

Go Ahead

by Roger Weaver

A drag queen thrown from the mechanical bull Thursday night is my fault, they say, they meaning management. And because of the ensuing brouhaha and the ambulance and the medics and a thousand flannel shirts straining for a look, I failed to pick up Jenny, my six-year-old daughter from the day school out in Millersylvania. Which means I'm on my wife Elaine's shit list. On top of that I am given my first Employee-Ratings Noose, which is just a plain piece of rope you have to wear instead of your regular belt and buckle. The second time you make a mistake though, you wear it around your neck. If you receive a third demerit and you don't want to walk home jobless, with your very own Noose around your neck, you let them brand you on the buttocks with the "Kickin' Chicken company logo. Because it's mandatory, I wear a red bandana and a crimson polo shirt with a fat egg-laying chicken sewn onto the breast. Rick the manager makes employee policy, so instead of the "Kickin' Chicken" logo, he gets to wear a black cowboy hat, alligator boots with real spurs, and a silver star that says "The Man".

Ms. Freshly, one of the regular queens, usually just has a cowboy cocktail or two while watching the young bucks square-dance, but that night she was more inebriated than usual: her tear-splotched eyeliner made her look distinctly raccoonish. Now, the Cowpokes aren't allowed to let anyone rodeo drunk. Riding Rusty is not for the liquored-up or the lovelorn and even then, we start you off on Slo-Poke, the gentlest setting. I had suggested that perhaps she might be safer and more satisfied mixing it up in one of the Duel-to-the-Death Bar-brawl Rooms. From around belt-buckle level, she waved a broken beer bottle up at me and said, "I am a babe not a brawler, Nester. Now may I please have a fucking ten-finger lift-up please?" My name isn't Nester. I wasn't even wearing a nametag. But I'd like to have another child someday, so I raised her up into the stirrup.

I'd been distracted by the dance floor, maybe that's why I accidentally set Rusty to the "Kick-Ass" setting. Our technical

Cowpoke, Kevin, had put the Robotronic Rustlers, programmed to play "Jailhouse Rock", in motion behind the chicken-wire stage. Because the Rustlers are designed to mimic western swing for the young-at-heart, not rock n' roll rhythms for gyrating, leather-pants wearing party-goers, they always look dangerously over-caffeinated.

My wife was getting up on the piano to do her feather boa routine when I noticed Rick over by the CD jukebox eyeballing her as he smoked a Cigarillo. Standing underneath the speakers then, one could clearly hear me say, to myself: "I don't like you Rick".

A few minutes later as I sat on the toilet pondering this, I heard the first of a series of prophetic sounds that proclaimed, loudly from above:

"PASTURE D YOU HAVE A DOWNED AY-1, HEAVY ON THE SPECIAL SAUCE PRONTO"

I pushed my way through Pastures A through C, feeling fellow Cowpokes and customer's eyes on me. Always ahead, I could see Rusty, immobile in the center of the room, and knew then what I would find- Ms. Freshly sitting on a bar stool with her ankle wrapped in a cold compress. As I swung myself over the corral fence though, I saw the awful truth: kicking up sawdust amidst the peanut shells and cigarette butts, an enormous Mardi-Gras bead-wearing raccoon going into convulsions and Rick, in the center of it all, directing the medical crews and passing out free drink tickets.

Today I've been demoted to the Bar-Fight Simulator room with Desmond, Larry and Fritz. The three of them have been dressing as Mexican bandits for months now. They get bonuses for keeping their mustaches extra long and waxy. I am issued temporary peel-and-stick facial hair. Each of them wears a Noose around their neck so right away there is some pep-talk about trying to be professional. After we do our stretches and warm-up exercises we all get into position. Larry and Desmond sit down at a table in the center of the room and begin playing cards. Fritz bartends and I lean up against a post near the bathroom. A bus of dudes from the Cattleboro Men's Choir have strapped on VR headgear and begun flailing around the nearly empty room, punching phantom villains and quick-drawing

with unseen gunslingers. It's our job to keep them from banging into each other too badly.

