

Tuesday Nights at the Bull Barn

Tuesday nights are for trying out villainy.

Nickname or surname? A nickname often telegraphs your intentions to the crowd. Calling yourself Evil Eric makes apparent everything that is to come. But some surnames, especially German ones with an H, convey a more slowly unfurling dread. *Hackman, Hammerstein, Hiss*. Each can do a lot of the work for you.

Mask or no mask? I like a mask myself, but sometimes a face is more frightening. A hook nose, a jagged scar, a row of broken teeth jutting up from your jaw like spent shells out at the range. Spend enough nights at the Bull Barn and you earn one from some hopped-up kid from Clayton or Dalhart who doesn't understand how to come off the top rope without causing real harm. No reason to rush a disfigurement.

Weapon or no weapon? A weapon usually helps people remember you. It can be something common used in an uncommon way, like a chair you hold over your head. But I find that the unusual weapons are the most memorable. Knew a guy who used a samurai sword and then built a whole persona around it. Called himself Rising Sun. Spoke in a heavy accent, like his voice could make an underbaked character rise from the mat. We all knew his real name doubled as a verb for vomit. Buy Ralph a beer and he'd stage whisper a secret. "My granddaddy smuggled it home after World War II. Took it off a Jap-o-nese soldier he shot in the face. In the face." Get Ralph drunk and he'd admit he bought it from the pawn shop down at Fourth and Western. Probably bought it at lunch, since it's just down the block from the tire shop where he works.

Most of the time, Ralph pumps gas and takes orders. *Regular or diesel? Half a tank, full tank, double tank?* When the shop manager can't find someone else to do it, the manager has Ralph bust

tires off tractor wheels, even patch a flat or replace a broken valve core in time to get big wheels running again. But mostly, Ralph pumps gas and dreams about doing something else.

Most everyone in Bomb City does.

The attractions of Tuesday nights at the Bull Barn are self-evident. A crowd yelling out your name. A set of bright lights catching every sequin on the tights your sister stitched up for you from a pattern she bought at Joann's. A concessions stand selling the beer some dumbass from Dumas will throw at you. It can make even the Bull Barn feel like a stage worthy of a real personage, a someone.

But not tonight.

"Bow before me, earthlings! I am King Jupiter, ruler from a distant planet," says the yahoo on tonight's undercard. "I have travelled across the universe to pulverize and smash you into obedience," he says in a British accent badly slathered over an Umbarger twang.

"See my royal scepter, my shaft of power." He brandishes a broom handle spray-painted gold and Bondo'ed into one of the finger holes of a child's bowling ball. "And fear it!" The ersatz King raises his regal staff above his hand and begins to jerk it back and forth like a badly animated ruler, each movement like a jump cut from one movement to the next. His next cartoonish motion comes soundtracked with a loud crack, and I almost think the new king has summoned thunder from outer realms into our tumbleweed town. His shouts say something much earthier.

"Shit, Darryl, shit. It broke on my goddamn foot. My foot!"

In the crowd, whatever fear had been generated by his junklord gimmick sours into scorn as they realize his shaft is splintered into two and the bowling ball is resting atop the crushed toes of his bare right foot. A few of his friends, one of whom must be Darryl by the way he slaps the deposed king, lead him out of the ring and into an ambulance. The paramedics turn on lights for

effect too, even run the horn to escape traffic as they drive off to the emergency department at High Plains Baptist.

Baptist sponsors Tuesday nights. Fridays and Saturdays too, with a banner advertising their excellence in orthopedic care. It declares them “Amarillo’s Hospital For Joint Reconstruction and Replacement” and offers free ambulance rides for all wrestlers. Members of the audience who get so caught up in the action that they get chest pain or have a slip n’ fall coming down from the stands will have to pay, but the ambulance is always right there, so Baptist gets most of the business from the Bull Barn. Except on busy weekends when a fight doesn’t go like planned, and it can look like a barroom brawl over here. Then, Northwest Texas takes the overflow. Unless you’re a veteran. Vets always get shipped over to the VA.

