know." Ringside, I shift my weight with every punch and kick, keep my eyes on the clashing bodies. I watch as though, if I look close enough, I can absorb the movements Jacob is using. There is something volcanic about the way he moves, not the way he was dormant a minute ago in the dressing room and now might erupt, but that there are signs of the pressure gathering. Throughout the first round, Gomez doesn't land a clean blow, while Jacob lands several kicks to Gomez's stomach and left thigh.

In the second round, Jacob goes straight for Gomez, quickly deflecting a punch then kicking him in the ribs, chasing him

across the ring. He seems to anticipate all of Gomez's moves in that round and knocks him down at the very end. Gomez picks himself up slowly before the bell rings and moves to his corner for the final round. Gomez lands a few punches, but by now he is so battered that they don't seem to have any power. Jacob is landing rhythmic blows to Gomez's exhausted face. Finally Gomez falls over again. This time he doesn't get up. Kylie hugs me around the waist as the bell rings, and I can feel tension leave her body and mine, too.

After the fight, Jacob says he could go ten more rounds, and I believe him. Watching him doesn't make me want to be a fighter—I don't have the body for it, and I know Jacob has been training for years—but it does make me want to feel whatever surge gave Jacob his energy, to switch from being unable to control my body to moving it as fast and naturally as a river of water.

* * *

I am back in Pleasant Grove and back in church. The sacrament has been passed. This week the main speaker is a recently returned missionary who served in New York. I turn my head to look at the clock every minute and swear that the big hand is moving backwards. "Well played, God." I try to read the hymn book for a while, and then something the missionary says catches my attention.

"Even though I think these members had good intentions, I think it is important to remember that where we choose to put ourselves does make a difference. While it might seem okay to go to bars as long as you aren't drinking, or to be in a casino as long as you aren't gambling, ask yourself: do you think the Spirit is waiting for you there? In D&C 87 the Lord counsels us: 'Stand ye in holy places . . .'" I think about the smoky club of Jacob's fight.

"Temples and churches are holy—even our homes should be holy," the missionary says.

This is where he loses me. The answer is church? That gets you three hours a week. What am I supposed to do when I'm not in church, just stay at home all day praying and hope it's holy enough? I start to wonder about my holy places, where they are, and how I can find them. I don't feel any different on the days I take the sacrament compared to the days I don't. I want some-

thing like a scar, something to show that I'm here and that I'm doing something. I start to wonder if bread and water can ever stand in for body and blood.

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It's summer, and though it's too hot to move outside in the day, it's warm all night, so we've been fighting later and later. By 11:00 P.M., Pleasant Grove is almost as quiet as the desert. The streetlights every few blocks seem to glimmer more slowly than usual, like the wandering spectators at Jacob's fight, bored and waiting for something to happen. In between the streetlights, I can see dark blue slash across darker sky, can see the stars as I walk to Anderson Park. The cool night air makes it impossible to remember how brutal it will feel twelve hours later when the sun comes up swinging and keeps swinging all day long.

Though I shudder a little bit to catch myself thinking this way, tonight the city is sparkling, all the way from the stars to the grates in the gutters. I decide I'll suggest we try some kickboxing. A little cheap, I guess, since it's new to everyone else, but I don't care.

When I get there, I ask Lane right away if he wants to throw in a little kicking action. He cocks his head to the side as though considering all arguments and says, "Sure, why not?"

We put on the gloves and face each other. I make a promise to myself that if I lose to him now, I will walk in front of traffic on the way home, then remember that the only traffic I saw walking up here was two girls on a scooter, but still, I tell myself, "Just don't lose."

We start out slow. He is smiling as usual, throwing a few play jabs my way. I wait. Then he does a little bit of a kick with his right leg, just to get a feel for it. He nods as though satisfied with a new menu choice. I move a little closer, act like I am going to punch him, then wait. Finally, he tries to hit me in the side of the head. I block it with my left hand and kick him in the stomach. The kick surprises him and he leans over a little bit. He tries to retaliate with a kick near my hip, but it bounces off and seems to hurt him more than me. He is short of breath. This is it. I punch him in the mouth as fast as I can. Then I try another kick. I'm out of form now, just swinging. I throw a fist for every huge house on the mountain, and I throw them as desperately as I want to get out of

my beige and undemanding life forever. I am not strong, but I am thorough. Someone pulls me off. Everyone gathers around Lane and glares at me. Someone asks, "Dude, what the hell?" I don't even turn back to see the damage. I just walk out of the park and all the way home.

