

# REVENANT

# A DEGENERATE MODEL FOR LIVING



STORIES by MARK PLASMA

ILLUSTRATIONS by KNOX 2021



**REVENANT**

**+**

**A DEGENERATE  
MODEL FOR LIVING**

**TWO SHORT PIECES  
BY MARK PLASMA  
WITH ART BY KNOX**



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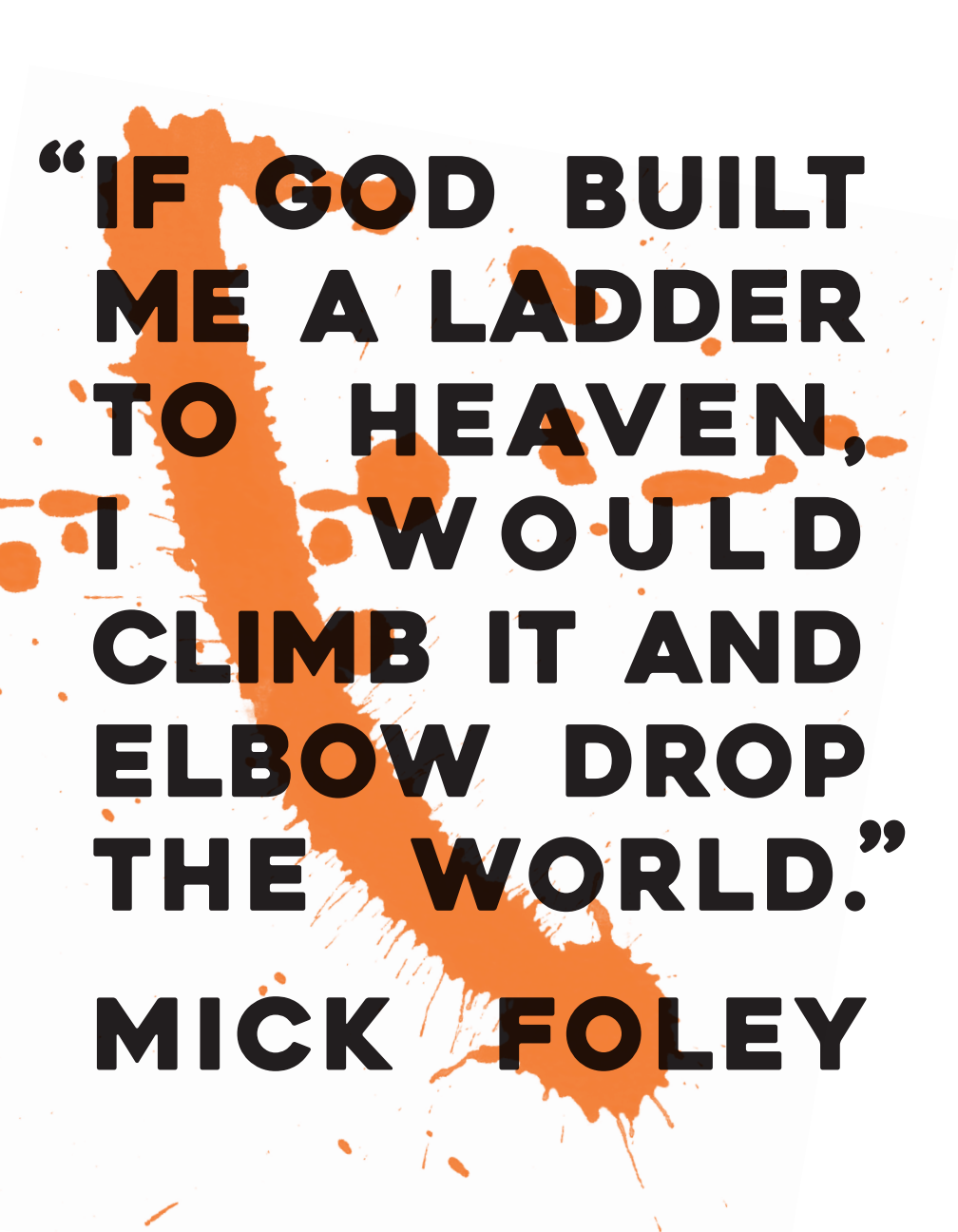
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The background of the image is white, featuring a large, vertical, irregular splatter of bright orange paint that runs down the center. Smaller, scattered splatters of the same orange color are visible around the main one. The text is overlaid on this background.


**“IF GOD BUILT  
ME A LADDER  
TO HEAVEN,  
I WOULD  
CLIMB IT AND  
ELBOW DROP  
THE WORLD.”**

**MICK FOLEY**



The background is white with various orange splatters and spots of varying sizes and shapes scattered across it. The word "REVENANT" is centered in a bold, black, sans-serif font.

