

My Father The Man in the Chicken Wire Carnival Cage

My Father Wild Bill Fresno's job at the carnival was to get people to hate him and get them angry enough to pay money at the chance to hurt him, and he loved it! He was a wonderful Father who loved me and my brother a lot, and I don't care what my brother Henry says, I think he loved his job even more than he loved us. Anyone at the carnival with two nickels could buy a baseball or an empty bottle to throw at him sitting in his cage, the front of which was made of chicken wire mesh and one 2x4 at the top. He didn't use a dunk tank, and he *certainly* wasn't painted like a damn clown.

Those clowns that insult you, the ones you might still see today in what's left of the carnivals, they're just cheap knockoffs. Seeing my Father and seeing them was like going to watch the Yankees in '27 then coming home to your little four-year-old brother playing teeball in the backyard. Father started his act later in the night when over a third of the people were nearly stumbling drunk just *itching* to spend the rest of the money they didn't have, and the truth is there wasn't nobody else better at insulting people for money in the whole damn country.

He was not tall my Father, not even of average height, nor handsome, bald, started poor as dirt, but he was a great respectable man. The cage was built on the backdoor of one of those old school buses about six feet off the ground. It was set up so my Father could squeeze into the cage from the back of the bus with just enough space for a few bottles of beer and a little stool for him to sit in. Hell that's all he needed. By the time I arrived at the Carnival he was just starting to draw a decent crowd every couple of towns, usually more on the 2nd and 3rd nights,

and even on one of those early nights the crew had to cut the show short and drive the bus away because they were chanting for Father's blood.

It was his gift, it was theatre, a one-man show. Father just had to have two beers to start and the words would come flying right out of him like he was possessed, or like they had always been there and he was just pulling them out of the sky. Years and years before that he had started at the bottom at the carnival, loading and unloading and setting up the rides and cleaning all the elephant and lion sh*t, but as the years progressed he got crowds as big or, in some of the poorer sh*thole towns, bigger than all the animal shows, freak shows and clown shows combined.

"Holy Jezus Chr^st this \$@%#ing town stinks and looking at all you poor miserable repulsive asymmetrical people here is going to make me go blind in the one \$@%#ing eye I got left."

A special favorite act of his was holding up a wrapped bar of soap, then slowing peeling off the wrapper and excruciatingly slowly explaining to the crowd what it was and then pantomimizing how to use it like it was some mystical ancient object the crowd had never seen before, implying of course that all the residents in that town were dirty and never bathed, and in some of the towns we travelled to the smell would almost have you believe it to be true.

Father was a quiet courageous patriotic man who never swore a word when he was around me or my brother. Me I ran away from my aunts and joined up with the circus he was at when I was 13, and they had come the closest to us they had ever come before, only one-and-a-half states away! This is before his act had taken off to the moon and he started making some

real money. He was furious; *Damn you Delia!* he bought me a ticket on the railroad and ordered me back to their house, but after a few days when I still hadn't budged he got me a job at the very bottom pecking order of the carnival, probably simply as a way to encourage me to go back to the aunts house on the hill as fast as possible.

But I stayed on just to spite him and because it was *still* in many ways better than living with my aunts who tried to force me to wear dresses and stay inside in their stupid gossipy small town in Maine. Eventually I cut out my own niche in the carnival too like you would cut out someone's beating heart but that's a whole other story.

This story here is about my Father, Wild Bill. He was a sweet modest man, who would never hurt a fly. He never lifted a finger to me, and one of the only times I ever seen him yell or curse outside of that cage was when I showed up broke at the carnival when I was 13-years-old. Up until then he had sent money back to my aunts and he had sent me letters for all my birthdays as far back as I could remember.

He was a loving, humble man who respected his elders and was kind to animals, even insects. A man who never thought he was better than another soul on Earth. Sure he drank a lot but never in the daytime, and like I told you drinking was an essential part of his act. He couldn't perform without it. But hell squeeze him out in that cage hanging on the back of the bus after 1-and-a-half beers and he could probably do it blind, as long as he had another three or four beers at his feet.

He would start slow. "Warm-ups" he called em. He was only advertised as The Man in the Chicken Wire Cage. Kind of a mystery before he became the whole damn show. He'd ask

them where they're from or a little bit about the town. Be courteous. "Nice place. Yes Yes. Uh-huh. Yeah." You see my Father was actually a very good listener. Then after being all friendly with some local guy he would ask the fella about his wife or maybe his daughter.