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It's a Saturday evening in August. The sunlight is down to its last traces, orange behind the mountains. Well-prepared drivers are starting to switch on their headlights. Jacob and Kylie are already in Salt Lake, so I borrow my mom's white Astro van and say I have to work until midnight at the grocery store tonight. She says just bring it back as soon as you can. Somewhere around the freeway entrance, I feel a little bit of ambivalence about lying to her, and I remember that I'll have to wake up in the morning to join her and the rest of my family for church. But instead of turning around, I turn up the music and pound my palms on the steering wheel all fifty miles north to Salt Lake City.

I take the 600 South exit off I-15 and meet up with Jacob and Kylie at a vegetarian restaurant near the club.

"Hey, there he is," Jacob says as I sit down. "So, you stoked?"

"Don't be stoked," Kylie says. "Don't do anything stupid. Don't get in any fights. Don't be sucked into the performance."

"Come on, lighten up, Ky," Jacob says. "After all, which experiences do you think you're going to remember when you're ninety and in a diaper?"

He looks at both of us. I honestly don't know the answer to that question.

After we finish eating, we move up the street to the club where black-haired kids are already waiting in line for the show. Three bands are playing: Bane, Poison the Well, and Hatebreed. By now I am used to seeing the kids in black bandanas, with graceful cursive tattoos on their bodies, and X's taped to or written on their hands. I look up and down the line and try to determine which of these people I could beat in a fight if it came down to it.

The doors open soon, and more waves of black-haired kids materialize. We flow in with everyone else. Kylie goes straight to her usual spot at the bottom of the stairs that go up to where you can order drinks. It's a good spot because it's private, and you can

climb two stairs and see what's happening on the floor and stage. The music has started by the time we get there, and I see bodies flying around as though propelled by the sound of the guitar. By now I've seen my share of spontaneous fights at shows, and I expect them. These were different than Jacob's fights, as he told me while we hit the punching bag in Kylie's garage. Different strategy, he said, but for me the main difference was that it wasn't bulky guys who drank Muscle Milk fighting in a ring but skinny dudes like me in a corridor, or on the stairs. So far I'd stayed comfortable in the margins, unaffected except as an observer, but I am ready for that to end tonight. I feel confident after the Lane fight and want to put my adrenaline to good use.

Bane and Poison the Well play their sets without much happening in the crowd—fists fly in the pit, a few people call each other out, nothing really comes of it—but the place is vibrating. And two songs into Hatebreed's set, I see a group of four kids start to attack two others like piranhas. That starts it. To my right someone tries to climb the railing but is pulled back by fingernails that leave his shoulders and back bleeding. To my left someone takes a knee to the face. The movements look choreographed and electric, sort of poetic in a head-torn-from-the-shoulders sense, an observation that's easier to make from the stairs, with your teeth in place.

Kylie pushes us toward the exit. We are fighting our way through when a metal bar stool ricochets off the wall and stings me in the neck. Another guy knocks Jacob into the wall. It may be an accident, but Jacob says, "Come over here. I'm going to crack your spine like an ice tray." My first reaction is to ask Jacob how long he's been planning to say that.

Even though I have been waiting for a fight all night, the desire is wavering now that fists and bodies are all around me. I know that Jacob will probably win whatever fight he walks into, so I just follow him and act like I have his back.

Then Jacob and I are face to face with three other guys in the corner opposite the exit, elevated above the pit. I can't tell if they know each other or just happen to be standing next to each other. One of them is the guy who pushed Jacob into the wall, so Jacob goes after him. The one to the right looks just like me—thin, tall. He

doesn't seem to know his next move. That takes the nervousness out of my bones. I hit him in the face—a graceless, rookie jab in that flat area to the left side of the mouth that always makes people fall over with no blood in movie fights. He doesn't fall or bleed, but the punch otherwise feels good. He looks surprised. I move fast to his left as if I am going to move out of the picture, and then hit him again on the side of his face. And then again, with my elbow.

Someone grabs my shoulders and throws me into the wall. I hear my shoulder blades collide with brick. Then someone yells, "Cops!" and instead of getting my ass kicked, I'm the first body shoved out of the way as my assailant moves for the exit.

I look back at the guy I punched. He puts his hand to his mouth, which is bleeding, and then to his eye. His contact pops out. It's sitting on his blood-smeared hand like Charon's boat on the River Styx. I start to wonder if he even knew the guy Jacob was fighting.

Jacob pushes me through the corridor and out the door. Kylie is already out there. Police cars are lining the side of the street all the way down the block. Broken triangles of glass reflect the streetlights on the sidewalk. I bend down to pick up a piece. It's sharper than I expected and slices into my index finger a little bit. I wipe the blood on my hoodie and put the triangle of glass in my pocket. The point cuts my palm as I let go. I can't tell if it broke skin, but I taste blood when I lift my hand to my mouth to see.

We walk up the street as if we are bystanders who happen to be walking by. Jacob tells me I need to be ready to move in case someone approaches, and I am.