**REVENANT**

The text is centered on a white background and is surrounded by several orange paint splatters of varying sizes and shapes, some overlapping the text.

**LISTEN, MAN:  
APOLLO JIM FOWLES,  
SIX-TIME CON-  
TENDER FOR THE  
UCWF WORLD'S  
HEAVYWEIGHT  
CHAMPIONSHIP,  
GOT OVER FROM HIS  
VERY FIRST MATCH.  
UNFORTUNATELY  
HE WAS A SIX-  
TIME LOSER, TOO.**



Us old marks remember his run from the late eighties through the mid-nineties even if no one else will. Toward the end the crowds got older, meaner, and drunker, cheering trash-talking antiheroes on to victory after bloody victory. Long-haired golden boy Apollo Jim—old school, family friendly, built like fucking Flash Gordon on steroids—didn't stand a snowball's chance in hell, even if some of us were still screaming his name til the bitter end. After losing his sixth and final championship match to Dee Zaster, Apollo Jim disappeared from the ring for good. Retired young, they said, while he still had his health. Sunset Sunday, they called it—the final nail in the coffin of the Golden Age.

At the next pay-per-view the UCWF rolled out a new, mysterious stable: The Riders. No one knew their real names. The official line was they'd been summoned right out of Hell by the Commissioner himself to punish the brash, anti-authority babyfaces and bring balance to the upper card. The brothers Red War and Famine terrorized the tag circuit in long robes and full-face masks, stalking reigning champs Thee Gnarly Boyz like twin shadows. The Pest—that skinny albino babe, clad entirely in filthy white denim—started picking off the weaklings of the women's division, moving up the rankings like an infestation. Their leader, though, the heavyweight? He was something else, let me tell you.

The Reaper was the scariest goddamn son of a bitch you'd ever seen. A skull-faced titan, seven feet tall if he was an inch, musculature hacked out of granite. When the announcer called out his name the lights would dim and fog would roll out from the entryway. He'd stride slowly down the ramp, shrouded in black satin and brandishing his scythe while thunderclaps rolled over the loudspeakers. The spectators would scream and boo—that is, until he met their stares with his blazing eye. By the time he stepped through the ropes the crowd would be dead silent—I'm not shitting you. I saw him live once and it was like no one could make a sound even if they wanted to. That's how scary he was. He'd stand there for what felt like hours, soaking up the silence. Sometimes he'd croak just a few words before he threw his robe to the platform and square up, all pale and massive.

What words? They changed from time to time. But when I saw him all he said was, "None shall escape."



To be real with you for a minute, anyone older than ten knew it was Jim Fowles behind the skull paint. Shave his head, skip the tanning beds, whatever; in a business built on giants, Jim stood head and shoulders above the rest, and you just can't hide that in plain sight. But a great worker's great no matter

the gimmick. That's the way it goes: a wrestler's gotta change with the times. Reinvent himself and push on, or retire and get his realtor's license, some shit like that. And as much as I loved him as a babyface, turned heel he was un-fucking-de-niable. Apollo Jim might've gone for the title a half-dozen times—and worked some all-time great matches in the process—but the Reaper took the belt his first try and kept it for a solid year and half, stomping a mudhole in every fool who tried to take it from him. Dozens tapped out to Death's Grip, the ugliest chokehold I've ever seen and to this day one of the most protected finishes in all of pro wrestling. For a while there the Riders were untouchable. It was a terrible, beautiful thing.

Eventually Reap dropped the belt to a hot-shotted cruiser-weight with a posse, and that guy ended up losing it to some stunt-booked celebrity a couple months later. Red War and Famine got squashed out of the tag titles and the Pest got tied up in a dumb fucking romance angle with a big Russian dude. Man, UCWF booking really went downhill. After a year twiddling their thumbs in the midcard the Riders got retooled as some kinda biker gang, trading in the shrouds and scythes for leathers and bandanas. It popped for a minute, even got the Reaper another title program—one he didn't win. Eventually they fell back down the card and after a while just vanished.

The UCWF lost the ratings war and folded not long after. Can't help but wonder what might've been.

Reaper and the Riders didn't quit the business, but they went their separate ways, turning up in some of the bigger indies for brief stints. Reap worked a few Japanese death matches, held three or four regional heavyweight titles for a while, tagged with some young up-and-comers. It was fun to see him out there just wrestling—he was so good in the ring he didn't need a stable or storyline to draw decent money. But it's tough to play the ageless face of fear while the cartilage in your knees deteriorates and your shoulders ache. You take the bookings as they come, step down from arenas into flea markets and VFW halls, stand quietly next to stacks of t-shirts and eight-by-tens while the fans flock to some slick kid's table for photos.