Karl was a vet, so the VA would fix him up when he was so beat I couldn’t stop the bleeding or reduce the fracture. That wasn’t often. Before they discharged me, I’d learned a lot in service. I knew how to set a nose straight and put a shoulder back into its joint. When I had to work on Karl, he never cried out, just looked at me. Him holding my gaze while I worked on meant I had to look into his eyes. Always surprised me. They looked scared, like a beat-up little kids’. They spoke to me, but he never said a word out loud about how much it hurt, so no one else in the Barn knew he was scared. He was that committed to the bit, I suppose.

His bit was so good he could use his real name. Never brought his last name into it. Hinkel Septic was painted on the side of his work rig in shadowed letters. In the Barn, the crowd shouted out his name for him. Before the announcer could call it out, his many admirers in the crowd would chant his first name and an adjective that announced his actions, “Killer Karl, Killer Karl, Killer Karl!” The crowd loved how simple Karl kept it. They watched every second he spent in the ring.

His matches never ran long. He couldn't stand the whole verse chorus verse aspect of wrestling. He was there for the hurt, his and the other man's too. He'd let some supposed hero hit him for a round or two, which kept the promoter happy and reminded Karl what it feels like to feel something. When the bell rang for the third, everyone knew Karl was stepping forward to send a man to the hospital.

He stepped forward right. Black leather pants over his bare ass. Black leather jacket over a black undershirt which framed a gold cross necklace. Jet black hair greased up into a little pompadour that saluted his wife, who favored the look, and then back and down over his collar, because the crowd still feared a longhair. Black jungle boots, with a Panama sole. He looked villainous, all right.

But you know a villain by his actions, my mother always said.

Mama liked the wrestlers whose actions were clear. If you were a good guy, you stayed good. No heel turns. If you were a villain, you acted badly. No conversion stories. Not in wrestling anyway. She once asked me, "Ever notice how no wrassler ever dresses up like a father? A mother neither. Ever notice that?"

I acknowledged that I had, while keeping a further thought to myself. *You'd think that someone would considering how much hurt a father can inflict and how much fear a mother can induce.* Mama was the only one I still feared in the whole town. The rest of them, the loan sharks and the landowners, seemed to me they were just playing a part, and not as well as the Barn's wrestlers. But Mama? I feared what she thought of me, back in town again, after she had worked hard to send me away.

She never said much about my failures, but I could hear it in the edge of our conversations. Some nights, she'd take the long way home from the Barn, out through Bishop Hills. Before Christmas, it was place in the county to get the Christmas spirit. We would drive slow, admiring all

the lines of those fine houses trimmed out in lights, peering inside a parted curtain to glimpse the decked trees inside and the presents spilling out below. I never minded that.

Outside of Christmas, she would drive through the neighborhood and point out the best houses and their owners. She'd usually drive extra slow by the homes of men I had grown up with. Booby Pierce owned a five-bedroom, with a pool, after settling a big case. Tee Curry owned an eight-bedroom, with a paddock and acreage, after finishing med school. "Real fine houses, real fine men they became," she would say, sucking in a little bit of air in admiration between the gap between her front teeth. That always hurt. The distance between them and me became the distance between me and Mama. The hurt grew as we drove away, picking up roller dogs from the 'Toot n' Totum to eat back at her place, next county over, where I took up my usual station on her couch.

That was my life. Sleeping at my mother's. Remembering what might have been. Working at the Barn.

Mama never came with me on Friday and Saturday nights. She would drop me off since I still wasn't allowed to drive on my own. I'd always make a show of inviting her in. "Too many people," she would say, "Too much noise." True, but I think she also preferred the unpolished personas coming together on Tuesdays. On Tuesdays, she would park her Dodge without invitation and walk in with me. I think she liked seeing the Tuesday night try-outs as they practiced against a wrestler who knew who he was.

