

Fumes

The map was uncertain. He'd been brought to this place by way of an uncertain route that he could barely trace out. Dark, serpentine roads. Impossible to commit to memory. It all felt like a muddled mess in his mind's eye.

Matt Hodges did not know how he'd come to be here. He had no idea how long he had been gone for. He had no idea when he'd lost his way. The lack of mental landmarks along this road was a real bitch to contend with. He had no idea how to get back on the right road or if it was even possible.

The one thing, the only thing, that Matt Hodges was truly certain about was that the decision was made by Hannah that the nursery was going to be painted *today* and it was going to be painted *fucking pink*.

Anemone, specifically. A nice, soft shade of pink. Verbena Pink was *too* pink, she said. Diminutive pink wasn't pink enough. Amour was too vibrant. Cheery wasn't cheerful enough. Through the disinterested lens of Hodges, all these shades of pink looked exactly the same. There weren't any marked differences he could pick up on. His wife sorted through them like each slightly different tinge had a personality of its own that she was desperately trying to get to the bottom of. The shade of the nursery was going to comprise the defining characteristic of the young woman their daughter would become.

"Remember to go with the grain of the wall," said Hannah's disembodied speakerphone voice from the top cap of the ladder, "and please, *please*, whatever you do, don't cake on the paint and just spread it around. Nice, gentle strokes."

Easy for her to say. She didn't have to do any of the work. She was holed up in an inner city hospital, where her mother remained admitted. She'd gotten through the worst of her recent brush with eternity and was in the process of cardiac rehabilitation.

"I know how to paint," said Hodges dryly, as he slathered the wall with a sloppy, viscous slough.

"I know, honey, I know. I just want it to look, you know, well...good."

He had come to view his own marriage as a constant inoculation against annoyance. He barely registered the passive aggressive slight as a suggestion he'd do it wrong. Instead, he carried on without mounting a single word of self-defense. "Okay," came his flat response.

"Oh, so I wanted to tell you, the doctors said that mom was progressing well ahead of schedule. Everything's looking *really* good. She's getting around extremely well and she hasn't had a single episode of chest pain in days."

"Oh?" Said Hodges inattentively, stepping onto the second step of the ladder.

“It looks really good. Some of her blood work is still a little off, but given the circumstances the doctor said that could be like that for several weeks after, so that’s good. Her throat still hurts a little bit from where the tube was.”

“I bet,” he said. It was about the best he’d ever seen her look. Laying limp, rendered unable to criticize his parenting or make snide comments about his career at the behest of sedative drugs and a large machine that fed into her lungs.

“She’s talking about change a lot. You know, like changing her lifestyle. Quitting smoking and eating better. I’m really encouraged. I’ve never heard her talk like this before.”

He splashed a fresh glob of anemone colored paint and ran the brush through it, watching the eggshell white of the former guest room wall morph into a rosy nightmare.

“The doctor also said it’s not every day people talk like that about their health. That we’d be surprised by the number of people who come into a situation like this and don’t take anything away from it. They just kind of live from heart attack to heart attack and expect medicine to save them every single time.”

He could believe it. It sounded borderline romantic to him. The idea of tightly embracing that kind of self-destruction appealed to him. It was a road he used to know extremely well before he convinced himself that he needed help that he never even really got for himself. He imagined that Karen’s resolve would eventually peter out and she’d be back to the same old shitty, unhealthy person she’d always been.

“That would be surprising,” Hodges feigned a shred of interest. His minimal responses never really seemed to phase Hannah. They were designed, in part, to convey a lack of regard for her content. Instead, it’s almost like she talked over him. Like the only reason she had a conversation with him at all was to bounce thoughts off him so she could get them out.

“There *was* something that mom wanted me to say to you,” said Hannah.

“Mmhmm.”

“Stuart let her know that you prayed for her while she was in the hospital bed and, well, she got *really* emotional about it.”