Half an hour later, I am having my head slammed against the bar by a masked man whose butt cheeks protrude from his leather chaps, when I see Elaine and Rick emerge from a control room door. Rick is running his finger along the fringe of her black and white cow-print mini-skirt. Do I get up, walk over and confront Rick, tell him what I think of him? No. Do I maybe drag him out of the room, throw him through a fake front window so he'll get the hint that Elaine is my wife? No, no I don't. I crawl along the back of the bar and steal a half-full bottle of whiskey from the lips of a blind choir singer. I do this in full view of the cameras, knowing that I will now wear the Noose. Then I go outside, sit on a Dairytown Dispatch newspaper box and take up smoking again.

The Dairytown Dispatch newspaper box is conveniently located next to the telephone booth and the fire hydrant, at the far end of the Kickin' Chicken parking lot, ten feet from the intersection. From its perch one can survey the heart of Cattleboro and simultaneously take slugs of whiskey out of a paper bag without the whole world suspecting. Atop the main building there is a welded steel and neon sign of a female cowboy lassoing a fleeing fowl. The chicken flaps, attempting to fly, but she always snares it in the last frame. Across the street, dug tenaciously into the earth is the Plowboy Motel and Outdoor Pool. Behind the Plowboy is an oily patch of water known as Butter Lake. From the rear end of Butter Lake, spread out all the way to the Interstate lies Schwartzeneggerville, a massive encampment one hundred thousand strong of families living largely in tents and broken-down cars.

I've been out there about five minutes when I notice the white stretch limo two spaces over is occupied. A smiling old lady opens up the side door and waves at me with a bejewelled wrist, beckoning me it appears, to join her. She wears a white Kangol cap, and pink sweatpants with matching Pumas. Her face makes me think that she should be living in a gingerbread house. She also sports a necklace with the word "GOLD" inscribed in gold. "Come in dear. Share some

of that good drink with me, and we'll talk about it. I'm Claudia Gold." As I step cautiously into the limo, I notice she is accompanied by a toad-like man with a receding white hairline who is busy peering through a pair of binoculars. He has donned a pink dress with a white belt and sparkly slippers. Beside him sits a small mustard-colored dog. "The name's Bob", says Bob without looking up, "And that's Play-Doh. He's all I've got to show from Wife Number Three.... a pollution fronts rollin' in."

He hands me the field glasses and I peer out over the wasteland. Indeed, off in the background, Schwartzenneggerville seems to be shrouded in a sinister greasy smear that swells like a zit in need of popping. Repulsed, I scan the horizon. The Plowboy pool is filled with people in formal business suits apparently having mixed drinks and hobnobbing. Even more strange, I recognize a film star in the pool, Peter Poolman, who had been in that ocean disaster movie, Death Wave. Peter Poolman- the actor who does his own underwater stunts; who fought off a shark with a wrist-watch; who makes masked mobsters defecate in their drawers. He stands in the shallow end of the Plowboy pool in an all-white tux, highball in hand, as those around him apparently laugh at his one-liners. Then, to the right of him, I notice Rick and Elaine play-wrestling with a beach ball.

I decide I am going to go kill Rick, but Bob and Claudia hold me back. "Do I want to go to the Coca-Cola Correctional Facility?" asks Bob "Do I want to end up living out of my Chevy Nova?" asks Claudia. Well, no, no I don't.

"With women and money worries you have to have a plan", Bob says. "It was through a plan that we came to have a very nice mobile home", says Claudia. Bob repairs and drives the limo, while Claudia handles the finances. The "plan", as it turns out, largely involves the two of them being frugal with Claudia's inheritance, and using public restrooms. Plan "B" which they have not yet acted upon, involves holding up a Smurfies Convenience Store. Claudia would use their shotgun and of course, Bob would be the driver. Bob suggests that if I play hardball with my wife, she will back down.

