

For the Smart Marks

by Kevin Strange

I'm doing this for the smart marks. The pro wrestling fans who think they understand the business. Those internet fanboys who read the dirt sheet websites. The insider info newsletters.

I'm doing this because every great thing that's ever going to happen in pro wrestling has already happened. I'm doing this because everything you see on TV is recycled shit. Because you fawn over “Super Stars” while the real wrestlers in this business break their bodies and die on hotel room floors.

My name is The Great Chan. The smart marks mock me by calling me The Great Chin.

They do that because I suffer from Cherubism, a rare genetic disorder that causes prominence in the lower portion of the face. My chin is wider than my forehead.

Growing up, I idolized Hulk Hogan and The Ultimate Warrior. All I did was lift weights and eat so I could get as big as them. I never wanted to be anything else in my life except a pro wrestler.

I lived and breathed the business as far back as I can remember. And I did get big. I'm six foot seven and weigh over three hundred and fifty pounds. I spent my college money on wrestling school and steroids. I wrestled my first match inside a barn at age 16 in front of forty people.

I was told my whole career that I'd never make it to the big show because of my face. No matter how hard I worked, how much I sacrificed my time and my body, I was always treated as a freak show gimmick.

And baby, I could work with the best of them. Hour long iron man matches in smokey VFWs. Grueling I quit matches.

I worked the US indie wrestling circuit from south Florida to Seattle, Washington. I drove a hole in this country front to back in my Honda Civic. And I got good, boy. I got great.

I made a name for myself in the extreme wrestling era. The Japanese Death Matches. Barbed

wire ring ropes. Exploding turn buckles. Flaming tables.

I never once played up my heritage. I'm of Chinese descent. Born and raised on the mean streets of Cook County. Chicago, Illinois, baby. Mid West till I die. I refused to play my appearance up as a bumbling Chinaman. Never spoke with an accent. Hell, I don't even know Chinese. I know wrestling.

Big Chan. Chan the Great. King of the razor wire ladder match, boy.

I never made it to the big show. Never got that call.

I pay for my goodies at the hardware store with wadded up dollar bills and enough change to make the checkout clerk embarrassed for me. The big Chinaman with the the too big face full of scars.

“What's all this stuff for, Mr.?” the young girl asks me. “You building a dog house or something?”

I don't answer.

I throw the bag down in the passenger seat of the Civic on top of my latest eviction notice and the letter from the doctor's office. Yeah, baby. The Honda still runs. Five hundred fifty thousand miles on that son of a bitch.

I'm going to wrestle a match tonight, against the doc's wishes. I took six months off after I got the news. I tried to live off appearances. Autographs. T Shirts.

I can't even pay my five hundred a month rent at my roach infested efficiency apartment on the North Side.

My spine feels like it's split in half, the two parts constantly grinding against each other, the sharp parts stabbing my internal organs.

When I wake up, I start my day taking two muscle relaxers and two Viodin. My legs don't work until I've massaged out my quadriceps. They curl up into tight balls in the middle of the night due to the massive amount of Human Growth Hormone I've injected into my ass for years. It takes me 30 minutes before I can walk to the bathroom to piss.

My hands don't make closed fists anymore.

I've had seven surgeries on my knees. Torn meniscus. Blown ACL on the left side. Blown PCL on the right side, twice.

Eight documented concussions.

Shattered orbital bone, left eye.

Dislocated elbow.

Dislocated jaw.

Dislocated ankle.

Third degree burns on back.

Third degree burns on right arm.

Third degree burns on left arm.

Torn shoulder.

Torn abdominal.

Torn biceps.

3 herniated disks.

2 ruptured vertebrae.

650 total stitches in eyebrows, lips, arms, shin, back, and cheek.

All because of you.

I call seven booking agents before I find one willing to give me a job. I have to beg and plead to get him to put me as the show closer. He only agrees because his main event guy canceled due to a bad flu and he needs a replacement for his cell match.

Perfect.

I don't ask who I'm wrestling. It doesn't matter. I've wrestled a thousand matches. I can go against anybody.

