

# Rodeo Daze by Barry Friedman

It's the manure that gets to you.

Saturday, August 6. It's the final night of the 25th Annual Pawnee Bill Memorial Rodeo, and we're at the Lakeside Arena, two miles outside of town, and it smells like every animal here has suddenly and simultaneously defecated.

"You have to get used to it," says Melissa, my girlfriend, who grew up in southwest Kansas near meat processing plants, feed yards and flatulent livestock.

"And why are we here two hours early, anyway?" she asks, standing in the heat (101° according to the last bank) in the dirt parking lot.

"Why? I hear ten thousand people will be here, that's why. By the way, glad you wore shoes, considering what you're four inches away from stepping in right now?"

"And what do you know about it? You're from New York. You ever been to a rodeo?"

No.

We drive back to Harrison Street and decide to eat at Click's Steakhouse, rather than El Vaquero, which is open but has no cars in the parking lot. We see a sign for the rodeo.

*Advanced tickets: \$6 per night. 3-Day Pass \$20*

We can't be reading that right.

We are.

I'm thinking even without the rodeo in town, Click's is packed on Saturday nights. Kids with spurs, teen girls in boots and cutoffs, and XXL men in XL large shirts stand outside. A man inside, sitting with his wife, is trying to calm down his children. His youngest is screaming, his wife is bouncing the older one on her thigh—a thigh, I imagine, that's significantly larger than the one he married. The man's head is in his hands.

He can't be older than 20.

There's a story, it's on the menu, that when Click owned the place, someone ordered fries at dinner, something Click did not serve. "Who ordered the @!#?@! fries? They can go across the street to the @!#?@! Tastee Freeze for that!"

You hope the story is true.

Click is long gone; I ordered the @!#?@! fries.

Traffic is now bumper to bumper on the way to the arena. Up ahead, we see a panting dog, standing on a toolbox in the back of a pickup, his head moving in and out of the open window of the cab.

"Write that down," I tell Melissa, "*Mangy dog in back of a pick-up.*"

"The dog isn't mangy."

It's a little before seven. The rodeo starts at eight, but we want to see the Pawnee Bill Memorial Rodeo Pageant, whose application includes the warning: *NOTE: Should the Pawnee Bill Memorial Rodeo Queen or Teen Candidates become married or pregnant during her reign, she will automatically forfeit her crown, buckle, saddle, banner, and trailer to the first runner-up.* The application also alerts the girls that each night after the competition, *You will return to your lodging accommodations and will not leave for any reason.*

Animals aren't the only ones locked up after a rodeo.

Employees of Hampton Rodeo Company, the event's producer, collect admission by the sign in the parking lot that reads ...

*Contestants and Vendors Keep Right! Everyone else go straight*

We go straight.

Gordon William Lillie [a.k.a. Pawnee Bill] produced Wild West Shows in the early part of the twentieth century, including, "Pawnee Bill's Great Far East Show," where he hired Mexican cowboys, Pawnee Indians, Japanese performers, and Arab jugglers.

Rodeo is an American show.

"Rodeo is not my God anymore. You must be born again in the name of Jesus Christ."

The man speaking is in the booth on the north side of the arena, sharing his testimony, asking us to repent, reminding us that if we break one commandment, we break them all (I think about the crackers we stole from Click's),

and promising to be around tonight for "fellowshipping."

The beauty pageant contestants-- Princess, Teen, and Queen categories--all in heavy makeup and sequin shirts but none from Pawnee ride in on horses. Before the winners are crowned, a girl is named Miss Congeniality, one wins for Horsemanship, others are runners-up. Every girl is something. They leave, one last ride, fast, around the dirt field, waving and smiling.

A man on a tractor--he's on his cell--the giant rototiller behind him unearthing the ground, begins circling the pit. He's the *Zamboni* machine operator between periods of a hockey game.

The announcer for the event, Danny Newlin, a bald man in a cowboy hat with an unruly mustache and a wireless mic, enters on horseback, circling the arena, extolling the wonders, beauty and metaphor of the sport.

"I am the luckiest man in the world," Newlin says, "because I get paid to do what I love. I could talk forever about the rodeo."

At times he does.

The IPRA (International Professional Rodeo Association) is in Pawnee this week as part of the second annual Oklahoma Twister Rodeo Series. Last week, Salisaw; next week, Hanna, Oklahoma. Summer for rodeo is like spring for the NBA. Someone wrote that schedules like these make professional sports more like vaudeville.

Newlin keeps making reference to tonight's *performance*.

Rodeo contestants are paid only if they win, place or show in an event (they're like horses in that respect). If they finish in the top eight at the end of the IPRA season, they will also be awarded a commemorative belt buckle. Most, though, are lucky to cover expenses. There's no guaranteed money, no salary. They will pay the \$80 entry fee tonight, sleep in trailers and pickups on sun-baked fields, do their own laundry, crack ribs in the mud.

Chris LeDoux sings about it.

One cowboy, Newlin tells us, got married earlier today.