I don't know how it happened, but eventually Reaper ended up training rookies at the local promotion—NCW, of all fucking places. He still comes out for matches here and there. It's good to see him but it's sad, too, knowing what he used to be, watching him on TV every week. Now he's furniture. I talked to him a couple times and I never met a nicer, quieter dude. I'd love to see him make another go at it. I can see it in his eyes sometimes: this year could be the one. The one where he drags himself back into the spotlight; the one where he gets to win some main event matches clean, without any low blows or

surprise chairs across the back; the one where maybe he could build a life for himself outside of the sweaty, staph-infested locker room. Anything but training younger, stronger wrestlers—his replacements, fodder for the machine. Anything but sitting ringside, providing color commentary as his skin greys. He can bump for another few years. Against his doctor's advice, maybe, but he can do it. I know he can.



Saturday night's NCW show was a wild one. Started off just like always with the meat-and-potatoes shit, some new guys making their debuts and comedy matches to pop the kids. But there were some real solid spots, too. Big Boy Jimmy Lee straight-up squashed this new kid, then Tyler Hendrix took on Brandon Irish in a street fight and beat his ass to pieces. The triple threat women's match between Alecto, Megaera, and Tisiphone—the recently-split Furies—hit way harder than anyone would've expected, a brutal fifteen-minute slobberknocker ended with Meg tapping out to Alecto's new Deathlock submission. I actually love those lowcard matches, even when they're nowhere near the title scene. The road is wide fucking open and we get to see who's getting the crowd on their side, maybe revving up for a bigger push. Maybe some of them get called up to the big leagues eventually. I like being there from the beginning.

The main event, though—that’s what we paid for. LANCE (seriously, dude spells his name in all caps) versus the Hunter. They’d been building up to it for months, the pretty boy’s victory streak marred only by the Hunter’s run-ins and interruptions. You know how it goes: LANCE hoists the belt over his head after yet another decisive defense. The lights shut off and the crowd’s excited shouts mix with animal noises over the loudspeakers—birds screeching, bears growling, a lion’s roar. The Hunter’s on the prowl. Predatory eyes flash across the screens and deep chuckles turn into words: *That pretty head sure will look nice above the fireplace in my lodge, boy.* They’d been doing it for months but the crowd still popped for it every time. And it all built up to this match, the one where we’d all finally find out whether the Hunter could make good on his threats. I had my doubts.

LANCE entered the arena to his usual power metal theme. Looked like David Bowie in *The Labyrinth* or some shit, glammed up in silver eyeshadow and a matching cape that brushed the floor. He strutted down the ramp while dragons flew across the big screen and fire erupted on either side of him, showers of colored sparks fizzling and popping. I guess since the NCW crowds started growing they had some cash to spend on pyro. The fans threw piles of roses at LANCE’s silvery high-heeled boots and before he climbed into the ring he bent

to scoop one up, holding it delicately between thumb and forefinger as he smelled it. He stepped his long legs through the ropes and blew kisses to his adoring fans until the righteous guitar solo hit its climax and he threw his cape into the air. I don't even really go for that shit normally but I gotta tell you it was pretty cool. That handsome motherfucker sure knows how to make an entrance.

But right on cue, the whole arena went dark and a low laugh rumbled out from the sound system. *You may have pinned me at Summer Showdown, but this time...none shall escape.* The lights came back on and the crowd gasped at the Hunter crouched in the ring, wrapped in a wolf's pelt, longbow at his side and a quiver of black-fletched arrows slung across his back. LANCE fell into a swoon before catching himself on a turnbuckle, face fear-stricken. The Hunter rose and started a slow pace around the ring, approaching the rock god like he was some kind of mythical prey. He took the mic from the ring announcer, not even blinking.

“No running, no hiding, LANCE,” he said, calm and low. “This time I’ve brought a little help in case you try to bolt.”

Only then I noticed something at the side of the platform—a long, dark box with silver hardware. A goddamn coffin, and a big one. Neither The Hunter nor LANCE had yet acknowledged

it, but I was already buzzing. It'd been years since I'd seen anyone put on a coffin match, where the only way to win was to throw your opponent into the box and nail the lid shut while they tried to muscle their way out. I'll give you one fucking guess as to who ruled those matches back in the UCWF days.

The Hunter gestured toward the ringside coffin as a spotlight zeroed in on it. The crowd started to murmur. A slow thump began to sound, quiet as a heartbeat at first, then thrumming louder and louder. LANCE cowered wild-eyed in his corner, hands covering his ears. I could see the hinged rails of the coffin vibrate in time with the steady, growing rhythm as The Hunter spoke his menacing piece.

“You’re youthful, LANCE. Lean muscle and limber tendon. I can see the luster of your mane even through all that hair-spray. You’re young, yes. You’re young. And that’s how I want you, full of vim and vigor. But I’m getting older. I know you’re scared of me, but I’m getting older. I know what it’s like to feel the toll of gravity, the strain of living. But I know, too, that Death is on my side. We’ve walked the hunting grounds together for many years. And he’s with me here tonight. Meet my enforcer—the Reaper.”