The whiskey is beginning to make participation in an armed robbery sound like sound financial advice when suddenly, I see Elaine, streaming wet, skipping back across Relocation Road. I get out and meet her half-way to the Chicken. I put my hand around her waist and she says "No, you'll get wet". I try to play hardball, remind her that we are married, but instead of backing down she laughs and tells me that she and Rick are not just good friends. They are going to the Cattleboro Drive-In later on to see Peter Poolman's new movie, OperationOpenOcean.

"Go ahead" I say. I should not have said 'go ahead'. I should have gone over to the Plowboy then, and had it out with Rick, man to man. Instead, after unsuccessfully attempting to borrow Bob and Claudia's shotgun, I stagger back into the Chicken for my Salad Bar shift in the Rooster Room.

Today, for some reason, I can't help thinking of the salad eaters in the Rooster Room as cow-like. They graze lazily at the bar, then, in their own private corner of the room, proceed to masticate their carrot sticks and celery stalks, grinding beans and croutons into a pasty cud. Perhaps it is the whiskey, but I cannot help but stare out at them from my work station. Probably it is because most of us cannot afford beans or vegetables and instead subsist on government-issue meat and cheese cubes (and those are only available during the Slaughtering months). My daughter, like most children her age, has begun to break out in meat sores and acute acne. I tell myself that I work extra hours at the salad bar so that one day, Jenny will be able to afford the occasional vegetable.

As I think this, I'm at the bar gripping the ten-gallon jug of Ranch dressing, attempting to fill a plastic container. It's difficult because my new neck noose threatens to dip into the dressing each time I pour, and my head is still swimming from the whiskey. Just then, I see Peter Poolman standing on the other side of the salad bar. Somehow, he has magically dried off and seems dressed for an afternoon of yachting. He smiles a good-natured smile in my direction as he picks up some bean sprouts with his plastic tongs. I smile back at him weakly, and then I crap my pants.

I scurry out to the kitchen and prematurely punch out, ensuring that the branding iron awaits me. How will Jenny ever be able to live down the shame of a father with a stick-figure chicken branded on his ass? I feeling like driving the Nova up to the Nabisco Overpass and throwing myself onto oncoming traffic but I remember that it is Friday and Jenny needs me to pick her up from school and drive her over to her weekly dermatology appointment.

As I walk over to borrow some ill-fitting clothes from Bob, I notice that the pollution front has hit. An ashen fog is rolling through Cattleboro. The white Caddy has turned a funeral gray and the Plowboy pool looks like a giant clam sunk in a tide flat. I have trouble finding the Nova. Once I locate her I strap myself in and do a donut in the parking lot dirt, spraying gravel up behind me. Swinging out onto Relocation Road I look into my rearview mirror and realize I have just run over Rick.

I think better when I'm driving, when I'm away from people. Out on the open road one has a few moments to respond before they walk right out in front of you; you can swerve to avoid hitting them. I think about Elaine, who has a Masters degree in astrology and about Jenny who wants to be just like her Mom. Elaine is a Cancer, Jenny a Pisces, and I am a Sagittarius, which means Elaine and I can vote in the general elections but we cannot go off on the State Vision Quest as Jenny can, and maybe one day be allowed to work on Wall Street and have a chance to eat vegetables. I let the twenty miles to Millersylvania roll by, try to forget this particular week, and try to focus on the good; try to get a plan going that doesn't involve armed robbery. I drive with my knee and using both hands, unfasten the Noose from my neck, toss it into the back seat.

I pass by the American Fork Manufacturing Company and then a fairly common sight: a throng of unemployed guys smoking primitive beer bongs at an ancient overhang, what must once have been a "bus stop". I park about two blocks from the school and walk the rest of the way so as not to embarrass Jenny in front of the other kids who must trek the twenty miles back to Schwartzeneggerville. On the way I pass by a fire-blackened supermarket and pausing to

bend down to tie my shoelaces, I catch sight of myself in the sooty display window: a balding, middle-aged dad dressed entirely in baggy blue denim. A man in an army of men who don't know they're in an army.

