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A Hat in the Wind

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A HAT IN THE WIND

A couple years before I started riding bulls, I moved back to my home town of Twin Bridges, Montana to help my father with his failing pharmacy. Since I was a college graduate, single, broke, and living with my dad, I felt like a failure. It was one of the most depressing periods in my life but eventually I found the rodeo arena. I started riding bulls and for the first time in a long while, I felt like I was worthy.

Rodeo is not like other sports. In most sports, the athlete shares the stage with many other people at the same time. In basketball, football, baseball, and track and field, there is never a time when a participant can be confident that every single spectator is watching nobody else but him. In rodeo, every competitor gets his or her moment in the sun. And when the announcer would say my name over the loudspeaker and that chute gate would open, I knew that every person in that grandstand was watching nobody else in the world. It's an artificial, temporary morale boost when you are nobody.

The days before the rodeo, when I would walk the streets, I felt more like I was swimming in a sea of mediocrity than making my way in the world. I felt anonymous, invisible. But as soon as I pulled on that Stetson and threw my rodeo bag over my shoulder, I was transformed from an insignificant slob into somebody. It was thrilling. When my right hand lay pressed between a bull's dusty hide and a tightly stretched bull-riding rope, it held a whole lot more than rosin, leather, and hemp. But that feeling only lasted as long as the ride. I constantly searched for the bull that would help me ride my way out of mediocrity.

In June 1997, in Gardiner, Montana, I was sitting behind the bucking chutes at a rodeo, waiting for my turn to ride, when I noticed a bull rider named Ronny. He was warming up his legs by slowly walking back and forth, kicking and shaking his front leg at the beginning of each step. A smoldering cigarette stuck out of his mouth just far enough for the smoke to rise past the brim of his low black cowboy hat. His mustache was so scant it looked as if his cigarette was holding it in place on his weathered face. He looked like he had ridden a thousand bulls. Ronny almost perfectly fit my boyhood mold of an ideal cowboy, except that he was so thin that his wranglers, typically tight across the legs, hung loose and baggy.

He had nobody to help him set up his riding gear. When his bull entered the chute, he started looking around for a good candidate. Bull riding is a young man's sport, and he and I were older than most. That's probably why he noticed me and asked me to help him wrap his riding rope around the bull's chest. I agreed and jumped into action.

Ronny climbed to the right side of the chute. I held one end of the rope and lowered the other between the chute panel and the bull, slowly enough so the bull wouldn't notice it. Once the rope was lowered, Ronny used a long wire hook to pull the rope under the bull's belly and back up its other side, and then tied the ends of the rope together across the bull's back.

With the rope ready, Ronny climbed on the back of the bull and slid his right hand, palm up, under the rope and clenched it in his fist. When Ronny was ready to ride, he pushed his hat down tightly and nodded. The chute boss opened the chute with a quick throw. The bull turned to face the arena and gave a half-hearted jump. The bull planted its hooves and hopped again with more enthusiasm as Ronny slid off its side. As he fell, his hand got tangled in the rope still attached to the bull.

The crowd gave a collective gasp as the rodeo clowns ran over. Ronny was getting dragged around the arena, in danger of being gored or trampled. Without hesitation, one rodeo clown jumped on the bull's back to release the hand while the other ran past the bull's head, slapping it between the eyes with an open hand.

When Ronny's hand came loose, he hit the ground hard and grunted loudly as the air escaped his lungs. I had expected him to ride the bull for much longer, but was more surprised that his hat never came off during the entire ordeal. Ronny got up and ran to the same chute where he started his ride.

As the bull exited the arena, a rodeo clown picked up Ronny's rope and returned it to where he stood in the open chute, recovering. Ronny threw the rope over the back rail of the chute and climbed out on to the wooden deck on the other side.

"You okay?" I asked.

Still breathing heavy, he responded, "I'll be fine. It's nothing that a beer and a few minutes to catch my breath can't fix." Ronny took off his riding glove and inspected the red marks on the back of his hand. "Wish I knew why I keep getting hung up on these bulls."