“Ah,” said Hodges, doing his best to not relive the moment. The mere thought made him feel like he needed to step into a decontamination chamber and be given the steam. “Tell her not to mention it again. Ever. All good.”

“It meant a lot to her, she said. Kept going on and on about it. She said she truly believed that it helped save her.”

He hesitated to respond. “Okay,” Hodges finally offered, cringing through fresh brush strokes.

“I don’t want you to think that she’s become a full blown spiritual nut job over it or anything,” Hannah giggled, “just that she’s really, really grateful for you. She said that she feels like you somehow gave her the chance to meet her granddaughter.”

The shiver that went down Matt Hodges’ spine nearly made him drop the brush. “Okay, okay, okay, I get it. Tell her she’s welcome.”

“I guess I should probably tell you,” said Hannah, ignoring his urgent desire to terminate this particular portion of the conversation, “that hearing it really made me realize what a great man I’m married to.”

It should’ve been a warm feeling. But instead it was very hollow. Hodges didn’t reply. Didn’t know what to say aside from making noxious wretches that would’ve been more genuine than rehearsed.

“Listening to that, knowing how you feel about things like religion and prayers and God, and seeing that you’d still pray for my mother...I guess what I’m trying to say is I don’t really ever realize what a great life I have with you. You sacrificed your own beliefs just to make us *feel better*. Even if you don’t believe...I love you, baby. Thank you.”

“I love you,” said Hodges through the invasive pit that had consumed his guts. “And you’re welcome.”

“Mom *also* said that you don’t need to worry about fixing her upholstery right away,” said Hannah, changing the tenor of the conversation in a way that somehow annoyed Hodges even more. “You can take as long as you want. Just as long as it gets done.”

“How benevolent of her. Give her my regards.”

A dishonest prayer shouldn’t have gotten any credit for anything. Empty words. And yet here he was reaping praise for things he hadn’t done and character traits he didn’t really possess. He wasn’t entirely sure what made a good man good. Honesty? Integrity? Loyalty? In certain shades on the pallet, he had those. Only insofar as he hadn’t done anything overtly dishonest or ventured into truer forms of infidelity. The color of his deception was more subtle, less obvious to the naked eye. Something that would be somewhat noticeable, but not forthright exhibiting.

Duplicitous Pink.

Chicanery Rosé.

Subterfuge Salmon.

He exchanged the pleasantries that he was expected to trade over the telephone when ending a call, said his four I love you’s to his wife, and went on painting in his freshly bothered state.

He wasn’t sure how a woman who spent a majority of her time for the last half-decade plus was still somehow under the illusion he was some kind of good man. It bothered him, but *not* because he

romanticized himself as a villain. He wasn't distinctly really bad, either. If he had to describe himself, it would have been as the person who took the path of least resistance. He played the long game better than most. His foresight enabled him to identify problems and play the game better than anyone.

It's part of what led to him identifying Cid Turner as a potential problem. He planted the seeds in his former mentor's mind to neutralize the threat of this more dialed in version. Hodges deeply resented being thrust so carelessly into a tag team tournament with a no-name masked vagrant. He'd gone so far as to express it to the boss.

He had toiled over what was different about him in 2020. Broad strokes, this was the same sport he loved in his youth, and he was the same player adapting to new rules to the same game. The difference was patience. Between impetuous strokes of the brush, he worked on mentally mapping out the route to his endgame. Subarashi, as a veritable unknown, could be an incredible talent. He could also be subpar.

The reason he tolerated this pairing, after first glance, was because if he could throw this masked idiot over his shoulder and lug him over the finish line, he'd be undeniable.

Undeniable. He loved the sound of that word, especially in reference to himself. He'd park a slug in the brain of the last white buffalo on earth to get that point across. The long game demanded a different set of actions. He'd have to —

"Daddy?" The voice of young Ian Hodges broke his train of thought. The little black-haired boy stood in the doorway, clutching his blanket. His thumb immediately found its way back to his mouth.

