

# CHARLOTTE

by Tony Earley

THE PROFESSIONAL WRESTLERS are gone. The professional wrestlers do not live here anymore. Frannie Belk sold the Southeastern Wrestling Alliance to Ted Turner for more money than you would think, and the professional wrestlers sold their big houses on Lake Norman and drove in their BMWs down 1-85 to bigger houses in Atlanta.

Gone are the Thundercats, Bill and Steve, and the Hidden Pagans with their shiny red masks and secret signs; gone is Paolo the Peruvian, who didn't speak English very well but could momentarily hold off as many as five angry men with his flying bare feet; gone are Comrade Yerkov the Russian Assassin and his bald nephew Boris, and the Sheik of the East and his Harem of Three, and Hank Wilson Senior the Country Star with his beloved guitar Leigh Ann; gone is Naoki Fujita, who spit the mysterious Green Fire of the Orient into the eyes of his opponents whenever the referee turned his back; gone are the Superstud, the Mega Destroyer,

the Revenger, the Preacher, Ron Rowdy, Tom Tequila, the Gentle Giant, the Littlest Cowboy, Genghis Gandhi, and Bob the Sailor. Gone is Big Bill Boscoe, the ringside announcer, whose question "Tell me, Paolo, what happened in there?" brought forth the answer that all Charlotteans still know by heart — "Well, Beel, Hidden Pagan step on toe and hit head with chair and I no can fight no more"; gone are Rockin' Robbie Frazier, the Dreamer, the Viking, Captain Boogie Woogie, Harry the Hairdresser, and Yee-Hah O'Reilly the Cherokee Indian Chief. And gone is Lord Poetry, and all that he stood for, his arch-rival, Bob Noxious, and Darling Donnis — the Sweetheart of the SWA, the Prize Greater Than Any Belt — the girl who had to choose between the two of them, once and for all, during the Final Battle for Love. Gone.

Now Charlotte has the NBA, and we tell ourselves we are a big deal. We dress in teal and purple and sit in traffic jams on the Billy Graham Parkway so that we can yell in the new coliseum for the Hornets, who are bad, bad, bad. They are hard to watch, and my seats are good. Whenever any of the Hornets come into the bar — and they do not come often — we stare up at them like they were exotic animals come to drink at our watering hole. They are too tall to talk to for very long, not enough like us, and *they* make me miss the old days. In the old days in Charlotte we did not take ourselves so *seriously*. Our heroes had platinum-blond hair and twenty-seven-inch biceps, but you knew who was good and who was evil, who was changing over to the other

side and who was changing back. You knew that sooner or later the referee would look away just long enough for Bob Noxious to hit Lord Poetry with a folding chair. You knew that Lord Poetry would stare up from the canvas in stricken wonder, as if he had never once in his life seen a folding chair. (In the bar, we screamed at the television, "Turn around, ref, turn around!" "Look out, Lord Poetry, look out!") In the old days in Charlotte we did not have to decide whether the Hornets should trade Rex Chapman (they should not) or if J. R. Reid was big enough to play center in the NBA (he is, but only sometimes). In the old days our heroes were as superficial as we were — but we knew that — and their struggles were exaggerated versions of our own. Now we have the Hornets. They wear uniforms designed by Alexander Julian, and play hard and lose, and make us look into our souls. Now when we march disappointed out of the new coliseum to sit unmoving on the parkway, in cars we can't afford, we have to think about the things that are true: everyone in Charlotte is from somewhere else. Everyone in Charlotte tries to be something they are not. We spend more money than we make, but it doesn't help. We know that the Hornets will never make the playoffs, and that somehow it is our fault. Our lives are small and empty, and we thought they wouldn't be, once we moved to the city.