Watching that bull drag around Ronny brought back a memory I'd cached away for years. In Ronny's face, I saw the same look that I had seen seventeen years earlier, when I was ten years old and I saw a friend get his ass kicked by his big brother in the middle of his living room. He and his hard-drinking family only lived in our little town for a couple of months; I don't even remember his name. I recall only one part in lurid detail, the look on the boy's face during his beating. It was emotionless, like his mind had shut down, anesthetized, like he was sleeping with his eyes open; it was in deep contrast to the tensed body connected to it.

When the memory came back, it felt as if the boy's facial expression had nothing to do with the violence, but I knew that they were together in one entangled souvenir.

During those years, I competed in a circuit organized by the Northern Rodeo Association based in Billings, Montana. I loved that little circuit and all of the small town rodeos it coordinated. I saw Ronny at many of them. Traditionally, after the rodeo, most competitors would go to the local bar. After I bumped into him again at the Three Forks Rodeo, I invited him for a beer. He entered the bar with his head down, eyes scrolling back and forth the way a cat does when it enters unfamiliar terrain. Out of his rodeo gear, he looked even frailer, like he was a couple of deep breaths away from passing out. The cigarette he sucked on only added to the struggle. His shoulders were turned inwards from a lifetime of looking at the ground.

He'd had a rough ride that day, so I offered to buy him a beer. I motioned to the bartender, "Two Coors heavy, please."

"You mean 'regular Coors' as opposed to Coors light?"

"That's right."

The bartender shook his head and handed me the beers.

Ronny smiled and grabbed the longneck bottle. We drank beer and talked like two strangers would. The thought crossed my mind to ask him about jobs or where he grew up, but the information didn't really interest me.

Most of my bull riding friends and I never talked about our pasts or any plans for the future. Bull riding doesn't attract guys who are big into long-term planning. The sport is dangerous, risky, and can cause

permanent injuries with each ride. Your past doesn't matter on the back of a bull. Your future doesn't exist until you climb back over the arena walls to safety. Discussing anything but the present is a waste of time. But maybe I'm overanalyzing that point. Maybe they were just young men who didn't see how a person could benefit from discussing each other's lives. Besides, most of us riding in that small rodeo circuit were not superstars. I can only speak for myself, but I was embarrassed about who I was. I didn't ask any rider about his personal life because it was the exact question I didn't want asked of me.

That day at the bar, Ronny and I talked about other things. I was curious about his riding. I had seen him ride a couple of times, and each time he fell off right away. He said he was improving. He was proud of how he rode at Three Forks even though he only made it to the third buck, about a two second ride. He didn't admit it but I knew that this two-second ride was his personal best. Ronny was not the legend that I'd taken him for at first sight.

Soon, three other riders walked over to us. Cody, the leader of the little group, was a typical brash bull rider. He was short and loud, and his chest popped out so far that it forced his chin a couple inches higher than normal. He started doing what he always did, making fun of any person he saw. Today, Ronny was in his line of sight.

"Every time I watch you ride, you get bucked off and hung up," Cody said. His friends looked on, sidekicks.

"I don't understand how you always seem to keep that hat on your head. What do you do? Staple it on there?" He reached for Ronny's hat. In this crowd, touching another man's hat is usually a sign of aggression unless you really know the person well. Whether Cody was in such good standing with Ronny was unclear.

A tall cowboy stood behind Cody, waiting to order a beer. His deep voice interrupted.

“I’m not so sure you little fellas can handle that. I’ll take it off for you.”

Cody turned to see the man reaching for Ronny’s hat. Cody shoved the tall man back and mocked, “Get back in the corner with your whiney team roper buddies.” Glancing back at us, Cody continued, “Ronny’s tougher than you anyways. At least he has the balls to climb on a bull and nod for the gate. The only time you ever nodded for a gate was when you let the goats out into the field.”

The tall team roper laughed. Before he walked away, he said, “I’ll try not to step on you when I order the next round. I wouldn’t want you to get stuck in the tread of my boots, little man.”