When The Hunter spoke his name the coffin lid swung open. The crowd gasped on cue. From the dark velvet interior, the



shrouded figure rose—so slowly, so fucking deliberately, the most excruciating sit-up I've ever seen. The Reaper climbed out of the coffin like all his bulk was nothing and entered the ring, standing silent in his cloak. A couple kids screamed. LANCE rose from his coward's crouch, though, shoulders thrown way back and head held high. The Hunter started to speak again, but LANCE interrupted him with a loud, slow clap, followed by haughty laughter. He strode across the ring and poked a long, ringed finger into The Hunter's chest.

“This is it, Hunter? You bring me an old man in a coffin and expect me to just give up?” I'll tell you, I snorted into my beer at that. LANCE had a point—I'd fucking loved Reaper since the Riders first reared their ugly heads, but he hadn't won a significant match in years. Sure did cut an imposing figure in the ring, though. Seemed like that silvery fop wouldn't even look at him for fear of making him more than a figment. I guess he didn't dare imagine he'd end up nailed inside a coffin at the end of the match, or that it'd be ol' Reap swinging the fucking hammer.



Somehow, the Reaper's back, and in fine form. That coffin match hit the internet like a neutron bomb and to NCW's credit they fucking capitalized, getting some decent cameras and live-streaming every show, posting promos and training

videos in between to keep the hype train rolling. They managed to get an ex-UCWF guy on commentary and the crowds just exploded. I'm telling you, man, now's the time to come. It's great.

I'd have never thought we'd see the Reaper get in the ring for a title match, not on this side of the decade, anyway. But he's had a hell of a year, crawling up the rankings with the steady determination of a man with a fire at his back, traversing a rain-slick precipice of sheer fucking darkness. And here we are, the last big show of the year, and he's in the main event.

He does the whole entrance, with the shroud and the thunder-claps and everything, but this time he rides in—that's right, *rides in*—on a real fucking horse. And it's not just him, either; they brought Red War and Famine and even the Pest in there to escort him, an honor guard from the end of the world riding out of the thickest fog I'd ever seen. They come down the entry-way, slow as death, ol' Reap holding that scythe out like a goddamn battle flag. I smell the fear coming off all these kids who don't know what a *real* wrestler looks like. I cheer him on until the very moment they step into the ring—all four of them—and stand there, looking out at the quiet crowd.

The Reaper takes the mic like he used to. You can't barely see it in that cinder block of a fist. As big as he ever was, maybe

bigger, and even though he must be pushing fifty you wouldn't be able to tell it. Over the course of his comeback he's taken to wearing a lucha-style mask emblazoned with a grinning death's head in place of the old paint. The eyeholes are nice and big, though, and you can still catch the glint; that old craziness, that fire—it's still burning. And he lifts that little microphone to his mouth, raises his scythe into the air, and utters words I'll never fucking forget, his voice low and gravelled like a dumptruck rolling over the rumble strip.

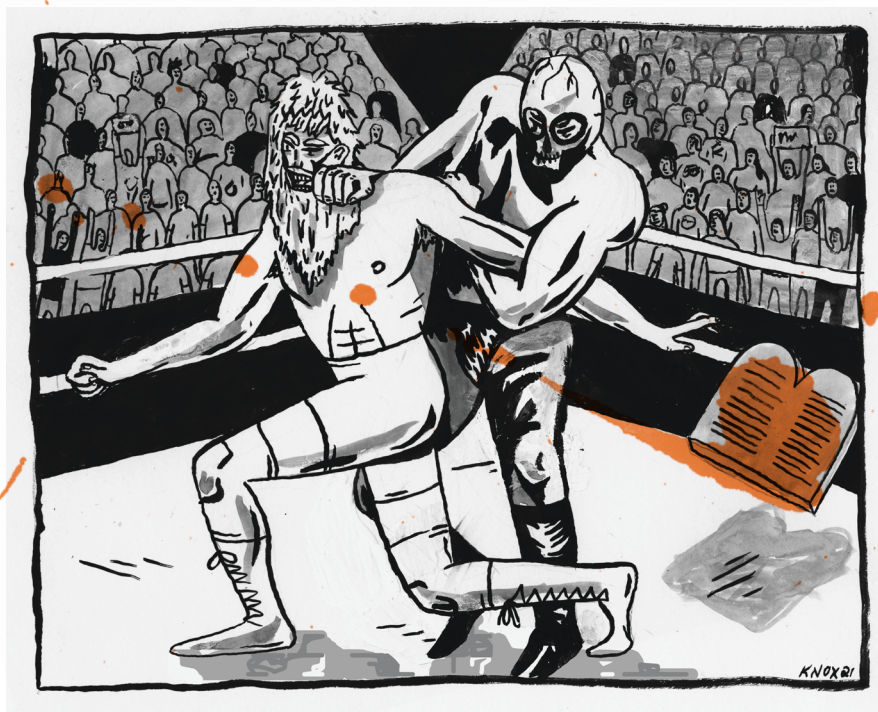
"This is the end. This is the beginning," he says. Holy shit, right? The most anyone ever heard from that ossified maw. When he finishes speaking he throws his fist into the air, too, and that crowd flips right the fuck out, booing and cheering and screaming and hollering like they don't know what just hit them. The Pest tears around the ring, middle fingers blazing, getting them even more riled. It's been years since she was on the circuit and I won't tell you it doesn't show. She still fits into her old denim, though, and she eats up every bit of noise the crowd throws her way. She circles back to Reap and takes the scythe from him, hefting it above her head while the crowd starts up the classic Death Chant—*REE-PER, REE-PER* rolling like waves. The twins flank the Reaper, each grabbing a sleeve, and pull the robe off him, exposing his dust-white torso.

