Pops Real Nice
by brainwane

Summary

After the events of "Animal Mask." Before, during, and after the events of "The Best Ever Death Metal Band in Denton".

Notes

Content note here: this story features a condescending, power-tripping authority figure in mental health.

Happy holidays, returnsandreturns, and I hope you enjoy the schmooop in this Yuletide gift!

See the end of the work for more notes

Summer 1975: Excerpt from an interview published in wrestling fanzine "Dust Phantom" issue 8

Hi readers! I have a special treat for you: a double interview with Omar Kasana and Roy Auburn, the Animal Passion tag team! You've seen their frog and duck masks and their yellow and green capes, you've seen their amazing teamwork in the ring -- now I've gotten a chance to talk to them in person, and let me tell you, they have great chemistry outside the ring too. Although maybe they don't back each other up 100% of the time!
I was lucky enough to catch Omar and Roy after a heavy night in Dallas, and I'd have been fine smelling their sweat, but they wouldn't talk to me till after they'd showered and changed into civilian clothes (which, I'm sorry to disappoint you, include no animals and about the same amount of green and yellow you might be wearing right now). Picture them with me at an all-night diner putting down glass after glass of Faygo (Roy) and Tab (Omar) as I fumble with my notepad and the reel-to-reel I'd borrowed:

Cal: So a lot of tag teams are guys who've known each other since grade school. But you met in the ring.

Roy: Yeah, it was on the order of 15, 18 men in that cage, it was madness. We just started working together right there, we had good chemistry, better even than some of those guys who've been fighting together for years.

Omar: It's been a lot of fun. Hard work, of course, but fun too.

Cal: I can tell you love it. I've been following you when I can, and it's great to see.

Omar: It's hard for me to believe we're worth following. For instance, why aren't you interviewing Al Madril?

Cal: You think Al Madril returns my calls? I'm not even a real reporter, this is just my two-bit fanzine.

Roy: Ah, come on, Omar, two years from now, Animal Passion --

Omar: I still feel like "Animal Mask" is better --

Roy: -- anyhow, when our team's at the world championship, no one'll doubt we're worth interviewing. We'll be blowing off reporters left and right.

Omar: My partner's kind of optimistic. We've got a long way to go before you see us in that particular ring.

Cal: So you're aiming at the World Tag Team Championship?

Omar: There's a few things we're looking at but it all depends on money -- you know, we both live in Denton, it's easier for us to get to Houston or Fort Worth than to get to Pennsylvania somehow.

Roy: We'll find the money. I mean to say, I do not intend for a guy as talented as Omar, and for a guy as lucky as me to have a great teammate like Omar, I do not intend for us to spend the rest of our lives repairing our own capes and, and spending our lives someplace where the only excitement is a fight or a tornado.

Omar: He always gets this way right after a fight.

Roy: I do not.

Omar: He does.

Cal: I think a fight gets everyone's blood pumping. That's how I feel when I see you in the ring, especially live -- it's crazy. As though we could do anything, make anything happen.

Roy: By the way, Carol --
Cal: Carol is my aunt's name -- call me Cal.

Roy: Yeah, Cal -- you dating anybody?

Omar: Will you stop it.

Cal: I'm not, but --

Omar: Roy is very happily engaged to a lovely ringside nurse named Linda. He is asking whether you are single because he believes that I ought to be similarly occupied. Regardless of whether I am actually interested in getting a girlfriend. At all.

Roy: If your hard head hadn't saved us eight different times in the past three years, I would actually be frustrated with you.

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Spring 1995: Dr. Emmeline Fitzpatrick's exit interview with Cyrus Kasana, including Omar Kasana, Carol Rockford, Roy Auburn, Linda Murch, and Jeff Auburn, at Quilted Together Facility For Youth, West Bountiful, Utah

Dr. Fitzpatrick: Let's start by having you talk about why you're here.

Cyrus: This is bullshit.