Besides, tonight isn't about wrestling a great match. I've already proven my greatness a hundred fold to you people. Tonight is about going out with a bang.

Tonight is the last match I'll ever wrestle.

I show up to the arena early. It was only a few hundred mile drive. I left as soon as I got off the phone with the promoter. It's a big place. I've lucked out. He booked an ice hockey arena. Place holds more than 10,000.

We draw maybe 1500.

I know a few guys on the card. Most are local and I haven't done this region very often. Still, I don't talk to anyone until my opponent finds me in a small room off in the back by myself.

"Hey Chan," he says. He's maybe 6 foot, two twenty, full of tattoos. Pretty small, but I've wrestled Luchadors before in Mexico much smaller. He'll do fine. This isn't about him.

"Big fan," he says. "I marked out when that exploding ring went off in your face and you still managed that shooting star press off the ladder to win the match. You're tough, man. A lot tougher than me."

"Thanks," I say, wrapping my hands with tape, trying to give him the hint to leave me alone.

"I've done a few cage matches. Never a cell match, though. You ever done one?"

"Yep."

"You wanna go over some spots?"

"Nah," I say, never making eye contact with him. "Call it in the ring."

"Ok. Well, I don't want you think I'm a pussy, but... I'm kinda scared of heights, so let's not a pull a Foley/Taker and climb up to the top of the damn thing, ok?"

I don't answer.

"Look. I know you've been around a lot longer than me," he says, exploding in roid anger. "But I've worked my ass off, too. I've taken my bumps! I can't feel my right hand cause of pinched nerves in

my back from going through a table sideways.”

I continue to ignore him.

“Fucking prick!”

He leaves.

A hot head. He's going to work perfectly.

My music hits. As I walk to the ring, the promoter stops me. “Hey, boy. Hey, listen,” he says, grabbing my arm.

He's a little man. Wide. Horrible comb over. By that, and his smelly tweed jacket, I can tell he's a used car salesman. Probably wanted to wrestle when was a kid. One of the marks out back waiting for autographs, then couldn't cut it in the ring when he got his shot.

These types always end up as promoters. They want so badly to be accepted by the boys in the back. He's probably got a wife bigger and uglier than him with a little family money she lets him spend. So he books shows and gets half a boner handing the boys their payoffs at the end of the night, while they act like he's a good buddy so he'll drop a couple extra 20s in their palm.

Mark promoters are the worst.

He says, “Don't blade too much out there, ok? Don't go bleeding all over my ring. I got kids out there. This is a family show. Give em a bunch of heat spots. Rake the eyes, low blows. Don't go trying to kill yourself, OK?”

I nod and walk out.

I'm out first. I don't hear my music. I barely notice the crowd pop for my entrance. I'm focused on what I'm about to do, and how I'm going to do it.

I carry my bag of goodies to the cell door. It's a big cell. Twenty five, thirty feet of steel cage. They call it a cell because unlike the traditional steel cage match which is open at the top, the cell is closed. Once you're in and the ref locks the door, you're in there till a 1-2-3.

I don't go in the cage. I throw my bag over my shoulder and climb to the top. The crowd goes crazy for me. I hear them this time. They pop big. For such a small crowd, they're on fire. Like I said, this region doesn't really know me. If they did, if there were a bunch of internet marks in the crowd, the "Big Chin, Great Chin" chants would have started by now. All these people see is a 350 pounder climbing the cell.

When I get to the top, I raise my bag over my head and they pop again. I walk around all four corners. The fans think I'm making sure they all get a good look at me, but I'm really looking for the main camera. They're taping the show so the promoter can sell it on DVD, maybe play it on some little shitty local cable access channel.

He won't be showing this match on TV.

The tattooed kid stomps through the curtain, still visibly pissed.

Good. I need him mad at me.

He gets to the bottom of the entrance ramp before he sees me up on the top of the cage.

"Motherfucker!" he screams, right next to a little kid on the other side of the railing. The kid's father admonishes the tattooed kid, but he's not listening. He's just staring at me, trying to decide if he's mad enough to climb the cage after me, or if he's going to walk out and quit the match before it's even had a chance to get started.