And then I hear it, passing Levi's Lumberyard, *another* distant voice speaking to me. Above the sound of jet planes and locomotives I hear Glen Campbell *singing* to me:

“Where hustle's the name of the game,
and nice guys get washed away like the snow and the rain...”
and seconds later, there they are- a gaggle of kids led on a long leash singing-

“...like a rhinestone cow-boy...” And the tears are about to come when I see Jenny. She's not on a leash. She walks towards me in her long powder-blue coat and her raven black hair cascades down from underneath her knit hat with the nubs on it.

We don't talk much as I drive. The wipers work hard against the grime which accumulates in a vague “W” on the windshield. On the way back into town the traffic slows to a crawl. As we go over the Nabisco, a crowd has gathered. Apparently, they are convincing a man to follow through with his jump off the bridge. I ponder the irony of this and look over at Jenny. The poor kid has a face like a sausage and pepperoni pizza. For some inexplicable reason, I start explaining why I am wearing ill-fitting denim, tell her that I met a dog named Play-Doh, mention that I would never think of killing myself. I finish my spiel just as I pull into the Democratic Party Dermatology Center. Just before she gets out, she turns to me and simply says “Word”.

By the time I pull back into the Kickin' Chicken the pollution front has passed on. I feel resolved about the branding. However, this feeling of well-being promptly deflates upon seeing the back-end of the Nova sinking with a flat tire. To make matters worse, as I am bending over to assess the damage, my belt buckle pops off. I can hear the security doormen snickering as I crank the jack, pulling up my jeans every five seconds. It doesn't help much that Bob keeps hovering over me in his pink dress, trying to give me mechanical

advice, suggesting that a skirt might be more comfortable than pants. Claudia asks me if I would like her to go over and give security a dose of her switchblade, but I decline.

I'd just concluded that I needed a new back wheel when I hear my name, GARY RAYMO, being called from some cloud up in the sky. GARY RAYMO! I see the chicken weathervane summoning me. GARY RAYMO TO THE HAYLOFT! Rick has had Jimbo, the octogenarian maitre d', page me from behind the glass counter where he

rings up customers. Aside from being Rick's eyes and ears, Jimbos only other known responsibilities are restocking the after-dinner mints and toothpicks and keeping the cardboard leukemia fund display upright. On my way upstairs I pass by his register. He seems to have slunk off to his dungeon, so I make sure to vigorously rap on the "for service" bell.

The manager's office is entirely filled with hay bales. A colossal wagon-wheel chandelier hangs over the room and feed bags cover the walls. I walk in and Rick is sitting in a hay bale chair with his real alligator boots up on a hay bale desk. He's wearing a neck brace that looks like a giant marshmallow. "Pull up a hay bale" he says. I pull up a hay bale. He's absently reading a Western Union telegram to himself, one of those messages that are always punctuated by the word "stop". I am imagining that it reads like this:

"Rick, this is Elaine. Stop. Meet me at the Plowboy, Room 12, 6 p.m. Stop. I don't want this feeling to ever stop. Stop."

Rick stops and puts down the print-out. He reminds me that the Kickin' Chicken is the only all-queer Wild West fun park in the Ramada Fair-Trade Reservation and that *there* is where the money is to be made. He asks me if I am happy with my demotion. I say I realize that Bronco Busting is serious business and I know my lack of respect for the Bull was the last straw. I'm not going to fire you he says, because your daughter loves you. She would like to see you make Mexican Bandit before she graduates from high school, sir. That small sir that he tacks on at the end works its voodoo. My

mouth is agape and I involuntarily drool on Bob's pants. Rick attempts to nod, but smiles neutrally instead. Then he tells me to change into a Cluckin' Cleaners outfit so that I can mop up the vomit in the parking-lot phone booth before the public branding.

One can approach vomit as vomit or one can approach vomit as one might approach an archaeological dig. One can muse over what food products emerged from what person to produce this particular eruption. Are there traces of hair? Foot prints? Did they leave a balled up pair of dirty socks and soiled underwear nearby? Why did they use red lipstick to tag the Plexiglas of the phone booth? Why is the phone dangling there? This particular case involves digging out a pair of plain high heels that stand perfectly preserved in a pile of puke. How far did someone travel to come to drink too many cowboy cocktails, to presumably make some kind of painful phone call to some special someone, to stand outside the puke then somehow step into the puke?