“Fucking team roping pussy.” Cody turned back to Ronny.

“Don’t give that dipshit any attention. When he has the balls to sit on the back of a bull, he can start giving shit to another bull rider. Until then, he needs to stay in the stands with the barrel racers.” Cody turned and motioned his friends to the end of the bar.

I looked at Ronny. He held his head just a little bit higher than he did before. Cody just verified it: Ronny might have been the worst bull rider in the circuit, but he still held the title. He was a bull rider.

I asked the bartender for dice so that Ronny and I could gamble. A bronc rider joined the game and got on a hot streak. I lost \$40 to him just as the bar started filling up with patrons and the jukebox began kicking out Waylon, Willie and Cash. Since I didn’t win any money at the rodeo either, my right back pocket felt a little light. I decided to order my last beer.

“I want to get out of here before the fights start and we have to

trade a few hooks. Well, I suppose if they aren't throwing the hooks at us, I'd be okay with it. I haven't seen a good fight in a while."

Ronny laughed, "Good point." Almost on cue, I heard that old familiar sound of fist hitting flesh, boot heels stomping a running shuffle on floorboards and people shouting profanity.

I jumped up and slapped Ronny on the shoulder. "Come on Ronny, we got a fight to watch." I took three steps, stopped, turned around and saw Ronny still on the barstool. He didn't move. His entire body was frozen in place, his face washed over with a blank stare. His eyes fixed on the drunken rage spewing from the other corner of the bar.

The fight was brief, and only included some shoving and cursing. Ronny never moved. His eyes stayed glued to the spot of the fight. I felt like he was making himself small, unnoticeable. His hand held an invisible bottle to replace the real one that had slipped unnoticed from his hand and smashed on the floor below his barstool. I watched him come out of his trance like he was waking from slumber. That look in his face was vanishing with every second of calm.

We decided to leave after the fight. We walked to our trucks and drove away.

I found that the more I ran around with bulls, the more I learned how they moved, which helped to protect me in the arena. Once in awhile, I acted as the rodeo clown for friends while they practiced. I learned that bulls don't turn quickly. They either move straight forward or spin in place, which made them fairly easy to dodge after I learned to read their body language. I soon felt safer with my feet on the ground facing the bull than sitting on its back.

I also hated to see guys get hurt. When a bull rider would get in trouble, I'd consider jumping into the arena to try to help. On numerous occasions, I saw riders get hung up on the bull only to have their friends jump into the arena, dodging the bull in an attempt to release their friend. I'm sure the rodeo clowns hated the extra traffic in their workspace. I secretly envied these men and their acts of solidarity, aiding a friend. I wanted to be part of that kind of camaraderie. I told myself that if Ronny got hung up again, I would jump into the arena, partly for Ronny, and partly for my self-serving desire to feel exceptional.

I saw Ronny again at a Friday night rodeo. He got bucked off at the second jump, as expected, but he was able to release his riding hand both times. He avoided another pounding and I was glad to see it. I knew that he would never be able to score an eight second legal ride, though. It just wasn't in him. That also impressed me. Despite his utter lack of ability, he didn't stop trying.

After the rodeo, Ronny asked me if I was going to ride in White Sulphur Springs the next day, and if he could hitch a ride.

Ronny lived in Belgrade, a small Montana town with railroad tracks splitting it in equal halves. Although Main Street was paved, it was so covered in dust that it looked like any other dirt road you'd find throughout the state. Main Street consisted of small businesses, thriving bars, and an imposing grain elevator at one end. Ronny's street was void of cars except for a few paint-faded jalopies. The dry, hot wind gave the place a frontier, ghost town sort of feel.

Ronny's house was not difficult to find, since it was the only trailer on the block. It was covered in faded blue and white aluminum siding and had straw bales stacked around the crawl spaces to insulate the plumbing. Ronny was sitting on the front steps of a plywood structure that jutted out

from the front door and served as a mudroom. He jumped off the step and walked to my little truck.

“My wife wanted to meet you, but I told her we were running behind.”