Her favorite wrestler was a little Latin fella from Nazareth who dressed like a rooster, mostly in black, but with these brilliant red flames on his mask. He would pace the ring, not just his side, but the whole square, glaring at the mat, popping his shoulders back and raising his knees as he walked his territory. He made these peculiar little squawks. He never looked at his opponent while

he was wearing his black. Then he would lower his head, fold the black cape over himself, and drop it to the floor in a flourish.

Unwrapped from the cape, we could see he was wearing a blood red leotard with his name across the front in sequins. *El Gallito Eduardito*. His strong calves strained against the leotard as he would half-squat to build up his welcome, a roaring *cock-a-doodle-do*, the nonsense words rumbling across the Barn in his deep bass voice. As his welcome echoed, he would fall to his knees and then raise up with a torch he had been hiding within the cape. He would tap the end of it hard against the mat, then ignite the wick end with kerosene he had been secreting in his mouth. It looked like a tongue of fire escaping from his mouth, real Pentecostal like. Might have been the best weapon at the Barn. At least top two.

My mother loved the torch, the mask, the whole bit. She would turn away from me from the moment Eduardito began his entrance. She enjoyed every step. So did most at the Barn.

I'm working on my 100-day medallion, so it's been a few months since I've tasted it myself, but I can tell you that good villains sell bad beer. To sell harder stuff, you'd need to pay more to the county. It's cheaper to sell the weak stuff at volume. On a weekend night, I can go through a dozen kegs of foamy 3.2. Sell it in two varieties. *Regular. Lite*. I'm pulling the tap all night long for the meat packers down from the IBP and the ranch hands up from the Canyon E-Way and the women who put up with them. Sell it in two sizes. Large for \$4. Extra-large for \$8. *Cash Only*. No credit cards at the Barn. We set the prices to catch the change from small bills as tips. We catch all the tips on paydays, no matter how the fights are going.

Need a good fight to catch tips by the following Tuesdays.

Eduardito always provided the good fight. Mama wasn't alone in being unable to take her eyes off him.

Ralph was drunker than usual. Which meant he had gone through his whispered lies, through his slurred truths, and all the way to a sullen silence. Instead of heading back to the stands, he was buying the beers and drinking ‘em right there next to me. We chatted over the first few, but eight beers into the night, the only words he was exchanging were with himself.

“Little rooster. That’s he all he is. ‘Gallito’ sounds special. It ain’t. Just a little rooster who squawks too much. Squawks like he needs to have his spurs clipped.”

I figured it was just talk and tended to the other varieties of Tuesday night drinkers. Ralph kept it up.

“Needs a hot potato. Or a reciprocating saw. Something capable of delivering a good trimming. Cut ‘em down to his real size.”

Ralph moved his hands through the air in some pantomime of a veterinary procedure. Caught up in his stupor, he wound up slapping himself. Almost knocked his next beer off the bar, but I took it off before it could spill out.

“Okay, Ralph. That’s enough for tonight. Let’s switch to coffee. You know I keep a pot going back here. Let me pour you a cup. Want creamer? Sugar?”

“Want beer. I’ll tell you when it’s enough. This whole town ain’t got enough for me. I could take on any man. And pin ‘em, pin ‘em good.”

I wiped the bar top in front of him with a kitchen rag, even though the dirt floors of the Barn mean there’s no real way to keep the place clean. You settle for wiping the dirt away for a moment or two.

“Let’s just get you home tonight. Who can I call to give you a ride home?”

Ralph spits in the little clearing of soapy water I rubbed into the bar top.

“No one. I need to be here. Need to be in the ring against the Gallito and clip ‘em good.”

“Let me call you a cab. Head into that ring tonight and you’ll leave here in a Baptist bus, headed for hospital.”

“Don’t tell me what to do. You’re not half the man I am. He ain’t neither.”

Ralph staggers away.

My mother is back at the bar.