"You're supposed to be napping," said Hodges. His voice was devoid of any emotion. He'd put the kids down to rest less than thirty minutes ago. He hated when Hannah had plans. It relegated him to this hell.

"I'm not tired," he stated matter of factly. He shuffled into the room slowly and sat on the floor. Hodges glances down at his son: the thousand yard stare in his eyes told a different story as he sucked on his thumb as if it was vital for his immediate survival.

His father said nothing. Simply ran the paint brush up and down the wall.

"Whattaya doing, daddy," he asked, his throat clearing his obvious sleeplessness.

"I'm painting your sister's new room," said Hodges, resting the brush in the metal tray. The paint fumes were getting to his head. By design, mostly. That's why he'd been painting with the door and windows to the room closed. He'd grown mildly frustrated with this distraction. Through his anemone-stained white shirt and work jeans he turned around to his son, who continued to stare absently at the floor.

"Come on buddy, let's go back to bed," said Hodges, reaching down gently for his son. Ian didn't extend his hand up towards his father.

"I don't like my bed anymore," said Hodges. "I don't like my room."

“What the hell?” Asked Hodges, perplexed. “Why not?”

“Because,” said the boy, “there are monsters in my room. They’re under my bed. And they’re *not nice*.”

“Did you tell them to be nice?” His father asked in a sardonic tone.

Ian nodded. “They won’t be nice.”

“Well, maybe you weren’t very nice to them. Maybe they’re just being mean because you were mean. Did you try to parley with the monsters?”

“What’s a *par-lay*?”

“It’s kind of where you meet to discuss terms,” said Hodges, fresh off watching a Pirates of the Caribbean marathon. “Hash out your differences. Negotiate a peace under the protection of a code.”

“Oh,” sighed Ian, clearly having no idea what his father was talking about.

“There are no monsters in your room,” said Hodges bluntly. “There are no monsters anywhere. It was all a bad dream.”

“They *are* real.” His certainty on the matter was unshakable. Hodges looked his son up and down and walked towards him.

“Okay. So, let’s say theoretically monsters *do* exist,” began Hodges. “What makes monsters bad?”

“They eat small kids,” said Ian.

“Who told you that?”

“You said they did,” he claimed.

“Erroneous. And even if that were the case, you really should know better than to take everything I say as gospel. Even at your young age, you need to learn to think critically. You’re a Hodges. Not a moron.”

The young boy had no idea what any of that meant. It was evidenced in his glazed over expression.

“Will the monsters eat me?” He asked.

“No. And that’s exactly my point. If monsters did exist, they’d be highly unlikely to eat you. Everybody romanticizes the idea of the monster as some kind of large, scary beast. But if they were real, they probably wouldn’t be that. They’d just be like regular people. Hell, your mother turns into a succubus in the bedroom. Maybe we’re all monsters.”

It was like talking to a wax plant. The four year old did not appear, to Hodges, to be able to comprehend the conversation. Something he'd been working on was simplifying the content of his conversations to his young sons so that they didn't have to dig to find the meaning. He simply didn't know how to make his point any clearer.

"I'll give you an example. Let's say for argument's sake I went to a therapist. I would never do that, but bare with me. If I were to tell said therapist about all the things that go through my head about how miserable I am, what kind of premeditated thoughts I have about those who oppose me, my desire for infidelity and to completely ignore my parental responsibility, I'm quite sure they'd find me some kind of horrible monster. But do you know what? I would reject that. Because at the end of the day, I don't follow through on those thoughts for the most part. I'm here with you guys every day when I'm not at work. Therefore, not a monster."

Hodges ended his dialogue emphatically.

"Daddy?"

"Yes, Ian."

"Can we watch Transformers together?"

To Hodges, his innocence was only tainted by his idiocy. The way that his child floated with complete disconnect from one thought to the next was proof. Still, for some reason, this was a moment that endeared the boy to him. It was strange. He felt as if he should be annoyed. Instead, the impulse to such an emotion was covered by a softer approach.