"You got any kids sir?" And if the guy would say no then my Father would move on to the guy's wife or maybe his sister." "Oh yeah. Is she at this wonderful carnival we got here tonight? Oh yeah? Wait *that's* her?! I'm sorry Sir I was confused because the doctor said I got perfect eyesight in my one eye, and with that red barn yonder there I thought your wife was a heffer that got loose and found her way into a flour sack." He slapped his knee. "Hell on wheels."

And this is where the money came *pouring* in.

Baseballs or empty glass bottles to throw at my Father for ten cents apiece or three for a quarter. The chicken wire had some give, but most of the time not quite enough to strike my Father, at least not on the early throws. It was an ideal situation because the cage bent in the more bottles and balls were thrown at it so it never appeared to the crowd like he was completely protected. Plus the bottles could shatter on impact with the 2x4 and take his other eye out, which he liked to prod the crowd with time and time again.

"Will one of you coal-mining scum disgusting hicks please *please* take my other eye out with a piece of glass so I don't have to look at your miserable poor slimy repulsive \$@%#ing faces anymore? *Please?* Jezus if someone packed up and moved out of Dante's ninth ring of hell to come here they would IMMEDIATELY turn back around and drive right back into the *gates of Hell itself.*" He shook his head and looked out at the crowd dumbfounded.

"Oh you don't understand. Oh um I have to make it simple. Hell is better than this town is what I'm trying to say. Do.....you.....under.....stand.....me.....you...DUMB...MORONS?"

He'd always get beer froth all over his mustache and white beard. The more he drank the faster the insults would come pouring out of him. He wore dark pants because he p*ssed himself. The Carnival Boss forbid him from pi**ing naked in front of and mooning the crowd again after that night in Painted Post when he sniffed a little of that moonshine, for fear of getting run out of the next town before they could even start setting up.

"Screw me? Screw me?! Yeah your wife did last night you F!##*%% \$@%#wit. You work at the dog food factory all day and pay for a house for us to screw in all day long, darling. Or do you wanna screw *me* baby? Is that *it*?! Is that why you're getting so red cause you wish you had something up your butt right now?"

He usually did forty-five minutes to an hour. More than that and he would start repeating himself and slide into getting too drunk, and by then the cage was usually pushed in or almost ripped in some places enough for an unlucky baseball to crack open Father's skull.

When he really got going the crowd would be yelling and hollering their own insults back at him. Then Father would give the signal for them to slide the mic under the door behind him, and he'd pick the mic up and drown out the crowd, and nine times out of ten that would make the crowd more furious than anything else you can imagine.

"WHAT'S THAT? I can't hear you REDNECK MORONS!?! Can you speak up and please let me know if there's maybe one of you who doesn't have the arm of a 9-year-old prepubescent girl? Young it means young you dumb dipsh*ts. I could put my face right up

against the cage, and I STILL don't have to worry about getting hit. Here. Free shot. Eyes closed. Let's see if any of you degenerate hicks knows how to throw a \$@%#ing baseball." A ball and then a string of bottles slammed very close to his face on the cage.

"I swear to Chr[^]st I don't even need a cage I don't think. Hey RAFF?" He looked behind him and bent down like he was talking with someone on the other side of the door on the old school bus.

"RAFF is there a way to just take this cage off because I swear I don't even \$@%#ing need it? I could just sit here on this stool and not a SINGLE SOLITARY bottle or ball would hit me. I have no doubt on earth about it. Take it off. TAKE IT OFF! I'm telling you all right now Raff I don't need any protection in this town with all these women with arms like scarecrows!"

He put the side of his head up against the chicken wire mesh again. He didn't put his face up against the cage every night, and when he did it was only for a little while. Some nights he just put his knuckles on it, but even just using his knuckles could really drive the crowd wild. He would usually only put his head next to the wiremesh on the nights he got really wasted. I could usually tell he was getting wasted cause he'd start stuttering a little bit.

"OK free shot. Can can *any* of you throw a ball faster than a schoolgirl?" He chuckled his hard guttural laugh, slapping his knee. "I didn't \$@%#ING THINK so. Or or better idea would somebody just throw a grenade and put all of us outta our ka collective F&\$*%ING MISERY?!?!"

He saw a bottle coming and moved his face away at the last second, and the audience collectively ooohed for a second and then BOOOED him louder than ever. He had amazing

reflexes, even wasted, and him putting his face and knuckles against the cage was one of the main components that made the act so successful. He was in real danger when he did that. One crack of a baseball against his temple and that could be it. Lights out. For good.