My girlfriend's name is Starla. She is beautiful and we wrestle about love. She does not like to say she loves me, even though we have been together four and a half

years. She will not look at me when I say I love her, and if I wanted to, I could ball up the words and use them like a fist. Starla says she has strong lust for me, which should be enough; she says we have good chemistry, which is all anyone can hope for. Late in the night, after it is over, after we have grappled until the last drop of love is gone from our bodies, I say, "Starla, I can tell that you love me. You wouldn't be able to do it like that if you didn't love me." She sits up in bed, her head tilted forward so that her red hair almost covers her face, and picks the black hair that came from my chest off of her breasts and stomach. The skin across her chest is flushed red, patterned like a satellite photograph; it looks like a place I should know. She says, "I'm a grown woman and my body works. It has nothing to do with love." Like a lot of people in Charlotte, Starla has given up on love. In the old days Lord Poetry said to never give up, to always fight for love, but now he is gone to Atlanta with a big contract and a broken heart, and I have to do the best that I can. I hold on, even though Starla says she will not marry me. I have heard that Darling Donnis lives with Bob Noxious in a big condo in Buckhead. Starla wants to know why I can't be happy with what we have. We have good chemistry and apartments in Fourth Ward and German cars. She says it is enough to live with and more than anyone had where we came from. We can eat out whenever we want.

Starla breaks my heart.

She will say that she loves me only at the end of a great struggle, after she is too tired to fight anymore, and

then she spits out the words, like a vomit, and calls me bastard or fucker or worse, and asks if the thing I have just done has made me happy. It does not make me happy, but it is what we do. It is the fight we fight. The next day we have dark circles under our eyes like the makeup only truly evil wrestlers wear, and we circle each other like animals in a cage that is too small, and what we feel then is nothing at all like love.

I manage a fern bar on Independence Boulevard near downtown, called P. J. O'Mulligan's Goodtimes Emporium. The regulars call the place PJ's. When you have just moved to Charlotte from McAdenville or Cherryville or Lawndale, and Independence is the only street you know, it makes you feel good to call somebody up and say, "Hey, let's meet after work at PJ's." It sounds like real life when you say it, and that is a sad thing. PJ's has fake Tiffany lampshades above the tables, with purple and teal hornets belligerent in the glass. It has fake antique Coca-Cola and Miller High Life and Pierce-Arrow automobile and Winchester Repeating Rifle signs screwed into the walls, and imitation bronze tiles glued to the ceiling. (The glue occasionally lets go and the tiles swoop down toward the tables, like bats.) The ferns are plastic because smoke and people dumping their drinks into the planters kill the real ones. The beer and mixed drinks are expensive, but the chairs and stools are cloth-upholstered and plush, and the ceiling lights in their smooth, round globes are low and pleasant enough, and the television set is huge and close to the bar and perpetually tuned to ESPN. Except when the Hornets are

on Channel 18, or wrestling is on TBS. In the old days in Charlotte a lot of the professional wrestlers hung out at PJ's. Sometimes Lord Poetry stopped by early in the afternoon, after he was through working out, and tried out a new poem he had found in one of his thick books. The last time he came in, days before the Final Battle, I asked him to tell me a poem I could say to Starla. In the old days in Charlotte, you would not think twice about hearing a giant man with long red hair recite a poem in a bar, even in the middle of the afternoon. I turned the TV down, and the two waitresses and the handful of hard-cores who had sneaked away from their offices for a drink saw what was happening and eased up close enough to hear. Lord Poetry crossed his arms and stared straight up, as if the poem he was searching for were written on the ceiling, or somewhere on the other side, in a place we couldn't see. His voice is higher and softer than you would expect the voice of a man that size to be, and when he nodded and finally began to speak, it was almost in a whisper, and we all leaned in even closer. He said,

We sat grown quiet at the name of love;  
 We saw the last embers of daylight die,  
 And in the trembling blue-green of the sky  
 A moon, worn as if it had been a shell  
 Washed by time's waters as they rose and fell  
 About the stars and broke in days and years.