“We’re not that late.”

“I like to leave for the rodeo early, just in case something goes wrong on the road. Old trucker habits, I guess.”

“You’re a trucker?” I asked.

“Yep. That’s what I do in between rodeos.”

“Huh. I never knew that.”

“I guess it’s never come up in conversation. I don’t know what you do for a living.”

“That’s a good point. But it would be nice to meet your wife.”

We went in and Ronny’s wife was cleaning dishes in the kitchen. She was short and plump with pregnancy. The flat bridge of her nose separated smiling, almond-shaped eyes. She had a slight lisp, and spoke so softly that I struggled to hear her words.

“Well, it’s about time you let me meet one of your rodeo friends,” she said. “I was starting to think that you were having an affair instead of riding bulls.”

“Now Sherry, you know that I’m too ugly to have an affair,” Ronny said. Sherry let out a giggle. “You’re damn right. So ya might as well stick with what you got.”

“Besides,” he said, and gestured to her, “how could I stray when I have this cute little thing waiting for me at home?” He wrapped his arms around her as she dried a dish and kissed the top of her hair.

“Well, this is the hacienda.”

“I like it,” I said, leaning against the doorstep. “Hell, everything

I own fits in the back of my little Chevy S-10. I could really get used to a place like this.”

Ronny raised his eyebrows, a faint smile pushed up the corner of his mouth. He took a deep breath. “We’d better get going. Those bulls aren’t going to ride themselves.”

After about an hour on the road, I asked, “So, where did you grow up?”

“Oh, all over the place.” He looked out the window. “Oklahoma mostly. We moved around a lot though.”

“Why?”

“Because my dad’s an asshole.” Quieter now, “He was a mean guy.” He stretched out the word “mean.” “He was always pounding on us.” We were silent for a couple of miles. I could see that he didn’t want to talk about his dad, but part of him seemed relieved. I looked for a way to open the door a little further.

“So, what did your dad do for a living?”

“All sorts of work.”

“What’s he doing now?”

“Don’t know, don’t care.”

He was done talking. I pulled into the next gas station to fill up. Ronny jumped out to buy beer. I waited in the truck and mulled over the conversation. Ronny wasn’t the same guy I saw get beaten by his brother years earlier, but he was the same guy in a different sense.

Ronny had never ridden a bull for eight seconds. He was too weak and didn’t have the ability. Plus whenever he tried, his hand would get stuck and he’d get pounded. Maybe, in his mind, taking a pounding while trying to beat the bull was better than not trying at all. But I knew that he was never going to win that fight. That’s one thing that was never going to

change no matter how hard he tried. Kind of like a person's past.

During the second half of the trip, we started to loosen up and give each other a hard time. We drove by a feedlot, and the scent of stockpiled manure overcame the my truck.

“Damn, Emry. Did you shit your pants or something?”

It caught me off guard, and I laughed. His teasing made me feel good. I took it as a sign that he was comfortable around me. I responded, “Ah, that’s just the smell of money, my friend.”

We arrived at the rodeo arena in plenty of time. I spotted Cody, who came over to lend his expertise while I prepared to ride.

“I’m ready to take everybody’s money today,” he said. “Have you seen these bulls buck yet?”

“No, I just got here...”

Cody liked talking more than listening. “Man, I watched them last night. None of them can buck. They’re nothing but junk bulls. If I can’t ride one of these bulls, you might as well shoot me.”

He was talking so much that I almost missed when he brought up Ronny. He said, “I think that Ronny’s getting hung up on those bulls because he’s too afraid to let go of the bull-rope after he gets bucked off.”

It’s a phenomenon in bull riding with young riders. After a young rider gets bucked off, he’s so scared that he can’t let go of the rope. He thinks, “If I let go now, I’ll land under the bull and it’ll stomp on me. I’ll wait for the next buck.” Or he thinks, “If I let go now, I’ll get thrown and land on my head.” The rider keeps waiting, refusing to let go until it feels like the perfect moment. But it’s never perfect. He’s on the back of a

pissed-off bull, for crying out loud. It will never feel right. So he chooses to hold on and continue to take the beating rather than to let go and risk landing in a worse spot.