“Slow night for the rookies, right? Last one couldn’t have been poured into a fight, even if you melted him down. None of these whey-faced newcomers could match my Eduardito.”

“No, Mama, none could. Not tonight, anyhow. Slow night out here for new blood.”

“Sometimes, it seems like they ain’t making good wrasslers anymore. Not like Eduardito.”

“Or Karl. You know they’re sparring next, right?”

Mama’s bored look blossomed into pleasure.

“Well, Blow, Sand, Blow! We’ve got a reason to stay and watch. I had been thinking about telling you to find your own ride home, but I’ll stay to watch the Killer take on the Gallito anytime, even if it is just a Tuesday night. Karl’s meaner than a skilletful of rattlesnakes.”

With that, Mama slapped her hands on her hips and leaned back against the bar.

The bar smells like beer, but anyone from the Rillo will tell you the Barn smells like money. Everything that stinks smells like money, folks here like to say. We have a lot of cowshit here, its strong sour smell of what even a ruminant cannot swallow perfuming the air across the counties. It piles up out here, in acres upon acres, underneath the feet of steers to be fattened on feedlots and slaughtered out at the IBP. It’s what really built this town. Amarillo figured out how to turn cowpies into cash. And lots of it.

They built a Bull Barn, made of metal and wood, with a dirt floor. It stands empty most days, tumbleweeds gathering against its fences, and the dust blasting the paint off its steel structures and weathering its wood so that we put out for new 2*4's every year to make bleacher benches. We always put the new wood in time for tri-county state fair. Then we hose the Barn clean, and people come from all over the Panhandle to show out, wearing their fair jeans and their new Stetsons. They show off prize animals, prize poultry, prize vegetables. It's alive those days.

The rest of the year, it is closed, except for three nights each week, when it gives off prizes for wrestling.

Prizes go out on the weekends. \$100 for undercards, \$200 for main matches, \$500 for main events. Tuesday nights, the only prize is a chance to punch your ticket to the weekend stage. Karl never cared for none of that, just the fight, so he came by on Tuesday nights when the bill was short. He was here tonight, reprising his years-long struggle with the Gallito. The two of them had agreed to work on a new set tonight, featuring Karl's new spinning toe-hold. He would hold the Gallito's leg, press his ankles tight between Karl's leathered thighs, then spin around as Gallito cried out for mercy on the mat. For his part, Gallito wanted to practice a new move, what some folks used to call cattle mutilation, but Gallito called the bridging double chickenwing. Gallito was going to stand over Killer Karl's back, tuck Karl's arms under his armpits, then flip Karl over into a bridge and pull Karl's arm tight against his own body.

They had worked it out in advance, texting each other a sequence of possible combination moves—*Spinning toe-hold. Bridging double-chickenwing. Sunset flip. Tree of woe. Pumphantle. Reserve crucifix. Gorilla press. Cobra clutch. Mexican surfboard. Trailer hitch. Indian deathblock. Texas cloverleaf. Hammerlock. Camel clutch. Sugar hold*—until they had settled on a Tuesday night routine. Killer Karl would, as usual, go without a weapon or a mask. And, just as usual, the Gallito would wear a mask, but tonight he would try out a new weapon.

Mama saw it first.

“Karl, look out, Karl. He’s got something.”

Underneath the crook of Gallito’s arm was a gunnysack, tied shut with twine strings. The rough burlap of the sack strained under the weight of its contents, then moved. Portions of the bag would raise up into a sharp form, like mountain peaks forming on a time-lapse topographical map, then pull down, as if an earthquake had suddenly levelled the shape. Something alive was inside, straining for freedom.

Then Gallito loosened the drawstrings. A yellow beak. A red comb topped with seven sharp knifepoints erupting up from its head.

“Karl, Karl, it’s a rooster,” Mama yelled. “He’s got a rooster in his gunny!”