I had a thought for no *one's* but your ears:  
 That you were beautiful, and that I strove  
 To love you in the old high way of love;

That it had all seemed happy, and yet we'd *grown*  
 As weary-hearted as that hollow moon.

P. J. O'Mulligan's was as quiet then as you will ever hear it. All of Charlotte seemed still and listening around us. Nobody moved until Lord Poetry finally looked down and reached again for his beer and said, "That's *Yeats*." Then we all moved back, suddenly conscious of his great size, and our closeness to it, and nodded and agreed that it was a real good poem, one of the best we had ever heard him say. Later I had him repeat it for me, line for line, and I wrote it down on a cocktail napkin. Sometimes, late at night, after Starla and I have fought, and I have made her say I love you like uncle, even as I can see in her eyes how much she hates me for it, I think about reading the poem to her, but some things are just too true to ever say out loud.

In PJ's we watch wrestling still, even though we can no longer claim it as our own. We sit around the big screen without cheering, and stare at the wrestlers like they are favorite relatives we haven't seen in years. We say things like "Boy, the Viking has really put on weight since he moved down there" or "When did Rockin' Robbie Frazier cut his hair like that?" We put on brave faces when we talk about Rockin' Robbie, who was probably Charlotte's most popular wrestler, and try not to dwell on the fact that he is gone away from us for good. In the old days he dragged his stunned and half-senseless opponents to the center of the ring and climbed onto the top rope, and after the crowd counted down

from five (Four! Three! **Two!** One!) he would launch himself into the air, his arms and legs spread like wings, his blond hair streaming out behind him like a banner, and fly ten—fifteen feet, easy, and from an unimaginable height drop with a crash like an explosion directly onto his opponent's head. He called it the **Rockin'** Robbie B-52. ("I'll tell you one thing, Big Bill. Come next Saturday night in the Charlotte Coliseum I'm gonna B-52 the Sheik of the East like he ain't never been B-52ed before.") And after **Rockin'** Robbie's B-52 had landed, while his opponent flopped around on the canvas like a big fish, waiting only to be mounted and pinned, **Rockin'** Robbie leapt up and stood over him, his body slick with righteous sweat, his face a picture of joy. He held his hands high in the air, his fingers spread wide, his pelvis thrusting uncontrollably back and forth in the electric joy of the moment, and he tossed his head back and howled like a dog, his red lips aimed at the sky. Those were glorious days. Whenever **Rockin'** Robbie walked into PJs, everybody in the place raised their glass and pointed their nose at the fake bronze of the ceiling and bayed at the stars we knew spun, only for us, in the high, moony night above Charlotte. Nothing like that happens here anymore. Frannie Belk gathered up all the good and evil in our city and sold it four hours south. These days the illusions we have left are the small ones of our own making, and they have in the vacuum the wrestlers left behind become too easy to see through; we now have to live with ourselves.

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About once a week some guy who's just moved to Charlotte from Kings Mountain or Chester or Gaffney comes up to me where I sit at the bar, on my stool by the waitress station, and says, "Hey, man, are you P. J. O'Mulligan?" They are never kidding, and whenever it happens I don't know what to say. I wish I could tell them whatever it is **they** need in their hearts to hear, but P. J. O'Mulligan is fourteen lawyers from Richmond with investment capital. What do you say? New people come to Charlotte from the small towns every day, searching for lives that are bigger than the ones they have known, but what they must settle for, once they get here, are much smaller hopes: that maybe this year the Hornets might really have a shot at **the** Celtics, if Rex Chapman has a good game; that maybe there really is somebody named P. J. O'Mulligan, and that maybe that guy at the bar is him. Now that the wrestlers are gone, I wonder about these things. How do you tell somebody how to find what they're looking for when ten years ago you came from the same place, and have yet to find it yourself? How do you tell somebody from Polkville or **Aliceville** or Cliffside, who just saw downtown after sunset for the first time, not to let the beauty of the skyline fool them? Charlotte is a place where a crooked TV preacher can steal money and grow like a sore until he collapses from the weight of his own evil by simply promising hope. So don't stare at the NCNB Tower against the dark blue of the sky; keep your eyes on the road. Don't think that Independence Boulevard is anything more than a street. Most of my waitresses