Before I knew it, our bulls were being pushed into the bucking chutes. Mine was assigned the fourth chute, and Ronny's bull wasn't loaded yet. Ronny did what he always did, grab a cigarette and start warming up his legs. My bull was a short little Brahma bull with grey hide, no horns, and floppy ears. When it was my turn to ride, I climbed over the top of the chute and eased my weight on to the bull's back. I nodded for the chute boss to open the gate. The bull started out with three straight jumps. Just when I thought I was going to have an easy ride, the bull rolled its bell to the right, lunged forward and finished with a sharp spin to the left. I was caught by surprise and the bull's loose skin slid over to the side of his body just enough for me to lose balance and fall to the dirt.

"No ride!" yelled the announcer. "He was bucked off at six point seven seconds. A rider must stay on the bull for eight seconds in order to have a qualified ride."

Bull riding is an all or nothing world: ride for eight seconds or it's not worth riding at all. When I got bucked off at six point seven seconds, I knew my night was a waste. But my friend still had a chance, though given that it was Ronny it didn't look good. I walked behind to the chutes to help him prepare.

Cody was back there already. He said that, in his opinion, the rodeo clowns were too young and hesitant. "They weren't anywhere near the bull when you came off," he pointed out. "Look at them. They look like they're afraid of the bulls. That ain't no good, man. That ain't no good."

I paused to think about it. "I hope Ronny doesn't get hung up. If those clowns aren't going to be any help and he gets hung up, he's going to

have to get himself out of it. ”

But deep inside, I had some sort of perverse hope that he would get hung up. I was prepared to run in to the arena for the whole world to see. My daydream was sucking down my inferiority complex and preparing me for what could happen.

The rodeo bosses pushed five more bulls in to the empty chutes. Ronny’s was the first. It was a big Black Angus cross with foot-long horns. Combined with the width of his skull, his head was too wide for him to walk through the chutes, and he had to turn his head sideways to get through.

Cody and I looked down on Ronny’s bull. Tugging on one of the horns, Cody said, “Dang. Look at those stickers.” He slapped Ronny on his back. “That’s going to make a great photo op for you buddy, a big black bull and foot long horns.”

Ronny didn’t respond, he just looked down at the dusty bull. He was moving slower than normal, almost lethargic. I wondered if he was panicking, so I leaned in close and quietly said, “Are you doing okay, buddy?”

He seemed insulted that I would ask but just nodded his head and climbed on the bull. I noticed he hadn’t pulled his bull-rope up on to the withers of the bull yet, so I grabbed his rope, pushed it forward, and tugged some loose bull-hide around the back of the rope to keep it in place. We set the rope fairly quickly, but Ronny wasn’t in the right mindset to ride a bull.

Ronny was quickly on the bull’s back and lost his chance to back out. He nodded for the gate and caught a break. The bull wasn’t ready for the ride and jumped into the arena with a halfhearted buck. His front hooves hit the ground. Ronny’s body was so stiff he looked like

a mannequin. The bull's second jump was a beautiful, long arching buck. The move was powerful enough to whiplash Ronny's head backwards with such force his hat sprang from his head, exposing his bald head. But Ronny was still riding after the second buck. It was the longest that I had ever seen him ride.

The bull turned into his third buck and I saw Ronny loosen up and move fluidly in unison with the bull. He pulled on the rope to bring his center of gravity closer to the bull's back. He made it to the fourth buck, a personal record for Ronny, then made it to the fifth and sixth spiraling buck, adjusting his position to every oscillating movement of the bull.

Stunned at the length of his ride, I leapt on to the top rung of the chute to get a better view. For a moment, I thought, "He just might ride this bull. He might finally ride one." He needed a couple more seconds to make it to eight but the bull's next move was too much for Ronny and he slid down the left side.