Carol: It is, but we gotta get through it, Cy. So do what the lady says.

Cyrus: Fine. So, my friend Jeff and I got a little band together, and we used some fake Satan stuff on the decorations for our gear, just to look cool, and it was fine, except one time we were setting up to practice for an audition, for the talent show, and somebody saw all that stuff and just freaked out. Even though my mom and dad were totally cool with it, even though we both swore up and down that it was just trying to make our band look metal, I don't know, some teacher or janitor or whatever told the principal that we looked like we were going to, I don't know, sacrifice babies on the high school lawn. So they said they were going to expel us, and Jeff basically said "whatever, sweet" and said he'd get his GED instead, but because I want to go to college once all this is over, my mom and dad made this deal that if I transfer to some special school for a quarter and then transfer back, then it all works out okay and it doesn't look on my college applications like I got expelled. And they found out about Quilted Together and I guess that's why I'm here.

Dr. Fitzpatrick: So you don't have any remorse about the decisions you made that brought you to Quilted Together.

Cyrus: No.

Omar: And nor should he. And Cal and I have been one hundred percent firm on that point through all of this nonsense.

Dr. Fitzpatrick: Which has made our course of treatment much less effective.

Omar: Doctor, I don't know if you can appreciate how happy that makes me. From what Cyrus has told me today, your asinine "treatment" has consisted of mocking his ambitions and cutting him off from un-monitored and un-censored communication with his friends and family. No wonder he doubled down. Maybe you've never tried to "treat" someone with real guts, but Cyrus is a chip off the old block, and I'm proud of how he's stood up to you. To my mind, that's the lesson we've all
learned from this -- that he's got some grit that we can all be proud of.

**Dr. Fitzpatrick:** I recognize that you and I are going to be at odds regarding our philosophies of adolescent psychology and discipline, Mr. Kasana, but --

**Carol:** I'm not chopped liver. I'm here too. And we're a united front on this.

**Dr. Fitzpatrick:** Be that as it may, Mrs. Kasana --

**Carol:** Now, I know your paperwork doesn't say that anywhere. The divorce was way before all this.

**Dr. Fitzpatrick:** My apologies. Ms. Rockford, Mr. Kasana. We have our differing approaches, but surely you recognize that disruptive behavior has to be acknowledged, not just because of its effects on others in the short term, but because it so often acts as a symptom of deeper pathologies and --

**Carol:** Oh, this is a pack of bull. A couple of pentagrams on some guitars and drums are not a symptom of deeper pathologies, they are a symptom of kids playing death metal, as you would know if you ever got out of Utah.

**Cyrus:** That's not fair, mom, the Salt Lake City scene is --

**Carol:** Okay, okay --

**Omar:** In any case, unless there's something else you need us to sign, I think this session has reached the end of its usefulness and we're going to be on our way.

**Dr. Fitzpatrick:** In fact, there is one more bit of paper for you to look at. It's this letter, which we intercepted, because, yes, we routinely monitor our patients' correspondence for their own safety. It's a letter from Cyrus's friend, Jeff Auburn.

[pause]

**Carol:** Okay?

**Dr. Fitzpatrick:** The clear themes of revenge and violence here -- you can see how --

**Omar:** If you are trying to find more grounds for diagnosing my son with something sick, because his friend wrote him a letter blowing off steam and saying basically the exact same kinds of things I used to say in the ring, boy, have you got another think coming. Cyrus, Cal, let's go.

**Dr. Fitzpatrick:** Joan, will you please send those guests in? Thank you. Roy, Linda, Jeff, I think you know everyone here.

**Omar:** I can't believe this.

**Roy:** Jeff, do you want to say the thing we talked about, in the hall?

**Jeff:** Yeah. Um, I'm sorry, I didn't mean it, I'm going to pray to get better, and it's all my fault, and Cyrus didn't do anything. I mean, he didn't say anything to make me think we should get even in, um, anyway, anything like that.