He put his hand on his head and ran his fingers through black hair, collecting dark bristles in the web of his hand. Ian smiled up at his father; in the deepest recesses of Hodges' gut he felt the urge to tell his son how he really felt.

"Son, I..."

Over the years he'd allowed himself to be tricked into believing he had the capacity to experience love. The reality was, it had been a long time since Hodges had expressed something bordering that feeling and actually meant it. His sons, both of them, were not accustomed to displays of affection. This one in particular went against his will. The kind of warmth that, in his own mind, he never received.

In thinking of it that way, he realized there was only one thing he should say in this situation.

"I hate Transformers. Can we pick something else?"

The tenderness he felt, he had to do away with. He wondered where the momentary moment of emotion had come from. In fact, he didn't understand where a lot of his recent weakness had come from. One

minute, he was saying a prayer for the sole purpose of making Stuart *feel better*, and the next, he was about to tell his son he loved him for no other reason.

All these recent changes had clearly affected him. Or maybe it was the sudden lightheadedness of being boxed into a room with paint fumes. Poor ventilation, along with the two oxycodone he'd taken prior to making lunch for his sons, perhaps had a hand in it.

Whatever the case, he set his youngest son up in the bedroom with his tablet and finished the first coat of paint.

After MJ woke up from his nap, it was abundantly clear that Hodges wasn't going to be able to put another coat of paint up. The fumes escaped out of the now open window of the new nursery and through the door. He needed another pill.

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The spider said, what's poppin' bitch. It sounded like James Earl Jones. His mouth was too dry to respond to it. Besides. He knew it was a hallucination, anyway. Sober for three days. Miserable. It scurried by wielding a switchblade. Hodges closed his eyes tightly as another bout of nausea attempted to sweep him away.

He felt like a washer on a spin cycle. Complete with drenching, cold sweats. He was laying on the floor in front of his sectional. The polyester on the couch somehow seemed to amplify the pins and needles that were in the process of stabbing and retracting from the dermal layers of his skin. His head was pulsating the way it would if there was a subwoofer in his fucking skull. Deep breath. Throb. Vomit. Repeat.

In 2014, the decision to become sober was less about personal mental health hygiene and more about antipathy about going to the liquor store. He didn't want to hobble to his car, hobble into the blood bank, and then hobble out. He wanted, even needed to drink. There was something publicly embarrassing to him about having to hop around on a crutch or cane at 32 years old. He couldn't get rid of the prevailing thought that somehow, some way, the community would be interested in capturing the image of Matt Hodges as a bird with a broken wing.

Gonna fucking stab you, said the spider, scaling the wall. Gonna cut you up so good. Gonna make your bitch ass pay.

Even the faint glow of the hallway light that provided the slightest bit of illumination was giving him a headache. He was well and truly in the throes of detox. Something he never wanted to do. But something he certainly wrought for himself.

He deserved it.

Needed it?

He'd spent the better portion of a few months ignoring phone calls from a woman named Hannah who didn't understand that sometimes a man has the wrong reasons to always say the right things. In this pitiable, broken state, for some reason unbeknownst to him, he felt some semblance of fault. Guilt, maybe.

She was a sweet girl. She shouldn't have been sent away. It was in this weakened state, watching a small tarantula wield a knife, threatening to slice him up into tiny pieces, marinating in a puddle of his own vomit, that he made the decision to reach across the hardwood and plant a finger tip on his cell phone.

This is your last fuckin' chance, you prick, the spider said, menacing himself from the single fibrous strand. Ain't nobody in this world gonna save you from me. I'm a fucking gangster. If I tell you to die, you just gonna sit there and ask me how hard. Feel me?

The first mistake that brought him here. Relying on somebody. A reminder. Don't do that.