You ask Ray Chapman about that if you don't think a baseball can send you to heaven. You ask one of those unlucky birds that sheer evaporated flying across a fast ball pitched in front of the baseball mound. Father got up from it last time he got hit about two years back a few minutes after he got knocked out, and the left side of his face swelled to twice its size for about a week and he drank bourbon to compensate but he recovered and wasn't exactly scared to do it again, although he did it much less frequently after that.

He had amazing quick reflexes, and he had pulled his head and hands back at the last moment many times before, but when he was really getting the crowd riled up people would start throwing their own bottles empty *and* full from farther back. And no matter how fast his reflexes were he couldn't see every ball or bottle coming. He had only been hit half-a-dozen times on the knuckles, twice directly on the head, plus the unlucky sliver of glass from a broken bottle on the 2x4 that took out his left eye.

Father would do his research too; he wouldn't just go into towns calling people fat and lazy and stupid. He would learn stuff about the town the day the carnival arrived at a new town, the only day he'd be able to walk around before his act in the chicken wire cage. He'd learn about the local factory closing or the towns terrible football record or some devastating fire or accident. He would memorize the rich people's names in town and then praise them in his act and tell all the poor people that they were poor because they were lazy morons and they should all be happy, not just happy but *grateful* and *fortunate* that they had Mr. _____ in town

who didn't mind putting in a hard days' work, not like the rest of you lazy dirty coal-mining hick redneck moron slobs.

He liked to push the lazy narrative in towns where he knew for a fact they worked themselves to the bone for pennies. It wasn't about just swearing and calling people dirty and stupid and ugly; he knew where to hit people. He knew the way to say the opposite of what something really was to drive them up the freaking wall. How to use local tragedies to make a percentage of the crowd willing to give up ownership of their shacks to afford the chance to slam a baseball against his temple.

After he got hit with that bottle hard and was out for a few weeks The Carnival boss tried out two or three other guys for the job, but it just wasn't the same. The second guy got some of the crowds to boo and swear at him, he had seen Father's act dozens of times so he copied a lot of Father's act and people disliked him sure and he sold a few balls, but he wouldn't risk his head or his knuckles and the majority of them didn't hate him enough anyway to spend their hard earned change for a small chance to hurt him.

Of course after my Father did his act in whatever town we were in he would never be able to walk around afterwards. So most of the time he would send me into town to get him supplies, usually more beer and bread and eggs.

Near the end of his life carnivals were fighting over him, and there was one offended Italian man in the crowd one summer night who legitimately offered up a clean \$40 to make my Father disappear. What ended up happening to that man discouraged anyone else in the future poor or stupid enough to take up that the job of making Wild Bill disappear. He had become

important to several different carnival promoters, and nobody in that county ever saw that man with the \$40 again or if they did they sure as sh#* didn't recognize him at first.

Eventually he worked it out to 25% of the earnings he took for himself, which some nights was damn near a fortune. He saved and saved and put us through school and left both sides of our family houses and land and money and heirlooms. My Father was a great one-of-a-kind man. A hero. A man to look up to. A family man. Most Fathers in that time just ran away. Disappeared in the middle of the night, and back then there wasn't any child support lawyers chasing them down, taking money out of their pay.

Even before he became rich he sent my aunts money four times a year and sent me \$2 every Chr^stmas and \$3 every birthday like clockwork. Do you have any idea how much money that was to a kid back then?! The year I turned ten he even sent me a \$5 bill and said in the letter he was so proud of me to and to keep the money secret from my aunts and spend it on whatever I wanted in the whole world, whatever would make me happiest! That's the kind of man we're talking about here.

A dime wasn't nothing like it is now. Just six or seven cents could get you a big lunch special with coffee and pie too, even less than that in some places off the main roads. And that's practically the only hot food some of these poor folk got all day. Some of them working hard all day in the sun for twenty or twenty-five cents, who had their pay counted up in their heads weeks in advance, months sometimes, would throw a dime or two bits at Wendy manning the bottle and baseball stand just at the *chance* to get at my Father. That means some of these people, I know for a fact, some of these people were skipping the next day's lunch for just a few \$@%#ing throws at my Father. That's how much people thought they hated him.

Other carnivals tried it and they could insult people well enough but most workers would never risk the bones in their hands or their temples, and even if they did they still never got those grudges or those surges in the crowd where it felt like they could lose control at any moment. And maybe some of those places got crowds at the end of the night, but there wasn't a crowded line of people swearing, lined up at the baseball/bottle booth to pay money, I know that much for damn sure.