**Linda:** And he'll sign whatever you need, to that effect.
**Dr. Fitzpatrick:** This is preposterous. Surely you all don't think I could be duped by such an obvious attempt at collusion and duplicity.

**Cyrus:** Well, since you --

**Carol:** Quiet.

**Linda:** Doctor, for the last twenty years I have been a registered nurse licensed to practice in the state of Texas. This means that I have a particular eye that's keen on those nitpicky little things that state boards are always interested in hearing about. And I had a chance to overhear some things and see some things, on my visit today that you so kindly invited our family to come to. Now, I know that there are ugly words, like "malpractice" and "whistleblowing," that none of us like to use. Those are real awful words. So is "blackmail." That's another one. And none of those words have to get said by anybody, as long as you sign all that release paperwork, so Cyrus here can get his college applications in order, without your fine facility saying a single thing that might count against him. Now, do I make myself clear?

**Dr. Fitzpatrick:** Joan, will you bring in those release forms for Cyrus Kasana, please? Thank you.

**Jeff:** Cyrus, I'm sorry I made all this shit happen.

**Cyrus:** God, I'm sorry you had to even come here.

**Roy:** Silver lining, I get to see you again, Omar, Cal. How long's it been?

**Omar:** Too long.

**Roy:** I been meaning to say for a while, no one ever measured up to you.

**Omar:** I couldn't keep fighting and I thought you did the right thing to try to get a new team together. I watched you, you know.

**Roy:** You did?

**Omar:** Sure I did. Animal Passion doesn't stop watching each other's back just because the match is over.

**Carol:** Linda, maybe you and I should get a team together. These guys are old news, looks like you're the one pinfalling.

**Linda:** Ah, it's nothing. You learn the moves, it even gets boring after a while.

**Roy:** Cal, did I hear right, you're Cal Rockford again?

**Carol:** Not that long after you went to Arizona, yeah.

**Omar:** Once all this is finished up we should all get a drink. Catch up a little.

**Dr. Fitzpatrick:** I am just going to say that even an aggressively anti-family pair of triads such as yourselves, involving two divorces, Satanic music, a dropout, an incorrigible, and a homoerotic bond between the two fathers, will find it very hard to get served an alcoholic beverage in West Bountiful.

[Pause]
Roy: You know, that sounds like a really fun challenge.

Omar: I was just going to say!

Summer 2015: Description of an excerpt of a videorecording taken in Denton, Texas

**Exterior shot:** Sunny day, green growth unfurled on trees and on bushes near the sidewalks. Pan to church front door.

**Medium shot:** The church steps, where the two grooms lightly punch each other on the shoulder, then drop into a wrestling-style hold for a few seconds before laughing, embracing, and kissing.

**Handheld over-the-shoulder shot:** Follows the grooms on their way into the reception hall, which features flowers, ribbons, and table linens in green and yellow. The guests stand and applaud as the couple walks onto the dance floor, stopping at a few tables for hugs and handshakes.

**Close-up:** On a heavyset man in his sixties as he welcomes the grooms, takes a microphone and speaks:

I am gonna be brief, I promise I am. I got to see Roy and Omar fight together forty years ago, and let me tell you, that was a delight, I wouldn't have missed it for the world. And to see them reunited and be a team again, them against the world, well, I don't even have the words for it. Congratulations, Omar and Roy, from the whole Guerrero wrestling family, and may you have a long and happy life together. And now let's party!

**Wide shot:** Guests assemble around the dance floor, giving Roy and Omar a respectful distance. The Hospital Bombers fuzz the air with a blast of distortion, then clear it with a percussive clack of one drumstick on another, one-two-three-four. The couple smiles, hands and eyes on each other as the Bombers hit the downbeat.