Now the reigning champ is Billy Moses, sometimes called the Promised Man, and he's got more fans than God. The crowd might have freaked out when the Reaper said his piece, but Moses is another thing entirely. Triumphant orchestral music blares over the loudspeakers, and a burning bush appears on the big screen. Before the announcer even says his name, a shit load of his fans jump the railings and flood the entryway, waving their signs and shoving their faces into the cameras. But when they finally say his name and he walks out, the marks part like the Red fucking Sea.

Honestly, I thought the Reaper's entrance was better. I mean, he didn't get the same kind of fan response, but NCW really pulled out all the stops for him. I guess he hasn't even come close to competing for a belt in years; he deserved every god-forsaken ounce of theatre they showered upon him.

Anyway, Billy Moses climbs into the ring. He plays up this whole savior gimmick, but I don't really get it. He's just a long-haired beardo in the same plain shorts and pads as everyone else, but his are bright white. So he gets the mic and gives this whole spiel about being Chosen, about his inevitable victory over Death. The Reaper stands in his corner, the Riders leering behind, and glowers at him. Those eyes could've set a real fucking bush on fire, I tell you what. Moses finishes his goddamn novel of a promo and the match ensues without so much as a handshake.

The whole fucking thing is insane, all high-flying elbow drops and spectacular body slams. Seems like neither one of them can miss, both of them bouncing off the mat over and over. I've never seen such an even match; the Reaper surprisingly agile for such a monster, the downright scrawny-by-comparison Moses strong enough to lift him up and put him down—hard. Three minutes in and they put every other wrestler in the whole goddamn region to shame. But after a brutal knee to the face Reap starts to flag out. He's got fifteen years



on Moses, easy, maybe twenty, and even though he's still in it I can tell his chops aren't hitting quite so hard.

Moses throws a clumsy double axe handle and the Reaper takes advantage, grabbing the Promised Man's arms and whipping him toward the ropes. Moses bounces back quick and uses the momentum to get across the ring, ducking one of Reap's granite clotheslines in the process. He bounces off the ropes again and spears Reaper hard as anything. They both go down and Moses covers Reaper for a two-count before the big man kicks out.

Normally this is the point where the heel turns up the heat, forcing the babyface to fend off all manner of holds and slams. Sometimes they get tossed right out of the ring and into a table or something—real hardcore shit, you know? And the Reaper gives as good as he gets, but after two more near falls it's obvious he's worn the fuck out. Breathing hard, stumbling, clutching the ropes. Billy Moses just goes to town on him and I'm on my feet shouting like a fucking lunatic. Just ain't right, a fight turned one-sided so quickly. The fans feel it, too, and they start up the Death Chant again in an attempt to lend their strength to the fading ghost. But even that seems to do more harm than good; Reap's eyes roll back up into his head and he sinks to his knees. Moses takes the opportunity to hop around the ring, soaking up the adoration of his own fans while the ref

steps in, shaking that crumbling colossus by his shoulder and speaking something unheard into his ear.