Gallito opened the gunny further and the rooster jabbed its hackle back and forth, the beak of his squared-off head slicing into the air before it. As Gallito released the creature onto its yellow legs, it spread its black feathered wings away, over its brick red body and settled himself onto the ring. Even from the bar, I could see that the rooster’s loins were strong and broad and ready for the fight. Looked like a radio rooster to me.

“Hell of a weapon,” I murmured to Mama.

“Oh, ain’t it though? Hardly fair to Karl. How’s the Killer gonna get away?”

As we watched from the bar, the rooster sped towards Karl’s feet, like it was going to scratch out a little feed from the ground. Before it brought its beak to Karl’s boot, it spread its wings, flapped once, then flew up into Karl’s face, its wings forming a feathered veil before his face. Gallito planned to swarm him then, but the bird went off script and took a bite from Karl’s face. As the Killer cried out, he swatted the bird away, and the Gallito rushed in anyway. Imitating the rooster’s

own cry, he rushed forward with a backhand chop, slicing Karl's chest again and again with an upwards swing of his knuckles.

Karl flexed backwards with each blow. The crowd cooed, "Woooo!," playing their part. The Gallito played his too, winding up for each blow, then pulling it right before it landed, but selling its force to the crowd.

Then Karl tasted real blood in his mouth. *Salt. Iron.* He clenched his teeth like he was biting down on a bit. He held onto the taste for a few seconds, then released the hurt into his whole frame. He struck back at Eduardito with a feeling, working his way through the mapped out moves, but pulling no punches.

Eduardito looked panicked, his eyes wild from behind the mask, and moved backwards in the rung. The crowd took it as part of the act, whistling and whooping. Mama saw it for something else.

"Oh, Karl, don't hurt him. That little rooster just got away from him. Have mercy, Killer!"

I don't know what Karl heard from the crowd, or if he was even listening, but he kept moving through Eduardito, never bloodying him, but surely striking hard enough to raise bruises underneath the faux rooster flesh of the costume. Mama didn't like it.

"Now that's real villainy," she hissed. "Wickedness-ss-ss."

The rooster didn't like it either. He was still in the ring, strutting about. His wings were folded tight against his breast, his head proud and still. Then, he squatted a bit, bared his wings, and flew up into Karl's face, drawing blood on the other cheek, while loudly squawking.

Eduarito fell back from the fight, slumping against the mat, while the rooster fought on, slapping Karl with his wings, scratching him with his talons, and pecking hard at his exposed flesh with his beak.

Karl's blood began to darken on the mat.

The crowd fell silent but could not turn away.

So everyone could hear when the Killer fell to his knees on the mat with a loud thud.

Ralph surely heard too. He came from some lonely corner of the Barn, ducked under the rope and was in the ring, right there in the middle of the action. He wasn't wearing no costume or mask, just standing there. His hands were by his side, right palm open, and, in his left hand a worn eight-inch piece of steel. I knew what it was.

"Mama, he's got that valve extractor from the tire shop."

"What, what's he doing with that fool thing in the ring?," she asked.

We saw, quick. Ralph flipped the valve extractor from one hand to the next and lunged at the rooster. He jabbed its business end against the bird, which squawked the louder and turned its beak upon Ralph.

It was hard to see from the bar, but it looked like Ralph got one more shot at the bird, bracing the bird with his left hand while he jabbed it with the extractor with his right, before the rooster landed the final blow.

Ralph yelled.

"My eye, my eye. Got my eye."

The crowd all sucked in the dusty air of the Barn as it saw the bloody globe which once occupied Ralph's right eye socket, bounce once, twice, up and down on the mat. Ralph fell backwards onto the mat, stunned. The rooster fell on top of him, dumbly pecking away at the half-blind man as its dying reflex.

The ambulance boys started up and were almost to the ring when Killer Karl rose off the mat. Karl stepped forward, scooping Ralph's eye from the mat with his left foot, then drawing his right foot up in the air to crush the neck of the injured bird.

"Mercy," Mama said, "that was a mercy killing. No act of villainy at all."