He shouts, "You ribbing me? This a fucking joke, asshole?"

I don't answer.

He stands with his hands on his hips, a look of disgust on his face till the crowd starts chanting "Boooooiinnggg!"

That's enough to get him to turn around and start walking to the back. So I climb down the cage, chase after him, and throw an overhand right to the middle of his back, trying to make the whole thing look like a work. Like we'd planned it that way the whole time.

The crowd pops, and that gets the kid back into things. I tell him to give me some heat, under

my breath so the fans can't hear. He whips me down the ramp and I smash into the outside of the cage full speed with my shoulder, then flop on the ground and sell it like I've been shot.

When he comes over and stomps some boots into my back, I feel them. He's working stiff. Hitting me with hard blows for real. He's still pissed at me.

I work light. So soft, baby. I've never hurt anybody in the ring, not in all my life. Sure, you're always gonna leave a barbwire table match cut up and bloody, but you can still work tomorrow night. I get up and throw some elbows into his gut, stomping as hard as I can and pulling the elbow back like the force from the blows is rocking my huge frame.

The kid no-sells. Doesn't react to my shots at all, even though it looks like I'm giving everything I've got. That's when I jack him in the jaw for real. I land a solid right. POW! Right in the damn kisser. Then I take off back up the cage.

“You *motherfucker!*”

Kid takes off climbing up after me. I've busted his lip open. He's not thinking about heights now. The crowd is hot, baby. The match hasn't even started yet. The referee is still in the ring waiting for us to enter the cage so he can lock us in. I scramble back up to the top and run over to my bag of tricks. The kid climbs up behind me. Everything is going exactly according to plan.

Some folks call it extreme wrestling, hardcore wrestling. Others call it garbage wrestling on account of how much crap ends up in the ring when you wrestle with tables, chairs, ladders, baseball bats, barbed wire, trashcan lids and anything else you can find around the arena.

I used to agree with those people. I was a purist. I liked holds. I liked to tell psychological stories in the ring. Work a guy's leg, then put him in a leg submission at the finish. He fights out or taps out. That's a wrestling story. That's a movie without words. Good guys and bad guys. A western told in tights. The archetypical good versus evil dichotomy if you want to get philosophical about the whole thing.

I paid my money. I paid my dues at the gym. I mopped floors. I set up and broke down wrestling rings. I hustled tickets. My coaches always believed in me. They saw the passion in my ring work. They understood my dedication. Promoters didn't give a shit about dedication. Fans didn't give a shit about dedication.

You're too ugly, kid.

Let's put you in a mask.

You'll make babies cry out there with that mug.

Did your momma drop you on your head?

I've never worn a mask. Masks are for the Luchadors. I'm proud of my face. I was bound and determined to make it in the biz on my own terms. In the end, I had to pay to get my time in the ring. I got a ton of heat. But not the kind the promoters wanted. I did make the kids look away.

I paid to work on indie shows for a few years. They put me on before the show started, with the least amount of fans in attendance. Even at shows where the most they could hope for in their dirty bingo halls was 150-200 people. The boys hated working with me for that reason. Whoever got stuck with Big Chan was doomed to wrestle in front of 15 guys paying no attention to the ring.

Don't get me wrong, the boys respected me. I worked smooth, like ballet. I taught the new kids moves their coaches had forgot even existed. I did my best to make sure every match counted. I believed in myself and I believed in the wrestling business.

And then I took my first hardcore match.

The indies were struggling, boy. The big two national televised wrestling organizations had choked the life right out of the territories as they went live, head to head on Monday nights. The money drained right out of independent wrestling, and as a result, so did the talent. For guys like me, flipping burgers part time paid more than wrestling. Meanwhile, for the first time ever, guys were making six figure deals on TV to wrestle mid-card matches.