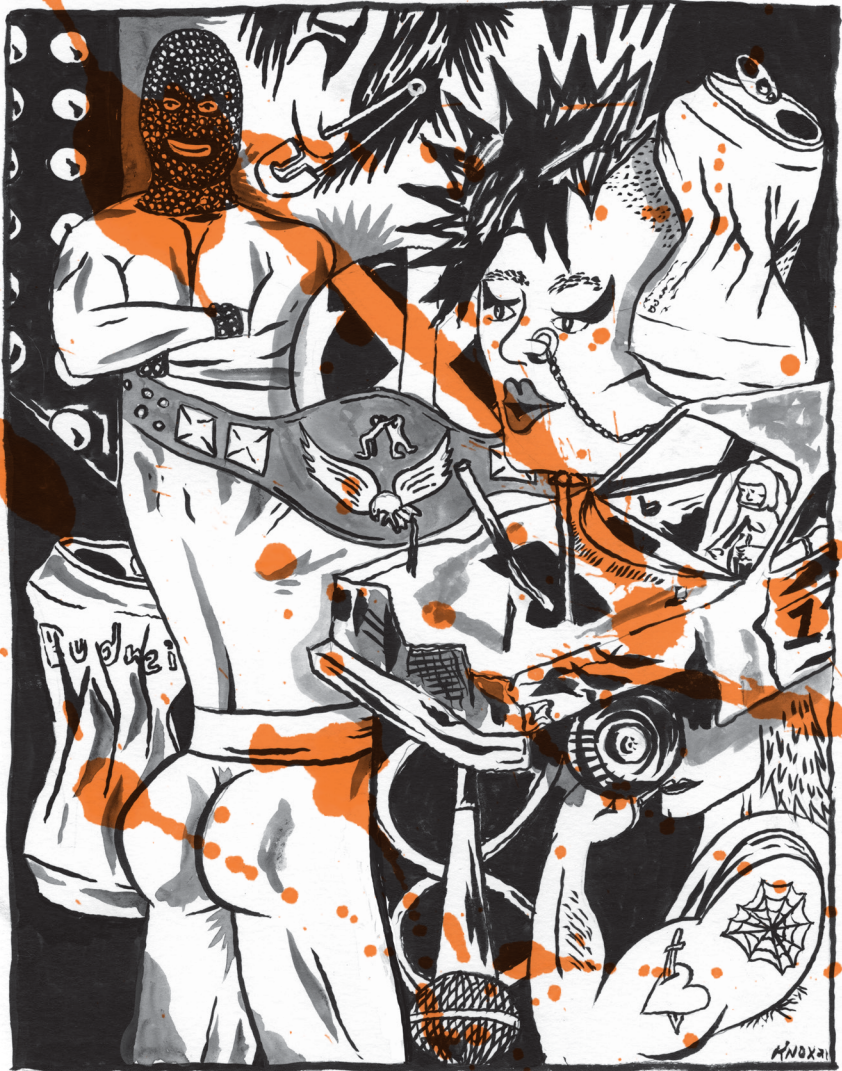
The Riders appear in a flash, slithering through the ropes to surround their leader, pushing the ref away as they cover the Reaper with his black shroud. I can't tell what's happening. The crowd's all shouting for blood—either Reaper's or Moses' or both—and security has to keep them from storming the ring. But then, just when it seems like they're going to have to ring the bell and let Billy Moses keep the gold, the lights change. Everything goes dark except for a single spotlight shining down on the Riders. The crowd goes quiet and just watches as the cloaked behemoth rises, ever so fucking slowly, and his entourage vanishes like smoke. He's completely covered, just a black mass in the center of the ring. Then he throws off the cloak.

Pyrotechnics ignite at all four corners of the platform and every light in the arena comes on at once. Smoke and streamers fill the air to the strains of deep, joyous laughter. When the smoke clears, we see a god resurrected in the ring: no longer the Reaper, he's Apollo fucking Jim again, beaming and glistening in his red trunks, regrown hair just as golden as ever. Such a miraculous fucking turn has never happened and will never happen again.

Of course the crowd entirely loses its collective shit and Apollo Jim quickly dispatches the pretender Billy Moses with a dazzling combo culminating in the finest fisherman suplex to ever grace the squared circle. I won't tell you I didn't shed a tear when Apollo Jim lifted the strap above his head, twenty fucking years after his complete and utter disappearance. I'm telling you, this is a new Golden Age. I can't believe you didn't watch it for yourself.









**A DEGENERATE  
MODEL FOR LIVING**

The background of the image is white, decorated with numerous orange splatters and stains of varying sizes and shapes, creating a punk rock aesthetic. The text is centered and written in a bold, black, sans-serif font.

**THIRTY YEARS OLD,  
MARRIED, NEAR-  
LY A YEAR OUT OF  
GRAD SCHOOL,  
STILL WORK-  
ING A JOB YOU  
HATE BUT CAN'T  
SEEM TO LEAVE.  
IN FOUR MONTHS  
YOUR PUNK  
BAND WILL SPLIT.**

A flea market in Harford County, a wrestling show. Your first. Holler and heckle and eat cheap pizza. Soak up the excitement of low culture for an afternoon.

Two weeks later, your thirty-first birthday. The gym of a decommissioned high school with your wife and two trashiest friends, all wearing cowboy hats at your behest. Mick Foley, hardcore legend, sits at a folding table by the door. Later he gets in the ring, congratulates a local wrestler on his engagement, and stuffs a sock puppet into an obnoxious manager's mouth.