are college girls from UNCC and CPCC, and I can see the hope shining in their faces even as they fill out applications. They look good in their official P. J. O'Mulligan's khaki shorts and white sneakers and green aprons and starched, preppy blouses, but they are still mill-town girls through and through, come to the city to find the answers to their prayers. How do you tell them Charlotte isn't a good place to look? Charlotte is a place where a crooked TV preacher can pray that his flock will send him money so that he can build a giant water slide — and they will. I prefer to hire waitresses from Davidson or Queens College, because when they are through with school they will live lives the rest of us can only imagine, but they are easily disillusioned and hard to keep for very long.

PJ's still draws a wrestling crowd. They are mostly good-looking and wear lots of jewelry. The girls do aerobics like religion and have big, curly hair, stiff with mousse. They wear short, tight dresses — usually black — and dangling earrings and spiked heels and lipstick with little sparkles in it, like stars, that you're not even sure you can see. (You catch yourself staring at their mouths when they talk, waiting for their lips to catch the light.) The guys dye their hair blond and wear it spiked on top, long and permed in back, and shaved over the ears. They lift weights and take steroids. When they have enough money they get coked up. They wear stone-washed jeans and open shirts and gold chains thick as

ropes and cowboy boots made from python skin, which is how professional wrestlers dress when they relax. Sometimes you will see a group of guys in a circle, with their jeans pulled up over their calves, arguing about whose boots were made from the biggest snake. The girls have long, red fingernails and work mostly in the tall offices downtown. Most of the guys work outdoors — construction usually, there still is a lot of that, even now — or in the bodybuilding gyms, or the industrial parks along 1-85. Both sexes are darkly and artificially tanned, even in the winter, and get drunk on shooters and look vainly in PJ's for love.

Around midnight on Friday and Saturday, before everyone clears out to go dancing at The Connection or Plum Crazy's, where the night's hopes become final choices, PJ's gets packed. The waitresses have to move sideways through the crowd with their trays held over their heads. Everybody shouts to be heard over each other and over the music — P. J. O'Mulligan's official contemporary jazz, piped in from Richmond — and if you close your eyes and listen carefully you can hear in the voices the one story they are trying not to tell: how everyone in Charlotte grew up in a white house in a row of white houses on the side of a hill in Lowell or Kannapolis or Spindale, and how they had to be quiet at home because their daddies worked third shift, how a black oil heater squatted like a gargoyle in the middle of their living room floor, and how the whole time they were growing up the one thing they always wanted to

do was leave. I get lonesome sometimes, in the buzzing middle of the weekend, when I listen to the voices and think about the shortness of the distance all of us managed to travel as we tried to get away, and how when we got to Charlotte the only people we found waiting for us were the ones we had left. Our parents go to tractor pulls and watch *Hee-Haw*. My father eats squirrel brains. We tell ourselves that we are different now, because we live in Charlotte, but deep down know that we are only making do.

The last great professional wrestling card Frannie Belk put together — before she signed Ted Turner's big check and with a diamond-studded wave of her hand sent the wrestlers away from Charlotte for good — was Armageddon V, The Last Explosion, which took place in the new coliseum three nights after the Hornets played and lost their first NBA game. ("Ohhhhhh," Big Bill Boscoe said in the promotional TV ad, his big voice quavering with emotion, "Ladies and Gentlemen and Wrestling Fans of All Ages, See an Unprecedented Galaxy of SWA Wrestling Stars Collide and Explode in the Charlotte Coliseum ...") And for a while that night — even though we knew the wrestlers were moving to Atlanta — the world still seemed young and full of hope, and we were young in it, and life in Charlotte seemed close to the way we had always imagined it should be: Paolo the Peruvian jerked his bare foot out from under the big, black boot of Comrade Yerkov, and then kicked the shit out of him in a flying frenzy of