He owed her a great debt to which not even a lifelong commitment could pay in full. She came rushing to his aid without hesitation and saw him through the worst of it, and when he'd officially recovered, the billing statement demanded absolute loyalty.

His son's heads were on the couch next to him, passed out. Hannah slumped onto his left shoulder, burrowed under his arm. His face was illuminated by the television. They'd watched a movie together after she got home from the hospital. He looked across the room to the clock. It was almost 11pm.

He sat. Stared into space pensively. Draped by his family.

"Hey," the somnolent voice of Hannah Hodges broke the silence. He looked down at her and smiled fraudulently. Her lips parted slightly and moved in for a kiss. Her hand reached up his athletic shorts and grabbed him firmly. He felt some personal growth abounding as she did this. It felt dirty and spontaneous. If she hadn't crept on him and initiated physical contact he would need a cialis to fake the verve required to fuck his wife. He hated the feeling of making love to a woman who looked like she'd been populated with alien life.

"Do you love me?" She asked softly, trailing her lips towards his ear, giving heavy breaths. He gave a nod. She worked her hand up and down. "Mmmm. I know you do. I can feel it, baby."

She reached her free hand around and used his shoulder to swing her body up and straddle him, keeping her hand firmly on his cock.

"You want me to suck your cock, baby?" She gave a half smile as she pressed her breasts forward.

"Mmhmm."

"You wanna fuck me?"

"Yes..."

“I know what you *really* want...”

She gave him a soft kiss through a moan.

“You want to cum in *mommy’s mouth* while I put my finger in your ass.”

Fucking Lord. That’s exactly what he wanted. His obvious mommy issues aside, it shouldn’t have been a chore to fuck Hannah. She was a stunning woman who ticked every sexual box he had, including a willingness to play into his perversions.

“Mmmmm. Good boy,” she said, dismounting. She forcefully grabbed his now full cock and stood up, leading him towards the kitchen. He got up and ambled along with her as if he were on a leash. Pushing him against the support beam with a single hand, she pulled down his shorts and lowered herself to her knees.

He felt her hot breath against him, and prepared himself to be taken in. He felt like a —

CRASH!

BANG!

Hannah’s lip had barely grazed Matt before they heard a hard thud coming from upstairs that caused the upstairs to shake.

“Oh my god!” Hannah said, standing up, hanging on to him with a single hand. He was dizzy by his horniness and looked at her incredulously. “Theresa somebody in the house!”

Jesus fuck. “No, sweetheart, there isn’t. Something probably fell in the attic. Please, let’s just—”

“Matt...”

“Fuck. Alright. I’ll go check.”

Full of blood but the moment dead, Hodges made for the stairs. Just his luck to have something like this happen in the midst of a sex act.

When he got to the top of the stairs, however, he smelled paint. Fresh paint. At the landing, there was a set of what appeared to be boot prints. He followed them through the new nursery door, where he found the anemone paint spilled all over the carpet. A complete *fucking mess*. The window was wide open, the curtain flapping in the wind. And there, stuck to the wall, was a scroll with was inscribed in what appeared to be Japanese.

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What a novel concept this is. A new initiative, presumably to reestablish the tag team division as one of the world's best, is thrust upon us by our overlords in the SCW office. The end result is a league to end all leagues: established teams, oddball pairings, superstars, and people who look like they haven't shaved their faces clean in ages. I'm talking to you, Kandis.

On the surface, you might take a look and say, *well gee, Matt, given your recent run of incredible, undeniable form, you should be upset at being thrust into this so haplessly.* And I would agree with you. You're right. It does seem like a tremendous disservice to me. I do have clear and present aspirations, after all, and at this point, frankly, they shouldn't be ignored. I really *should* be aggrieved. But I'm not. And I'll tell you why.

As the hottest professional wrestler in the *WORLD*, how can you claim something is the *WORLD TAG TEAM LEAGUE* and not offer the synaptically challenged viewer the very *BEST* that the *WORLD* has to offer?