You haven't gone out of town to see a band in forever, but you'll travel for wrestling. By the end of the year you've flown to Florida, been to a TV taping, sat on the floor at a pay-per-view. Every local show, even the bad ones. Especially the bad ones.

Once the band splits nothing really materializes in its place. You're still involved: semi-active side projects, basement recordings, running sound for a DIY space. But the fire's out. Music becomes a chore, an obligation to sit through sets by bands you don't care about, with breaks to yell at the people who take their beers outside. You don't even listen to new records for a long time. Console yourself by projecting Japanese wrestling matches on a screen above the performers.

You turn everything you like into a job. Music, writing, theater—it all becomes a slog, an immovable object that might pay off if you just bang your head against it for long enough. You were never good enough at music to take it so seriously, to want something more than ecstatic experiences with people you love. A fun, simple, beautiful thing turned into unpaid labor. You've heard about scene tourists but never about the folks who come in on work visas.

You turn everything you like into a job—except for wrestling. You love knowing it isn't real and believing it anyway—groaning when the chop hits hard, holding your breath when they wobble on the top rope, predicting and being proven wrong. Everything's safe until the botch happens, the bone breaks, the concussion comes down like rain. Potential pain draws you in and pushes you away over and over again, waves crashing over bodies locked in something like an embrace.

For all its studied machismo, wrestling is itself an act of rebellion against the masculine fight-fight-fight, inserting care into combat, a never-ending trust fall. Collision as an act of transgression. Mick Foley penetrated by barbed wire, bludgeoned and beaten by a man he respects and trusts. All the misogyny and bluster of the Attitude Era an overcompensation for wrestling's core homoerotic reality. Punk undergoes the same swings, from meathead hardcore to wimpy bubblegum. The

truly great bands contain something of both—aggression and energy coupled with vulnerability and humor.

You love the dumb, the violent, the low. Demolition derbies and death matches. Not because it's purer or better than the smart and peaceful, but because you contain both. You habitually suppress the things that connect you to your body and to the bodies around you, embracing instead the intellect, the ideal, the principle that exists in the ether. You overanalyze the political, social, and spiritual meanings of any given action, but real change happens where the rubber meets the road, the lariat collides with clavicle. The body is the body, but the body is the mind, too. This isn't a video game: the car you drive is real.

Wrestling can be an act of defiance, a willful step into degeneracy in service of creating something meaningful. It embodies something of the gothic: understanding the world you see as mere skin, the grotesque conflagration of bodies a window into a deeper reality. Degenerate in the mode of DEVO's de-evolution, regression into base humanity as a means of better understanding modern life.

Degeneracy can mean worldliness, tolerance, relativism, inappropriateness, lack of manners, transgression, uncouthness, lack of education, lack of adherence to sexual mores, refusal of the mainstream, regression to a more primitive state.

Privileging the body and the spirit over the intellect. Humor, lack of self-seriousness, puerile behavior. Lewdness. Almost always a descriptor applied by one group to undermine or vilify another. But it doesn't have to be.

The Nazis were gallerists, their Degenerate Art Exhibition intended to showcase the grotesque, the un-German, the creative bankruptcy of modernism. They hung pieces haphazardly with derisive accompanying text. And you can't help but think those shows must have been so fucking good. You can hold bad ideas up to the light to show everyone how bad they are, but more often than not you like the bad idea better. You seek the unrefined, the nontraditional. You want to see the cracks in consensus reality, to push toward the alien, even at its most mundane. Book and record burnings, rejection of art & music education, state-mandated aesthetic: these are all fascist moves toward presenting and preserving a single version of a culture. Degenerates dismantle the monolith.

Flannery O'Connor sought religious truth and empathy for outsiders in her work. She wrote with some dismay about being lumped into The School of Southern Degeneracy—less a defined movement than an external signifier for southern writers delving into the grotesque, hidden, strange elements of life. Read as sensational or unrealistic by northern elites, but also taken seriously as proof of southern inferiority. Despite her



resistance to the label, O'Connor knew what you know: degeneracy isn't a cage, but a door—albeit one opening onto a world far less safe than the one you live in day-to-day. Grace comes only through great hardship. There's a wildness to that kind of belief, an existential terror that can only be embraced.

Degenerate art—Good Art—actively refutes classist assessments of value and meaning, appropriateness and acceptability, gender and sexuality. None of it attains perfection, all of it has problems. But there's always something at the root that embraces aggression and transgression along with care and community. Finding that throughline connects you to your own creativity, spirit, and body. You don't always live authentically, but you're starting to understand how you might.