South American feet; **Rockin'** Robbie Frazier squirted a water pistol into Naoki Fujita's mouth, before Fujita could ignite the mysterious Green Fire of the Orient, and then launched a B-52 from such a great height that even the most jaded wrestling fans gasped with wonder (and if that wasn't enough, he later ran from the locker room in his street clothes, his hair still wet from his shower, his shirt tail out and flapping, and in a blond fury B-52ed not one, but both of the Hidden Pagans, who had used a folding chair to gain an unfair advantage over the Thundercats, Bill and Steve). And we saw the Littlest Cowboy and Chief Yee-Hah O'Reilly, their wrists bound together with an eight-foot leather thong, battle nobly in an Apache Death Match, until neither man was able to stand and the referee called it a draw and cut them loose with a long and crooked dagger belonging to the Sheik of the East; Hank Wilson Senior the Country Star whacked Captain Boogie Woogie over the head with his beloved guitar Leigh Ann, and earned a thoroughly satisfying disqualification and a long and heartfelt standing O; one of the Harem of Three slipped the Sheik of the East a handful of Arabian sand, which he threw into the eyes of Bob the Sailor to save himself from the Sailor's Killer Clam hold — from which no bad guy ever escaped, once it was locked — but the referee saw the Sheik do it (the rarest of wrestling miracles) and awarded the match to the Sailor; and in the prelude to the main event, like the thunder before a storm, the Brothers Clean — the Superstud, the Viking, and the Gentle Giant — outlasted the Three Evils — Genghis

Gandhi, Ron Rowdy, and Tom Tequila — in a six-man Texas Chain-Link Massacre match in which a ten-foot wire fence was lowered around the ring, and bald Boris Yerkov and Harry the Hairdresser patrolled outside, eyeing each other suspiciously, armed with bullwhips and folding chairs, to make sure that no one climbed out and no one climbed in.

Now, looking back, it seems prophetic somehow that Starla and I lined up on opposite sides during the Final Battle for Love. ("Sex is the biggest deal people have," Starla says. "You think about what you really want from me, what really matters, the next time you ask for a piece.") In the Final Battle, Starla wanted Bob Noxious, with his dark chemistry, to win Darling Donnis away from Lord Poetry once and for all. He had twice come close. I wanted Lord Poetry to strike a lasting blow for love. Starla said it would never happen, and she was right. Late in the night, after it is over, after Starla has pinned my shoulders flat against the bed and held them there, after we are able to talk, I say, "Starla, you have to admit that you were making love to me. I could tell." She runs to the bathroom, her legs stiff and close together, to get rid of part of me. "Cave men made up love," she calls out from behind the door. "After they invented laws, they had to stop killing each other, so they told their women they loved them to keep them from screwing other men. That's what love is."

Bob Noxious was Charlotte's most feared and evil wrestler, and on the night of the Final Battle, we knew

that he did not want Darling Donnis because he loved her. Bob Noxious was scary: he had a cobalt-blue, spiked mohawk, and if on his way to the ring a fan spat on him, he always spat back. He had a neck like a bull, and a fifty-six-inch chest, and he could twitch his pectoral muscles so fast that his nipples jerked up and down like pistons. Lord Poetry was almost as big as Bob Noxious, and scary in different ways. His curly red hair was Longer than Starla's, and he wrestled in paisley tights — pinks and magentas and lavenders — he had specially made in England. He read a poem to Darling Donnis before and after every match while the crowd yelled for him to stop. (Charlotte did not know which it hated more: Bob Noxious with his huge and savage evil, or the prancing Lord Poetry with his paisley tights and fat book of poems.) Darling Donnis was the picture of innocence (and danger, if you are a man) and hung on every word Lord Poetry said. She was blond, and wore a low-cut, lacy white dress (but never a slip), and covered her mouth with her hands whenever Lord Poetry was in trouble, her moist, green eyes wide with concern.