They'd watch a man in a cage insult their neighbors and their friends, but they sure as hell weren't giving up their lunch tomorrow for a chance to hurt him. They might frown and swear back at him, shaking their fists but it was a quick surface anger, almost a reflex, and before they even got home their minds had already wandered back to their own poor miserable lives.

My Father took all his 25% near the end and invested it and made even more money. He wasn't a gambler, he didn't chase ladies, none of that stuff. He saved practically every cent of that money he earned from those poor people wanting to kill him, and he gave our family and me and my brother Henry a better life. And our kids and now their kids as I'm writing this. Money in a time when nobody had money, and even the people who had money wouldn't spend it except on stuff they needed to survive, essentials like food and wood for the stove.

He gave us this beautiful wonderful house, the farm and the carriage house behind it and the 17 acres across the road and the two houses there to the aunts at a time when some kids were practically starving around the country. When half the population was waiting in bread lines or unemployment lines for work, for ANY kind of work, all across the country.

It wasn't just us neither. Father donated a fortune to the animal sanctuaries across the northeast, and half a fortune to Irish Catholic churches over the years. Yes I had seen him with my own eyes go to give confession, eat the body of Chr[^]st, and go inside to confess his mortal sins.

According to Henry, our Father always felt guilty for insulting all those fine folk in those poor communities, and even though it didn't look like it it wasn't easy for him to come up with those bad things to say to strangers. He was a religious man, a quiet, modest man who wanted absolution and provided for us for generations to come with the only means available to him.

"You worthless son of a bitch. Holy hell." My Father turned around, grabbed a beer off the floor of the cage, and twisted the cap off at the same time he twisted himself forward. He was getting roused and looking like he was having the best time of his life. He was doing his southern preacher character

"YES YES! uh. I have seen it people. I have seen the SIGNS YES! YES FRIENDS! Oh LORD YES! I HAVE SEEN THE SIGNS AND THEY ARE EVERYWHERE YES IF YOU JUST UH LOOK! I SAID IF YOU JUST LOOK TO THE NORTHWEST IN THE SKY PEOPLE I SAY IF YA JUST LOOK UP THERE ARE SIGNS EVERYWHERE UH!!"

He started doing his little religious dance like he was filling up with the fever of God. He didn't have much space, even with the newer slightly bigger reinforced cage, but he made use of all the space he had.

"SIGNS PEOPLE SIGNS EVERYWHERE. CLOUDS in the sky, the SUN and the EARTH, old scripture SIGNS, Road SIGNS, all of them SIGNS pointing to the fact that every

single one of you DUMB BASTARDS is about one of the most GULLIBLE MORONS I EVER LAID MY ONE EYE ONE BEFORE I SWEAR ON THIS HERE COPY OF THE GOOD BOOK! OH LORD OH LORD help me help help me please help me understand how I could be looking at so many ugly dirty hicks in the SAME \$#%#ING PLACE AT THE SAME TIME UGH!?! SORRY sorry I'm...this isn't part of the act. I think I'm going to be sick oh God OH NO!! This isn't part of the act I'm sorry, RAFF RAFF I'm getting sick I think I gotta stop because I can't stand the STINK OF THESE \$#%#ING DIRTY CESSPOOL pieces of HUMAN GARBAGE anymore! Can we never come back here? PROMISE ME we'll never come back here. PLEASE! PROMISE ME and HOLY HELL THEY CAN'T EVEN \$#%#ING THROW BASEBALLS BECAUSE THEY'RE so EMMACIATED because they can't afford to EAT ANYTHING EXCEPT POWDERED MILK AND WHITE GOVERMENT BREAD!!!"

He was especially good with little kids. When he invited Henry and his bride Tara to the estate she already had Ethan and Susan by then and was preggers with Samantha. He took to Ethan and Susan immediately. Took them for walks around the huge family property. It was a thrill for the children. You could see the change in them almost immediately, living in that tiny shack and now having this huge woods and house to run around in, *their* house and woods.

Father even got them a dog, and then a few cats sort of adopted us until I retired from the circus too and moved in to take care of the estate, and by then the aunts and some cousins were living just across the road and it was this big family again, in a time when most families were near starved and broken and living in rail cars.

He never gave up going on the road and doing bookings though. It's because he loved his work. How could he not? He got to say whatever he wanted to whoever he wanted and he

got paid for it. You put that job up in the want ads you know how many people you'll have lined up by the end of the day? Hell on hot water.