"Ride him, Ronny. Ride him. Don't give up." I yelled as Ronny's right foot slipped over the left side of the bull and hit the ground. I could tell that he was hung up. As soon as he tried to get to his feet, the bull sent him airborne again.

The rodeo clowns didn't know what to do. I leapt over the chute and in to the arena. Ronny caught another break. The bull was spinning to the right, away from the side that Ronny was hanging from. I ran towards the calamity, trying to time my arrival after the left horn spun to the right so that I could jump on the bull's back. If I landed on the inside of the spin, the bull would gore me.

The bull's nose was inches from the dirt and his head was facing directly toward me as he threw his head to the right. I dove, and his left

horn grazed my rib cage as I landed on its upper back, right where I wanted to be. I was facing the rear of the bull, between the rope that was clamped on to Ronny's hand and the bull's neck.

I threw my left arm over the top of the bull's neck and pinned it between my left arm and rib cage. Then, I harnessed the bull's power under my left armpit to carry my weight with every jump. This freed my right hand to untie my friend.

When I started pulling on the rope in an attempt to untie it, the problem became obvious. Ronny's hand was not tangled in the rope. His hand, still clenched down on the rope, was the only thing keeping him attached to the beast. He was too afraid to let go of the rope. The moment I understood that, something very strange happened. Maybe it was the fear or the adrenaline, but everything around me seemed to slow down.

The entire world became extremely clear, like I was a small piece in a massive, slow grinding machine. I knew exactly where the machine was going and where every random piece of the machine would move. Just then, the bull spun again hard to the right. Ronny's body was hidden behind a mound of shoulder muscle.

I waited for the bull to continue his spin, and Ronny's entire arm came into view on the other side of the bull's backbone. Ronny's body followed, swinging outward. His head tilted backwards from the momentum, and he shot a look directly into my eyes that sliced through slow motion streams of bull hide, rodeo chaps, and dust. I saw that Ronny was afraid of where he was, but even more afraid to let go.

"Let go, Ronny. You need to let go!" I yelled.

He continued to grab the bull-rope. The bull again jumped to the right and I squeezed the bull's neck to stay in position.

I shouted again, "LET GO!"

His gaze softened as he realized what he needed to do. The rope slid across his gloved hand like a hissing snake as he released it.

Immediately after the leather in his glove left contact with the rope, the world catapulted into full speed and I knew that I was in a chaotic, uncontrollable situation. A split second later, the back leg of the bull swung over Ronny's body and landed a hoof right in between his knee and the ankle. I heard a dull thud that sounded like a car door slamming shut. Ronny's lower leg immediately started to flip around in unnatural directions. I let go and the bull ran off in the other direction.

I ran to see if he was okay. Screaming in pain and tears he said, "Hold my teeth!" and spit a full set of dentures into my hand. His slobber-covered dentures slid across my palm. I shoved the slimy pair of teeth into the chest pocket of my shirt and turned back to Ronny.

In between the moans of pain, Ronny pleaded, "Am I going to make it through this Emry? Am I going to die?"

"You're going to be okay Ronny," I told him, "You're going to be okay."

Ronny's leg was bent in three different directions. He was hatless, hairless, and toothless. It was as if he was naked.

A couple of months later, I visited him at home. He was nursing his compound fracture and now had a newborn daughter. When I walked in, he was sitting in a worn out Lazy Boy recliner. His leg was in a soft cast, propped up to alleviate the pain. We sat and talked about rodeos and how he was doing, his daughter, and his truck driving future. His wife came over and handed him his baby girl. Ronny inhaled the aroma of his

daughter's hair. His wife teased him, "Stop doing that, you are going to sniff up all of that new baby smell."

I couldn't help but chime in. "When I stand behind you holding your daughter, I can't tell whose head is whose." Both of their heads were pale white with twenty or thirty long, thin strands of hair randomly placed across their scalps. He giggled, the two bald heads snuggling up against each other. After a few minutes of comfortable silence, Ronny looked up from his daughter and said, "I think I've been on enough bulls now." Pausing to kiss his daughter's cheek, he looked up at me. "Thanks for riding with me, Emry."