

# The Bull Dancer

*Matt Abbott*

They say there are over eight million stories in the Naked City. Well, in Ft. Collins, there are only about a hundred thousand stories, and the city is about as dressed up as a nun on Sunday. Still, working nights at a shitty gas station like Quikco had its perks, and now, looking back, I actually miss that crap hole. You'd spend weeks and weeks with no excitement, only books and mopping and, yes, the occasional customer to pass the time. But every now and then, you'd meet someone exciting, like Cindy, the stripper at one of Ft. Collins' four bona fide gentleman's clubs, who came in one night to spice things up. Yes, there were advantages besides making seven bucks an hour for doing jack shit. I'd had my share of excitement. So when the Bull Dancer strode in to Quikco one summer night, I was not too impressed, at first.

I was sitting on a stool behind the register, eating some primordial Dinty Moore I had snagged off the shelf. With each salty bite, I was making exaggerated "mmmmm"s and acting like it was right out of the Drake Hotel Kitchen. I would raise the plastic Spork up to my lips, try to convince myself that I was not about to take a spoonful of fermented beef, close my eyes, and drop it in. Then, I would go, "Mmmmmmmmm" as loud as I could to an empty store. So enraptured was I by my feast of dead cow in dead cow juice, that I never heard the door open.

I was in mid-mmm when the scratchy southern drawl interrupted my supping. "Must be pretty good stuff."

I opened my eyes and concealed my embarrassment. "It's out of season," I replied. "You should hear me in the spring."

The man was six and half feet tall, with scraggily blond hair that went down to his shoulders like cobwebs. He hadn't shaved in days, so his face was a tangle of sharp whiskers. As he walked back to the cooler, I observed his dress. His clothes were ridiculous: baggy pants, flannel shirt, bright red suspenders. Under his eyes I could see the traces of faded white makeup. I thought he was a robo, or a biker, or something like that. I thought about asking him, but he cut me off.

"Name's Harvey. I'm a Rodeo clown," he said after plunking down a six-pack of Coors. It was after one, but I sold beer anytime to anyone if I was confident the buyer wasn't a cop. "Everybody wants to know." He offered me a beer, which I gladly accepted, and he bummed a smoke. We sat there in Quikco trading stories, smoking and drinking. I told him about Cindy the stripper and all the other good ones, and he told me about life in the Rodeo.

"So, you ever been hit by a bull?" I asked after our third sixer.

He grinned wide through his whiskers, and lifted his shirt up to his

chest. I could clearly see three depressions on the left side of his rib cage. "I tripped. The fucker got me three times, pop, pop, pop. He missed my heart by two inches. That was about two years ago. It happens every now and then...It's just part of the game." His grin faded off his face like an old television set being switched off. "I guess one day one of 'em'll kill me." We didn't say any more that night; we just finished our beers and smokes in silence.

Harvey came back in the next night and the following night, and the two of us drank and smoked through most of my shift. He kept inviting me to the Rodeo, but I kept brushing him off, saying I couldn't afford it. On the fourth night, the next-to-last night the Rodeo was in town, Harvey didn't show up.

I hadn't brought a book along, so Quikco was the cleanest it had ever been under my care. I guess part of me knew what was coming before it happened, so when Harvey's pickup pulled onto the tarmac with a trailer on the back, I wasn't entirely surprised. Harvey got out of the truck and I noticed his face was totally painted up. He waved at me to come outside.

"What's up, Harv?" I asked, but I knew.

"You can't come to the Rodeo, so I brought the Rodeo to you."

I wasn't so sure this was a good idea, but Harvey hadn't asked my opinion. He jerked a thumb at the trailer and said, "This here's Spartacus. He's a champeen Rodeo steer. The rider gets on with nothing but some twine and has to hold on for eight seconds. Don't seem like much, but believe me, till you get on one a these babies, you ain't done nothin'. When he falls off, it's my job to distract Spartacus here 'til the cowboy gets outta the way."

I peered inside the trailer and sure enough, there was Spartacus. He was both fat and lean, in the way only a bull can be. He looked mean and tough and old. He was breathing through his nose in deep snorts and so was Harvey. "Well, he sure is a fine specimen," I said. Then, knowing it was no use, I added "Wanna come inside and have a beer or two?"

"No sir, you gotta do this sober."

"Do what?" I don't even know why I asked.

"You wanna get back inside and just watch this."

"Harvey, I don't think this is a good idea. What if Spartacus damages the store?"

"Ahh, don't worry about that. See, most people don't realize this, but these here bulls are trained. They got a job to do, and they know it. When the bell rings, they buck and jump, but when you open the gate again, they get right back inside."

All I could think about as I walked back inside Quikco was that old Bugs Bunny cartoon where the bull polishes his horns on the grindstone. Once I was inside, Harvey opened the gate and Spartacus was outta there like he'd been stung by a bee. He raced out onto the tarmac, whipped around on his heels, and

zeroed in on Harvey. As soon as Harvey stepped away from the trailer, Spartacus ran right at him. Harvey was more nimble though, and stepped away an instant before Spartacus could shish kabob him. Harvey dodged behind one of the pumps, and Spartacus chased him around it in a circle, never touching the pump itself. Trained, just like Harvey said.

Pretty soon, Harvey stepped away from the pump, and Spartacus stared him down. Harvey met his stare and began a slow, rhythmic step that seemed to hypnotize the bull. He stepped left, Spartacus stepped left. He went right, Spartacus followed. Soon, they were dancing to a steady beat. After a minute or two of the dance, Harvey put his hands on Spartacus' horns, and the two finished their dance. Harvey finally put Spartacus back in the trailer, and I came back outside.

“That was amazing.”

“Yeah, he’s pretty cool, even if he don’t have no nuts. I better get him back. Take care of yourself, Quikco.”

“Likewise, Rodeo.”

And with that, Harvey the Bull Dancer hopped back into his pickup and rolled out. From time to time, when I’m bored, I think about old Harvey, and Spartacus, being out there somewhere, dancing the night away in front of hundreds of fans, each one as mesmerized as I was that night. None of us lives forever, and when Harvey goes, I hope it’s in the ring. Men like Harvey aren’t supposed to die of heart attacks.