Wrestling and punk have different relationships with authenticity. As a fictive spectacle, wrestling exploits the audience's knowledge in the difference between the work and the real. The “true, authentic self” ends up somewhere in the middle of the wrestler, their character, and how the audience understands both. Authenticity isn't internal, but projected externally.

Chasing authenticity in punk creates its own bizarre artifice, a pretension of class or DIYness or not-giving-a-fuckness. Punk is aesthetic and ethic, but so often punks aestheticize ethics—a double-edged sword. The aesthetic draws new

adherents to the ethic; excited by the aesthetic, they end up learning more about DIY or anarchism or straightedge. But this can also hollow out the activity of the ethic, leaving only an aesthetic veneer—hence the prevalence of abusers with scene cred, cancellation instead of restorative justice, cliques instead of communities. You can look cool and still be a good person, but don't mistake your spikes and politics for kindness. And don't mistake the persona for authenticity.

Wrestling approaches the sublime in its simplicity, its stupidity, its clear dedication to artifice. It actively counters all efforts to take it too seriously. You never understood punk's stupidity. All that Dischord self-seriousness you soaked up as a teenager went straight to your bones and turned you into a twenty-two-year-old scene cop. By the time any of your bands went on tour it was too late—you couldn't have fun anymore. Instead of participating in a fun community you felt like you had to be its dad, and the people around you began to see you that way, too. They always felt okay about asking you for help, to be responsible for a practice space or keeping track of the money or dubbing tapes or booking shows or printing flyers. It wasn't enjoyable, but you became addicted to the feeling of being a respected and reliable hand—always the manager, never the main event.

You became many things in your insular community. Reliable tech wizard. Grumpy sound guy. Good friend. Decent guitarist. The band dad. The one who makes sure the touring band gets paid, even a little. And probably a million negative things, too. You cannot control the public self because so much of the you others see comes from them. Authentic selfhood is a push-pull between you and them and everything in between. We are both projectors and screens. The best you can do is be honest with yourself and with others.

At twenty-five you might have turned wrestling into a job, too. Maybe bringing that kind of physicality and risk-taking into your life would have been good for you—but in so many other ways it could sour, turn you against another thing you love. You could end up taking it too seriously, let the failures stack up. Just enjoy this one thing without picking it apart, holding yourself to an impossible standard.

You've never taken a real risk, physical or otherwise—skateboarding never stuck, sports weren't fun, exercise was a drag. You've had jobs with health insurance since you were 22, often staying far longer than you should have because you refused to jump ship without the next stable gig lined up.

You'll probably never get into the ring, but wrestling has still changed you. It pushes you to recognize your vulnerabilities,

find sources of confidence, allow yourself to take risks. Your body image has changed. Two years ago your body distressed you, the weight starting to stack up, the schlub emerging from the mirror. But your favorite wrestlers aren't body guys. Meaty dudes who can still move, brawlers and powerhouses, strength over bodybuilder definition. At thirty-two you start exercising, lifting weights. Not to become smaller, but stronger, to transform your weak bulk into something powerful. You grow out your hair, embracing the unruly part of yourself you contained throughout your twenties. You get more tattoos, decorating the house you've finally decided to make a home in.

Maybe it's too late to become a pro wrestler, but you know you can write songs. You find yourself wanting to front a band again. To shout lyrics that feel like a knife, cut promos on idiots in the crowd, headbutt your friends, get roughed up. You need it like a shotgun at your back, cold iron telling you *be be be*. You can radiate, you can fight. You're ready to get back to that place, to re-discover the nervousness you felt in those first sets—knees wobbly, brain a panicked slur as you willed your fingers against the strings. Maybe now you can actually feel excitement about your own performance instead of picking it apart, accepting compliments with grace instead of offering excuses for why it wasn't as good as it could have been.

In a year without live music, you've been given the distance from public creativity you needed to start loving it again. It starts with not taking it so seriously, with rediscovering the things you loved about it before it became a job. To look on it through the lens wrestling has offered you. You're on a path toward a new model for living—a degenerate and fulfilling kind of life.

Unironically appreciate and participate in low culture. Cultivate the ecstatic experience of the physical. Enjoy purely and without obligation. Take having fun and experimenting seriously, but never yourself. Embrace masculine vulnerability and feminine power. Find the other within and rebel against it. Find yourself in the balance. Reclaim your body and your emotions. Become wild. Privilege true authenticity over civility, appropriateness, and law. Cultivate deep friendships based in love and care rather than wide-ranging acquaintances based in transactional interest. Be unserious, take risks, fail more. Pain don't hurt. You'll be fine.



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# MARK PLASMA

was born in Alabama and lives in Baltimore. His past work includes the novella-in-stories *All By Our Lonesome*, *Deterritorial Audio Magazine*, and pieces in *Maximum Rocknroll* and *Distortion LTD*. He has released music as a solo act and as a member of the bands Barbelith and Quitter.



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