Darling Donnis's dilemma was this: she was in love with Lord Poetry, but she was mesmerized by Bob Noxious's animal power. The last two times Bob Noxious and Lord Poetry fought, before the Final Battle, Bob Noxious had beaten Lord Poetry with his fists until Lord Poetry couldn't stand, and then he turned to Darling Donnis and put his hands on his hips and threw his

shoulders back, revealing enough muscles to make several lesser men. Darling **Donnis's** legs visibly wobbled, and she steadied herself against the ring apron, but she did not look away. While the crowd screamed for Bob Noxious to "Shake 'em! Shake 'em! Let 'em go!" he began to twitch his pectorals up and down, first just one at a time, just once or twice—teasing Darling **Donnis**—then the other, then in rhythm, faster and faster. It was something you had to look at, even if you didn't want to, a force of nature, and at both matches Darling **Donnis** was transfixed. She couldn't look away from Bob Noxious's chest, and would have gone to him (even though she held her hands over her mouth, and shook her head no, the pull was too strong) had it not been for **Rockin' Robbie Frazier**. At both matches before the Final Battle, **Rockin' Robbie** ran out of the locker room in his street clothes and tossed the prostrate **Lord Poetry** the book of poems that Darling **Donnis** had carelessly dropped on the apron of the ring. Then he climbed through the ropes and held off the enraged and bellowing Bob Noxious long enough for **Lord Poetry** to crawl out of danger and read Darling **Donnis** one of her favorite sonnets, which calmed her. But the night of the Final Battle, all of Charlotte knew that something had to give. We did not think that even **Rockin' Robbie** could save Darling **Donnis** from Bob Noxious three times. Bob Noxious's pull was too strong. This time **Lord Poetry** had to do it himself.

They cleared away the cage from the Texas Chain-Link Massacre, and the houselights went down slowly until only the ring was lit. The white canvas was so bright that it hurt your eyes to look at it. Blue spotlights blinked open in the high darkness beneath the roof of the coliseum, and quick circles of light skimmed across the surface of the crowd, showing in an instant a hundred—two hundred expectant faces. The crowd could feel the big thing coming up on them, like animals before an earthquake. **Rednecks** in the high, cheap seats stomped their feet and hooted like owls. **Starla** twisted in her seat and stuck two fingers into her mouth and cut loose with a shrill whistle. "Ohhhhh Ladies and Gentlemen and Wrestling Fans," Big Bill Boscoe said from everywhere in the darkness, like the very voice of God, "I Hope You Are Ready to Hold On to Your Seats" — and in their excitement 23,000 people screamed *Yeah!* — "Because the Earth Is Going to Shake and the Ground Is Going to Split Open" — *YEAH!*, louder now — "and Hellfire Will Shoot Out of the Primordial Darkness in a Holocaust of Pure Wrestling Fury" — they punched at the air with their fists, and roared, like beasts, the blackness they hid in their hearts, *YEAHHHHHH!* "Ohhhhhh," Big Bill Boscoe said when they quieted down, his voice trailing off into a whisper filled with fear (he was afraid to unleash the thing that waited in the dark for the sound of his words, and they screamed in rage at his weakness, *YEAHHHHHHH!*) "Ohhhhhh, Charlotte, Ohhhhhh, Wrestling Fans and Ladies and Gentlemen, I

Hope, I Pray, That You Have Made Ready" —  
YEAHHHHHHH! — "For . . . The FINAL, . . . BATTLE . . . FOR . . . LOOOOOOOOOVE!"