That's right. I said it. If you don't believe me, you can ask the three schmucks who stepped into my ring at Apocalypse and walked out losers. Let it be known, if you step into the ring with the man, the *ONLY MAN*, who embodies world class professional wrestling, you'd better be prepared to be thoroughly outclassed.

And so here we are. The World Tag League. Allowing myself to be cast into this mess with a veritable entanglement of competitors of all walks of the pecking order? You're welcome. I came into this business in a tag team. I never reached the summit of that particular mountain. Presumably because I was just too damn good on my own, but also because for the bulk of my career I was forced to carry dead weight like James Exeter and David Grenier, to name a few.

And while I've had my share of strange and oddly ill prepared partners over the years, this one is all the more strange. A relative newcomer who looks primed to at least try to make some ways. Some masked weeaboo who, in all likelihood, cosplayed his way into an SCW contract from an anime convention. A truly improbable duo. It doesn't get any more odd than this. The very best this company has to offer is thrust into a partnership with some brand spanking new halfwit who admittedly looks like he could knee somebody's head off on any given day. And to that masked drifter, I will offer you two sentiments.

Number one? Welcome to Team Hodges. No need to thank me. Or talk to me. Ever.

Number two? If you *EVER* step foot into my home ever again, I will reign *hell* down on you. Do you understand me? I've got enough of a mess to clean up at home to have to worry about some escaped psych facility patient trashing my place. If you do it again, you're done.

...Ahem. So anyways, where were we? Speaking of odd ball pairings, this week Totoro and I get to face off against an odd pairing just the same, and it comes in the form of Jason Helms and Jake Starr. One with an established pedigree and family that he hasn't really been able to exploit for

success and a guy who has, by all accounts, really dropped off the face of the map, Jake Starr, a guy who years ago would've been a threat to actually make some waves at an event like Taking Hold of the Flame. This year, you could've found him playing bookie to see who was going to eliminate a 130 pound former model from the match. Glad to see you've aged into a good little spot for you.

What specifically makes that pairing interesting is simply put...how disinteresting it really is. The forgotten, lost Helms sheep and the forgotten, lost social misfit who evidently doesn't realize the glory days are behind him. Two guys who really have lost their own stock, but have the talent to make you forget about that in one fell swoop.

I have to say, shockingly, this is something the two of you could actually use to benefit each other. Jake could really use a fresh shot of life into his otherwise immobilized career, and why can't that be Jason Helms. Granted, it's hardly like he's...you know...successful, but hey, it's youth. It's fresh, somewhat. Jake, before you shuffle off into a commercial drivers license and subsequent employment at MEGABUS, take some time to consider whether or not that's what you want to do. Because like almost any oddball pairing, the grizzled veteran stands to learn something from the foolhardy clown.

That dichotomy works both ways. The foolhardy clown has a lot more obvious lessons to draw from the old hand. You can glean a lot from a guy like Jake. How to win a wrestling match would be a good place to start. Jake used to know how to win those before he slumped into embarrassment at the hands of Holly Adams.

Whatever the case, I find myself in an interesting position. One the same, but very different from the two of you. Because while the two of you stand to learn something from your unlikely duo, only one person stands to benefit from mine, and guess who it *isn't*.

The hottest guy in the business.

And that's really where your strange tandem runs into the razor really, really fast. An interesting team. Hell, if Jake watches some tape from 2010 and remembers who he is, maybe even a *good* team. As it stands, this little pairing is going to come in DOA. And there's one reason for that. Two little words that everybody really ought to be familiar with at this point.

The World Tag Team League?

No, no, no. That won't do. It simply doesn't have the

The WORLD CLASS Tag Team League?

That's better.

And to be frank?

The three of you that aren't World Class have an awful lot to learn. So settle in, take notes, allow me demonstrate, and at the end of the day, every single one of you will come out the other end better than before just by spending five minutes in my presence.

You're welcome.