I watched my Father in over 300 towns all over the country and even some in Canada too, while my brother Henry's trying ta tell me that our Father felt bad about all the terrible insults he's said to people over the years. Henry never saw Father's show in his life more than a handful of times; he just can't believe he could enjoy being such a villain. But me I know he *was* and *should* be proud of every insult he ever threw out to every poor hick in every poor town. He owned it and he earned it putting his skull on the line every couple of nights when he got really wasted and rested his face against the cage.

My father was a saint and a genius, and I can only hope to reach close to the heights he reached in this wretched world. Every man his age and older *breaking* their backs for pennies a day if they were *lucky*, and he learned how to rake in almost \$40 a day sometimes, without lifting a finger. Just a visit to the local library, the four most recent newspapers of the town, and a six-pack and he could practically transform a crowd of drunk and desperate locals into a mob with burning torches, ready to put up the deeds to their scrap of land for a chance to shatter a bottle on his big broad forehead.

My Father loved what he did and he was good at it. He had been there; he knew about how little the people had and how dumb and worthless most of them really looked to the successful people in the world. He wasn't a villain; he was a capitalist hero that started as a lowly working-class hero, at the bottom shoveling elephant sh%^ and loading and unloading the whole park for eleven cents a day and some soupy leftovers and maybe if he was lucky

somewhere dry to stay out of the rain. A self-made man from the change of all the desperate working men in hundreds of small towns all across the great big country of ours.

Years and years later word came to me some man with a lazy eye and a beautiful wife he insulted the night before, saying she was cheating on him because he couldn't keep his eye on her got my Father up near Niagara Falls. Those pansies in New York never *could* take a rib. He pulled out a S&W revolver from his jacket and got off two shots at Wild Bill in his cage in front of the whole crowd before the Barrel twins jumped in and dragged the man away. Father had just been getting warmed up too.

A hush went over the crowd as my Father started moving around on the floor of the cage. Crawling at first then he grabbed onto the bottom of his stool, set it upright, coughing and spitting up blood, but trying to speak. Whispering at first, hushed grunts between the coughs and moaning. Then he was pulling himself up on the stool, speaking louder but still unintelligible and the crowd was hushed, leaning closer to hear.

"thumb thuckers."

"What'd Bill say, Vern? What truckers? Did someone call for help?"

"Oh hell Vern! Somebody's gotta..."

"snot truckers. I said gawd. that dumb frucking..." He groaned.

"What's he saying?! Everyone QUIET! Quiet down. What's he saying? Help's coming. HELP IS COMING BILL!"

"Lord he got it twice. He got it bad, someone HELP HIM! HELP HIM!"

Quiet down. QUIET Norma! He's trying to speak. I want to hear."

"NOT. no God...He." By all accounts my Father opened his eyes and looked around the crowd from left to right and then back again. Then he looked down at the blood soaking through his white shirt on his belly and hands.

"SHUSH QUIET!"

He licked one of his fingers coated in blood.

"Tersts hmmm like jebby!"

"What'd he say?!"

"Shuuuuush he said it...."

"I said it tastes like jelly you stupid \$@%#ing deaf morons."

"HE..."

"Did I get gutshot by a BRAINLESS OFFSPRING of one of you DUMB IDIOTS!? TWICE?! JESUS someone wheel me out of this hellhole before before. I don't care about dying, I DON'T WANT TO DIE HERE!! Please GOD *ANYWHERE* BUT HERE!!!"

"Oh LORD HE'S..."

"HUT THE \$@%# UP you brainless incestuous redneck HICK!! Please Jesus don't let your idiot moron voice be the last voice I hear before I RAFF RAFF.../!"

"HEY \$@%# YOU!!!!!"

"AFFF take me to the GARBAGE DUMP on the other sidda town right now, I'd rather die there PLEASE ANYWHERE ELSE ON EARTH so I don't die HERE among these WRETCHED IGNORANT COWF#%^ERS!!!!!!!!!"

"THAT HE'S A BASTARD!! KILL EM. KILL EM PA!!!!!"

They told me the crowd went completely wild, demanding they be sold more balls and bottles to throw at my Father dying on his little stool, but dying with a smile on his wrinkled face and blood dripping down his white beard, winding up an already frenzied wild crowd, everyone there screaming obscenities back at him until their voices cracked, even the women and children, and him insulting them with his face against the cage until his last dying g*dd*mn breath. My Father my Hero.