At the end of regulation time (nothing really important ever happens in professional wrestling until the borrowed time after the final hell has rung) Bob Noxious and Lord Poetry stood in the center of the ring, their hands locked around each other's thick throat. Because chokeholds are illegal in SWA professional wrestling, the referee had ordered them to let go and, when they refused, began to count them out for a double disqualification. Bob Noxious and Lord Poetry let go only long enough to grab the referee, each by an arm, and throw him out of the ring, where he lay prostrate on the floor. Lord Poetry and Bob Noxious again locked onto each other's throat. There was no one there to stop them, and we felt our stomachs falling away into darkness, into the chaos. Veins bulged like ropes beneath the skin of their arms. Their faces were contorted with hatred, and turned from pink to red to scarlet. Starla jumped up and down beside me and shouted, "*KILL* Lord Poetry! *KILL* Lord Poetry!"

Darling Donnis ran around and around the ring, begging for someone, anyone, to make them stop. At the announcer's table, Big Bill Boscoe raised his hands in helplessness. Sure he wanted to help, but he was only Big Bill Boscoe, a voice. What could he do? Darling Donnis rushed away. She circled the ring twice more until she found Rockin' Robbie Frazier keeping his vigil

from the shadows near the entrance to the locker room. She dragged him into the light near the ring. She pointed wildly at Lord Poetry and Bob Noxious. Both men had started to shake, as if cold. Bob Noxious's eyes rolled back in his head, but he didn't let go. Lord Poetry stumbled, but reached back with a leg and regained his balance. Darling Donnis shouted at Rockin' Robbie. She pointed again. She pulled her hair. She doubled her hands under her chin, pleading. "CHOKE him!" Starla screamed. "CHOKE him!" She looked sideways at me. "*HURRY!*" Darling Donnis got down on her knees in front of Rockin' Robbie and wrapped her arms around his waist. Rockin' Robbie stroked her hair but stared into the distance and shook his head no. Not this time. This was what it had come to. This was a fair fight between men, and none of his business. He walked back into the darkness.

Darling Donnis was on her own now. She ran to the ring and stood at the apron and screamed for Bob Noxious and Lord Poetry to stop it. The sound of her words was lost in the roar that came from out of our hearts, but we could feel them. She pounded on the canvas, but they didn't listen. They kept choking each other, their fingers a deathly white. Darling Donnis crawled beneath the bottom rope and into the ring. "NO!" Starla yelled, striking the air with her fists. "Let him *DIE*. Let him *DIE!*" Darling Donnis took a step toward the two men and reached out with her hands, but stopped, unsure of what to do. She wrapped her arms around herself and rocked back and forth. She grabbed her hair and started

to scream. She screamed as if the earth really had opened up, and hellfire had shot up all around her — and that it had been her fault. She screamed until her eyelids fluttered closed, and she dropped into a blond and white heap on the mat, and lay there without moving.

When Darling Donnis stopped screaming, it was as if the spell that had held Bob Noxious and Lord Poetry at each other's throat was suddenly broken. They let go at the same time. Lord Poetry dropped heavily to his elbows and knees, facing away from Darling Donnis. Bob Noxious staggered backward into the corner, where he leaned against the turnbuckles. He held on to the top rope with one hand, and with the other rubbed his throat. "Go GET her!" Starla screamed at Bob Noxious. "Go GET her!" For a long time nobody in the ring moved, and in the vast, enclosed darkness surrounding the ring, starting up high and then spreading throughout the building, 23,000 people began to stomp their feet. Tiny points of fire, hundreds of them, sparked in the darkness. But still Bob Noxious and Lord Poetry and Darling Donnis did not move. The crowd stomped louder and louder (*BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!*) until finally Darling Donnis weakly raised her head, and pushed her hair back from her eyes. We caught our breath and looked to see where she looked. It was at Bob Noxious. Bob Noxious glanced suddenly up, his dark power returning. He took his hand off of his throat and put it on the top rope and pushed himself up higher. Darling Donnis raised herself onto her hands

and knees and peeked quickly at Lord Poetry, who still hadn't moved, and then looked back to Bob Noxious. "DO it, Darling Donnis!" Starla screamed. "Just DO it!" Bob Noxious pushed off against the ropes and took an unsteady step forward. He inhaled deeply and stood up straight. Darling Donnis's eyes never left him. Bob Noxious put his hands on his hips, and with a monumental effort threw his great shoulders all the way back. No, we saw Darling Donnis whisper. No. High up in the seats beside me, Starla screamed, "YES!"

