

## Clarion, Pennsylvania

Sean Prentiss

I.

I'm wandering Main Street, walking past the early closing restaurants, the hotdog shop, the tuxedo store renting \$69 suits. In this town of two thousand people, Doug, who needs this many suits? How many weddings and proms (or funerals) can this town hold?

II.

Though I've never visited Clarion before, everything feels exactly as it should—and just as sad. This visit, we both know, is twenty-two years too late. I should have wandered these streets built on the back of lumber, oil, and coal (now poverty) with you when we were kids. Not on some random drive from Michigan to Bangor, our hometown on the other side of this old state. You could have showed me your dorm, your wrestling room, the gym where you battled other heavyweights. You could have said, *We'll need a 119-pounder next year.* I would have smiled.

But, just like always, everything changes. Never in the ways we expect.

III.

Twenty-two years ago, you were a high school heavyweight wrestling champion. I envisioned myself a future lightweight champion. And though you weighed a hundred pounds more than me, still, we trained together that summer of 1989 in Bangor's wrestling room. You took hundreds or thousands of phantom single-leg shots, preparing for your freshman season at Clarion University. I prepared for States as a senior at Bangor High.

These were our dreams.

IV.

How is it that one tired town (Clarion) can remind me of so much of another (Bangor) even when each slumps into oblivion so far (254 miles) apart? How is it that a town built on lumber can resemble so much a town built on slate?

Doug, I walk these sloped streets and see kids twenty years younger than us. I wonder if you would have kissed any of them (or I guess their mothers)?

When I think of you, you are always eighteen, and forever.

V.

We grew up in a town, Doug, that every highway bypassed. Our town was slouching porches, buckled barns, winding back roads leading from nowhere to nowhere. Though so few of us escaped Bangor's magnetic pull

of unemployment, poverty, and alcoholism, you wrestled your way to a scholarship at Clarion, another town the highways all bypassed.

Doug, is it strange that I am talking to the air here in Clarion? Talking to yesterday's breeze?

VI.

This evening walking Main Street, everything is filtered through failure. (Or sorrow?) Everything is sepia.

The heavyset fathers walk home from work, the sagging mothers with children in tow, the *For Rent* signs, they all remind me of Bangor though I don't know a single person here.

*I wish I knew a single person here, I say to a brick apartment building.*

VII.

The summer of 1989, you and I practiced single-leg takedowns until we were sweat and fatigue.

That summer night, I drove home.

That summer night (four months before you would have moved to Clarion), you get drunk at some party. Later, while I sleep deeply, you flip (and flip and flip) your Mercury Lynx down a back road that leads forever to nowhere (except fire and death and a granite stone in a cemetery overlooking our rows of cornfields).

VIII.

Age and time make memory brittle. But tonight as I walk Clarion, I am washed in memory. Doug, I see before me the sharp cut of your jaw, the way your body moved as we practiced. I almost see you driving to Clarion that autumn after your death. Your car packed high with whatever we kids owned.

As a thin fog settles over this sleepy town, a blanket to comfort us all, I convince myself that I can almost remember visiting you during your almost-freshman year. Maybe we would have walked past Wein's Clothing Store after your wrestling match against Edinboro. You would have flirted with some thick-legged girl beneath these globed streetlights. I would have looked into the window of Michelle's Cafe and dreamed of wrestling here next year.

Earlier that evening, I would have watched you wrestle a heavyweight so big he would have seemed to be myth or monster. In the third period, the score would have been tied, 6-6. You would have been beneath the other wrestler.

The crowd (all of us—the lumbermen and their clucking wives, your mother and father in for the weekend, all the prettiest girls, all the boys like me who dreamed of being you)—all of us—leans in over the mat, almost hugging you

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two wrestlers. We fall silent, worried about the toll these small town battles take.

Doug, how much can you carry?

IX.

With thirty seconds on the clock (the seconds ticking forever away), you do a flawless stand-up, Doug. Once on your feet, you peel your opponent's grip and escape.

You can escape, right? You have to escape.

X.

In Clarion, Pennsylvania, the thin fog steals the last of our light. I slowly walk up the sloped sidewalk that leads toward my motel, heading nowhere tonight. Town is quiet. Town is empty. These globed streetlights, Doug, cast the only lights down on this town or on me.

Tomorrow I drive to Bangor, to the twin of this town, to even more ghosts of you.

XI.

Doug, is there a way to turn memory into one more moment? To trade in memory for one afternoon of you and me once more practicing phantom single-leg takedowns, the sweat dripping off our noses, falling heavy to the mat. We shoot, shoot, shoot our takedowns, knowing that no one can ever take us down. We know we can never lose.

XII.

Clarion is as lonely as any breeze. Clarion is as empty as a heartbeat. Clarion is dark, and I need a deep night of sleep. 