"Wonder how long his wife'll put up with it?" he asks.

I'm a comedian, I've traveled. I can tell him. Three years max.

It's 8 p.m. The stands are full. Ten thousand? Maybe not, but still more than attend a weekend of Tulsa Shock games. The performance starts after the national anthem, after Newlin proclaims that John Wayne is his hero, why vegetarians would benefit from eating burgers, and how God needs to protect us from terrorists. I look across the arena, up one section, down another, and other than the African American in the blue Hampton shirt who helped us find parking and who is now on horseback on the south side of the field, I see only white faces.

A rodeo clown on the infield wears a *Stillwater Steel and Welding Supply* sign that hangs to his ass. He and Newlin have a routine.

"Hey, Danny," the clown says, "heard someone say you were sexy and wanted to meet you."

"Really?" says Newlin, in mock excitement.

"Yes. The note was signed by Tom and Steve."

During tie-down roping, a particularly brutal event, a calf is released, chased, thrown to the ground (it's called flanking) and then tied up by at least three of its legs, upside down. One of the calves breaks free from the rope (the pigging string). It lingers for a moment, like a ballplayer admiring a home run, then proceeds to run around the arena, a victory lap, a triumphant *Fuck You* to both the rider on the ground who wanted to humiliate it and a crowd that came to see its subjugation. Melissa, who *did* go to rodeos and got drunk afterwards with guys who had initials for names, calls out, "Run, little calf, run!"

Soon, though, it is corralled, returned to the staging area--its moment of freedom, *schadenfreude*, vindication over.

The clown enters the arena driving a red jalopy with a man in a wig in the backseat and a "Just Married" sign on the bumper. The skit ends with the clown throwing large brassieres out of a suitcase, the "groom" chasing, a little kid in the driver's seat, and the car backfiring and doing wheelies.

I start thinking about that scene in *Diner* where

Fenwick asks Boogie, "You get the feeling there's stuff going on we don't know about?"

I walk down to get a water, a lemon Popsicle, something to combat the stillness and stench of the night air. I find a port-o-potty. Waiting, I am fourth or fifth, I see an elderly man to my right who is clearly angling to cut in line. He is slightly bent, crazy thin, an OU hat on his head. My urge to go is not great and my prostate is just a guest here; I should let him in. He has an aging urinary track; this is a home game for him. But there's a principle at stake, a protocol.

No.

He looks at me; I look back. He inches forward; so do I. We're two lanes of traffic merging into one figurative and literal shithole.

"The line's back here," someone says, saving me from having to. I'm not sure I would have.

"An old guy tried cutting in line to use the bathroom," I tell Melissa when I return.

"You let him, I hope."

During the Wild Cow Milking competition, one of the cows collapses. According to IPRA rules, cows in this event can only be milked on all fours; so while the Roper and Milker stand over it, the cow struggles to get to its feet. Something is wrong. It stands for a moment, then falls again. It gets up, wobbles, falls for the third time. Breathing, but erratically, it lies motionless. Rodeo personnel ride around it, watch it, but don't attend to it. Newlin rattles on about upcoming events and thanks more sponsors, a diversion often used by rodeo announcers when an animal is in trouble. Eventually, the cow stands, steadies itself, and limps to the pen. The crowd cheers, as if the animal, like some athlete, was headed to the locker room for x-rays.

"Time to slaughter," said a man a few rows up.

We've been here three hours. A big man in a shirt that looks like a Rorschach Test walks towards us. He is familiar; he was at Click's earlier. He can't possibly be hungry, I think, but he's eating a corn dog. He stops, obstructing our view. It doesn't matter. I've had enough. The events, and there are still four to go, are maddeningly similar--more roping, more tackling, more jerking of animals, more cowboys being thrown to the ground.

Football, baseball, and basketball unfold like novels: fourth quarter interceptions, ninth-inning home runs, 3-pointers at the buzzer; rodeo is a collection of short stories in search of a narrative: defiant steers, weekend cowboys chasing dreams, young girls with pageant smiles vying for the trailer, a debate over whether it's sport or animal abuse, small Oklahoma towns in the dead of summer.

"You ready to go?" I ask.

Melissa gets up before I finish the question.

Earlier in the evening, former Pawnee Bill Rodeo Queens threw promotional items into the stands. We caught a sparkly pink ball with a "Sonic" logo.

"Got the ball?"

"Got it."

We thank the woman behind us who has been nice enough to swat bugs and mosquitoes and other flying evil from our backs all evening.

"You leaving already?" she asks.

Behind the stands, we see a girl with an autographed photo of Dakota Missildine, Miss Rodeo USA 2010. We pass the Christian Rodeo Fellowship trailer, the root beer concession stand, and then maneuver our way through men and women and children in cowboy hats and Wranglers. We stop to watch the cows and steers and bulls, lying in a giant holding area, waiting to play the part of the Washington Generals, and then walk to the exit, stepping over and between six piles of freshly deposited dung that inexplicably lead to the parking lot.

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