Bob Noxious's left nipple twitched once. Twitch. Then again. Then the right. The beginning of the end. Darling Donnis slid a hand almost imperceptibly toward him across the canvas. But then, just when it ail seemed lost, **Rockin' Robbie Frazier** ran from out of the shadows to the edge of the ring. He carried a thick book in one hand and a cordless microphone in the other. He leaned under the bottom rope and **began** to shout at Lord Poetry, their faces almost touching. (Lord Poetry! Lord **Poetry!**) Lord Poetry finally looked up at **Rockin' Robbie**, and then slowly turned to look at Bob Noxious, whose pectoral muscles had begun to twitch regularly, left-right, left-right, like heartbeats. Darling Donnis raised a knee from the canvas and began to stalk Bob Noxious. **Rockin' Robbie** reached in through the ropes and helped Lord Poetry to his knees. He gave the book and the microphone to Lord Poetry. Lord Poetry turned around, still kneeling, until he faced Darling Donnis. She didn't even look at him. Five feet to Lord Poetry's

right, Bob Noxious's huge chest was alive, pumping. A train picking up speed. Lord Poetry opened the book and turned to a page and shook his head. No, that one's not right. He turned farther back into the book and shook his head again. What is the one thing you can say to save the world you live in? How do you find the words! Darling Donnis licked her red lips. Rockin' Robbie began shouting and flashing his fingers in numbers at Lord Poetry. Ten-Eight. Ten-Eight. Lord Poetry looked over his shoulder at Rockin' Robbie, and his eyebrows moved up in a question: Eighteen? Yes, screamed Rockin' Robbie. Eighteen. Ten-eight. "Ladies and Gentlemen," Big Bill Boscoe's huge voice said, filled now with hope, "I think it's going to be Shakespeare's Sonnet Number Eighteen!" and a great shout of *NOOOOO!* rose up in the darkness like a wind.

Lord Poetry flipped through the book, and studied a page, and reached out and touched it, as if it were in Braille. He looked quickly at Darling Donnis, flat on her belly now, slithering across the ring toward Bob Noxious. Lord Poetry said into the microphone, "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?" Starla kicked the seat in front of her and screamed, "*NO!* Don't Do It! Don't Do It! He's After Your Soul! He's After Your Soul!" Lord Poetry glanced up again and said, "Thou art more lovely and more temperate," and then faster, more urgently, "Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May," but Darling Donnis crawled on, underneath the force of his words, to within a foot of Bob Noxious. Bob Noxious's eyes were closed in concentration and pain, but still his

pectorals pumped faster. Lord Poetry opened his mouth to speak again, but then looked one last time at Darling Donnis and buried his face in the book and slumped to the mat. Rockin' Robbie pulled on the ropes like they were the bars of a cage and yelled in rage, his face pointed upward, but he did not climb into the ring. He could not stop what was happening. Please, we saw Darling Donnis say ro Bob Noxious. Please. The panicked voice of Big Bill Boscoe boomed out like thunder: "Darling Donnis! Darling Donnis! And summer's lease hath all too short a date! Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines! And often is his gold complexion dimm'd!" But it was too late: Bob Noxious reached down and lifted Darling Donnis up by the shoulders. She looked him straight in the eye and reached out with both hands and touched his broad, electric chest. Her eyes rolled back in her head. Starla dropped heavily down into her seat, and breathed deeply, twice. She looked up at me and smiled. "There," she said, as if it were late in the night, as if it were over. "There."