

“Wrestling in the Movies”

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By Jonathan Rylander

He tells me something in the way his uniform fits better than mine. Chest so wide it floods out on either side, soft pale cushions tucked in sweaty armpit cracks. And greasy, dirty, blond hair. As if he has actually been wrestling.

And that all makes sense when I see a bigger man behind him—maybe his coach.

“Are they set? Have they met? We need these boys to fight.”

When I was 13, I learned how to wrestle.

Here, on a set just outside the Twin Cities, I am playing a younger version of the lead role in *The Naked Man* by Ethan Cohen and J. Todd Anderson. I am “Middle Eddie,” a boy who picks fights and gets in trouble at school. He is, after all, the opposite of me—freckled, pale-skinned, timid.

And they must sense it. How out of place I am. Like this woman from the crew, who’s job, I’m convinced, is to make sure I’m ready. But she hesitates in how she responds to this coach-like guy, who I now remember is the director.

“They met,” she says. “But he seems a bit nervous.”

“Who?”

“Eddie. I mean, Jonathan. I don’t think he’s ready. I’m not sure he can do this.”

I can sense I’ve let him down.

“What do you mean he can’t do this? We need it to happen today.”

Then: he looks at us boys.

“Ok, you two. I need you to try something. Jonathan, get behind him and grab his belly.”

How does he want me to do it? The boy kneels on his hands and knees. Behind him, I bend down and hug him, because I think I should.

And then: I touch his stomach, barely. Just my fingertips. But I can feel the temperature of his skin, which is warm and moves up and down.

“Tighter,” the director says. “Grab him at the waist”

So, I do. My whole hand takes on the shape of his thick belly. Molds his playdough fat.

The director comes closer. Says,

“You need to not be afraid to hold him. Did you play football?”

“No”

“Have you ever wrestled with your brothers?”

“No.” And I mean it. Growing up, we never rolled around on the living room floor, at least not for fun.

So now, as I’m pulled away from the mat and this director puts his arm around my neck. Asks me to look at him. I am embarrassed.

“I want you to think about a time that you and your brothers got into a fight. What started it?”

When I can’t respond, he turns to my mom, in the distance. I cannot quite hear what he says to her. He might have said,

“What gets him going? What can you say to him that will set him off?”

With a grin, she might have replied, “Oh, he’s not a fighter.”

She would be right. I am her middle child. Her ultimate peacemaker. In second grade, when everyone else told Brad Matthews his hair looked like carpet, I didn't. I am her son that rides along with her to clean houses not just because I need to, but because of how her voice, mixed with Pledge and Downey, tells me I'm okay.

But as a boy now on brink of puberty, her being here weirds me out, and so I pretend they aren't there. The director and my mother. And everyone else. I imagine them as grownups uninvited.

With all of them gone, I look at this boy in a new way. In the same way, it seems, I looked at my friend Ryan two years ago, in a cozy basement on a stormy summer day in little house south of Minneapolis. Imagine the kind of day when 11-year-old boys watch movies, when their parents are away, and rough house a bit when no one is watching. There, by a brick fireplace, Ryan comes back from the bathroom and jumps on me.

“Body Slam!”

His weight. His football-player build. It gets me going until we spill testosterone everywhere, with WrestleMania moves.

And as I keep thinking of it—of that day—I begin to see this boy, here in this gym now, for the ways in which he brings me back there again, like a movie in itself, to Ryan—to rug burns and all, on dated red shag carpet. To my parent's basement. For what felt like hours—dripping, by

the end, with sticky B.O. that only running around, shirts off, in heavy sheets of a blue summer rain will clear.

That sense of freedom in my skin—that summer day—tells me I can act in ways my mother might never expect.

Because I don't think she would expect that now, part of me wants to walk toward this kid actor back here in this gym, while no one is watching. I want to sneak up and take him down with all my weight. Smother him. Make him feel my wrath.

But when my mother comes back, when she takes me outside to talk, these thoughts—they fade.

“Jonathan,” she says, “I told them that you're not the aggressive type. But they want to make this look as real as possible, as if you were actually beating up that kid back in the gym. I just don't understand it.”

“I know, mom.” I reply. As quickly as I can, because I just want this conversation to end, like the pain of a timer clicking down when sitting in timeout. Her towering over me, making sure I don't move a muscle.

And that's how it feels now. Sitting on this bench. When she squats down to lecture me. Until we walk inside, together.

Back in the gym, the director waits impatiently, like a father with one and only one thing on his mind: to catch his sons misbehaving.

And he will. In front of me, the boy lays on his side. His ear rest on his hand, as if holding a serving tray, showing new folds and creases in his uniform. Revealing, even more so now, how well-fed he is. I know, from hearing friends talk, that wrestlers cut weight. That they do so almost religiously. But everything about him seems so, well, natural. And I know I want to join him there, on one of those plush, light-weight wrestling mats that fold up and slide when you put too much weight on them. Clearly, it was bought for one purpose. Which reminds me: there is a script to follow.

“Jonathan,” the director says. “You seem nervous, am I right?”

“Yes,” I reply, with bobble-head certainty.

“You see, this scene is crucial. I need you to act like you're beating him up. Don't punch him in the face or anything like that but throw your weight on him.”

“I can do it,” I say.

“That a boy.”

Then: I kneel behind this boy, who reeks. And my now lighter arms, wrapped around his waist, work to get a better grip. Down there, I feel an elastic band beneath his suit, one that must attach to tighty whities.

“Action,” the director says.

And when he does, with that volcano-about-to-erupt feeling, this kid pushes up. I expect, if he wanted, he could head lock me. Instead, he waits for me to make my move. I rush him. Full tackle his waist. Together, we fall.

Even though it’s all an act, he looks like he’s about to kick my ass because I went too far. Clearing his throat, he grunts. Rolls on top of me. Jams my face between dark, pressure-filled thighs. Then locked in full body scissors, I sense I’m close to what he’s got down there, and I don’t want to touch it.

When I escape, I climb on a back of firm muscles. Small medal mounds. And his bottom, harder yet. A butt that looks like it should be on a man

“Take that,” he could have said. “You’re not going anywhere”

And then, when I'm on top, he rolls and smothers my face, which slips into dirty, dirty pits that stink so bad—but warm me.

As a small child, a similar sort of comfort existed in the feel of holding my mother's or father's hand, walking into our local magical movie theater. Just four screens, no stadium seating. From the outside, a single ticket office. Behind it, the most gradual sloping ramp, easing us into earth-toned carpet—dark reds, rust oranges, lime greens. With a small, incredibly dark hallway. For two hours on a Friday night, we went to another world, one that made me feel less afraid.

And that is exactly how I feel here, locked in his thighs, feeling around the corners of his singlet, his budding leg hairs. With heavy air, so extremely hot.

And though my mind cannot not make sense of it then—back there, as a thirteen-year-old kid, when I'm trapped by this mean kid. When he puts me in my place in the most serious, aggressive way possible.

It feels good.