End Notes

Post-author-reveal notes:

Thanks to Leonard Richardson, Tim, Brendan Adkins, and Grandfather Trout for beta services on this! Much thanks to those Wikipedia writers and editors who helped me understand 1970s soft drinks, Route 60, Denton, tag team wrestling, the history of zines, and the Guerrero wrestling family. And thanks to Scott Rosenberg and Jim Fisher for introducing me to the Mountain Goats a decade ago, when we were colleagues at Salon.com.

I matched with my recipient on "The Best Ever Death Metal Band in Denton" and then read her [Dear Yuletide Author letter](https://example.com) and found out that the new Mountain Goats album, *Beat the Champ*, was:

the fandom I'm most hoping for this year, because I really, really want to read
the love story behind "Animal Mask," two guys falling in love as they form a
tag team and compete in wrestling together.

I'd listened to most of Beat the Champ, and certainly I'd heard "Animal Mask", so I put
together a "Yuletide" playlist on my phone that had "Best Ever" plus Beat the Champ plus
some additional repetitions of "Animal Mask". And I got the idea: Jeff & Cyrus cannot be
the main characters of "Animal Mask" because the "Animal Mask" characters meet in the
ring during a match, and are adults already -- but what if Jeff & Cyrus are the KIDS of
those wrestlers?

I started constructing the timeline and characters, and realized that I did not want this to be
about jerky parents -- especially since my recipient had requested happy endings. Which
posed a problem, because of course the most direct way to get Cyrus thrown in that school
would be that his parents freaked out.

Much like the other "Best Ever" fic this Yuletide, "Hail, Hail" (which I love love love),
"Pops Real Nice" is constrained by the canon, and is about "the righteousness of your fury"
and "the justice of your cause in the face of those who would do you wrong and who would
rob you of your youth and who would ignore what's good and beautiful in you" (per the
rendition at 1:29:49 in this archive.org recording linked at emotionalaborunion's Tumblr --
also where we hear that the school is in Utah). So the school is awful. But technically, the
song never states that Cyrus's parents are down with its awfulness. And so I figured out a
loophole, a way to preserve plausibility and sympathy both.

As I worked on the timeline, I saw that a sort of triptych structure naturally revealed itself.
Beat the Champ is about 1970s pro wrestling, and to me, "Best Ever Death Metal Band in
Denton" is super 90s, reminiscent of my own high school years and the Columbine High
School massacre. And in the summer of 2015, same-sex marriage was legalized across the
whole United States -- no more of this state-by-state stuff. And so I thought it would be nice
to have Roy and Omar marry, in Denton, and have their kids play at their wedding
reception, in 2015.

On the names:

- Roy is my spouse's dad's name. He traveled a lot for work and sent his family a lot of
  postcards. (Incidentally, my headcanon is that Roy's the narrator of "Southwestern
  Territory" who gets a diary from his son.)
- A friend of mine grew up in West Bountiful, Utah.
- An acquaintance of mine, Cyrus Farivar, is Iranian-American. Even though Farivar
  pronounces his name differently than Darnielle pronounces "Cyrus", I decided that at
  least one of the character's parents was a Muslim with heritage from the Middle East
  or Pakistan. "Kasana" is an homage to Pakistani writer Mehreen Kasana and "Omar"
  is the name of a Muslim guy I knew in high school. In retrospect I wish I'd done more
  work on consistency, to find names common in a particular region of one country.
- The surname "Fitzpatrick": in the version of "Best Ever" linked above, Darnielle
  says, "Kirk Fitzpatrick, I remember when they sent you away, man. This is for you."
- "Auburn" is an homage to a Northern California town covered in a 2003 Salon.com
  article about small Christian towns and churches reacting to same-sex marriages
  among their neighbors and parishioners.
- The surname "Murch" is an homage to Walter Murch, the film editor. And
  "Emmeline" honors voting rights activist Emmeline Pankhurst. I think "Linda",
  "Carol", "Quilted Together", and "Rockford" kind of came out of nowhere.
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