As I mop up the puke, mentally I take a road trip to Tabasco Falls to see the lava flows. There I muse on the fiery bowels of Mother Earth and the volcanic eruptions that buried whole civilizations under hot ash. I, imagine the couples fused together in their beds forever, the family members overwhelmed by lack of oxygen unable to locate each other in the common room. I ask myself whether the couples had finished their copulating, whether any of them were able to find final words.

"May I ask you, do you smoke *weed*?"

These don't sound like final words.

"*Weed*, my poor man, do you smoke *weed*?"

It is Peter Poolman. He is still dressed in his yachting outfit and he is asking me a question.

"*Marijuana*?"

"No. Not really", I say.

"That's excellent. For I was wondering if you wouldn't mind giving me a *urine* sample. I could pay you good money, say a couple of hundred dollars. You see, I'm staying temporarily in a houseboat out on Batter Lake..."

"Butter Lake", I correct him. There isn't another lake around for a thousand miles.

"Yes, yes. *Butter* Lake. There's a bit of a mix-up with the union you see, and I just want to be prepared. And it seems, perhaps, that you are in a need of a spot of good luck."

And that is how I come to be riding out towards Schwartzeneggville in a stretch limo with Peter Poolman, two elderly people wearing too much pink, and a dog named Play-Doh. We pass a small assembly of true believers fanning themselves in the heat outside the Church of the Mail Carrier. A few miles later we pass two men by the side of the road outfitted in white and green sweatsuits who may, or may not be, as Claudia points out, escapees from the Coca-Cola Correctional Facility. Peter takes it all in serenely, yet with great interest. We are all getting paid; he gets a chauffeur-driven ride back to his houseboat and, after enough wine is imbibed, my urine. I suppose it is a good enough way to spend your hours before being publicly branded.

Once we get to Butter Lake we make our way out to a shabby little rowboat. An outline of the houseboat can be faintly made out from shore, suspended somberly in the murk. As Peter pulls on the oars we finish the wine and I make a mental note to hold it until we reach a bathroom. About half way there we begin to take on water. There is no hole per se, but the added weight of three people and a dog has probably overtaxed the frame. I look over to Peter for direction but he is quietly weeping, his hands shaking in his lap. He has stopped rowing.

Claudia pushes him aside and takes his place. She is a remarkably strong rower. Bob and I bail with our bare hands. There is no ballast to throw overboard. Play-Doh, uncharacteristically, has begun making sharp yipping sounds. About two hundred yards out the boat finally comes to a dead stop and sinks.

In my panic, I am tempted to take water into my lungs and wet the bed: both actions that human beings are hardwired not to do. But I don't. Instead I swim through the thick water without thinking, without stopping. I'm not an employee, nor a Sagittarius, nor a

husband. I'm not sure I'm even Gary Raymo anymore. What I do know is that I reach that houseboat, kick an outboard motor on a pontoon boat into gear, and end up hauling Bob and Claudia and Peter and Play-Doh out of the soup.

Unfortunately, Play-Doh cannot be saved, the water stays down in his little lungs for too long. But we prepare a proper funeral for him. Peter, perhaps feeling guilty, makes a great show of laying the bugger out on a tiny raft covered in green marijuana leaf. Bob and Claudia set the mini-barge ablaze and gently push it out onto the waters.

As for me, my heroism lands me a lucrative position in the nautical disaster movie business, and so I escape my public branding. But right now, out on this houseboat, I call Jenny from a rotary phone, something my ancestors once used to communicate with before the modern age. The voice on the other end of the line makes my insides feel all shook up like they do at the drive-in when the famous movie star rides off into the sunset. "Jenny, I'm picking you up", I think I reply, or "It's good to hear your voice" or "Sure, honey, go ahead".