It was an unbelievable time for guys who'd just been struggling three, five years earlier. Now on

top of the world. And it left the rest of us with mouths full of sour grapes. A lot chips on a lot of roided up shoulders. So when the indie landscape changed thanks to a couple of East coast and West coast promotions bringing the Japanese Death Match style to the states, well baby, there wasn't much complaining from the indie boys. Those flaming table matches, thumbtack matches, florescent light bulb matches started showing on cable access TV channels and every mechanic, line cook and laborer who never thought they'd make a dime in the squared circle put on the tights and knocked the dog shit out of each other every Friday and Saturday night.

The money wasn't great, but it kept the boys coming back until hardcore wrestling was being talked about in every high school and every wrestling gym around the country.

And me? Well ole Big Chan finally got to wrestle matches for a paycheck. And that heat I was getting being the heel was finally good heat. People filled up those bingo halls and VFWs to see Big Chan get his big face torn to ribbons by cheese graters and barbed wire ring ropes every weekend. Me and the boys busted each other up in ways never heard of in pro wrestling. There wasn't a weekend gone by I didn't end up in a hospital bed.

I broke my body and tore my flesh, cracking my bones this way for almost ten years.

To this day I am the one and only champion of the barbed wire ladder match. Undefeated. I've main evented twelve barbed wire ladder matches, and not a single other wrestler has made that climb over those rungs wrapped tight in razor wire to claim my title.

Then one day I was introduced to the smart marks.

I was familiar with the dirt sheets, but I could barely buy canned tuna to eat on the road, let alone a personal computer. I was driving a couple of boys in the Honda back to Chicago from Indianapolis when they asked me if I'd read what the internet was saying about me.

At the next rest stop, I looked at the printout they'd made of an internet forum talking about the show we were driving home from. Sitting there, in the bathroom of a dirty gas station, I first saw the smart marks mock me with the name The Big Chin.

It took less than a week before the chants spread into the arenas. From the East coast to the West, no matter how hard I worked, no matter how much I bled, no matter how many staples were used to put my body back together...

Big Chin! Great Chin! Big Chin! Great Chin!

Every fucking night. In every fucking venue.

The boys started ribbing me, hard. The promoters would smirk and try to hold back laughter as I talked to them about match ideas and finishes.

I ate that embarrassment. I swallowed the humiliation as I slid further and further down the cards. Month after month. Year after year. I became the curtain jerker comedy act. Big Chin. Even the announcers would call me that. Even when I raged in the back and threatened them, throwing trashcans and kicking dumpsters. They just laughed.

Everyone laughed.

I'll show em all. I'll show them what Big Chan, Great Chan is really made of.

I make it to the top of the cell before the tattooed kid, but he's right on my heels, cussing me the whole way. I square off with him when he gets up there.

"I told you I don't like heights, you fucker," he says, ready to beat my ass for real.

"Listen to em, kid. They're on fire!"

The crowd's chanting *This is awesome! This is awesome!*

The kid noticeably relaxes, dropping his hands a bit as his focus changes to the fans on their feet, cheering for him.

"Now, give me all the heat you got, boy!" I say, telegraphing an exaggerated looping right hand, aimed at the kid's head.

He easily blocks it and throws a right of his own, but this time with an open fist, barely grazing my head.

I sell it well, acting dazed as the kid throws another fist, stomping his foot on the cage to make a thump sound as he hits me in the head again and again until I fall in a heap, rolling around as if my face is on fire from the fake blows.

The kid looks out at the crowd as they pop again. That's a mistake. His vertigo hits, wobbling him. I notice and start climbing to my feet. Covering my head with my arm, as if cradling my injury, I talk to the kid again. The audience is none the wiser.

“Don't look down, now. Not while we've got em right where we want em! Hit the hip toss, then the back body drop. I ain't gonna fall through the damn cage. Get some height on em!”

The kid stomp punches me a few more times before picking me up, grabbing me under my arm and then turning, tossing me up into the air as if he's executed a perfect martial arts throw. In reality, it's me who leaps up into the air, then somersaults forward. Baby, we make it look devastating.

I use the momentum from the throw to spring back to my feet, holding my back like it's been broken in half. I do a spot where I stumble forward and teeter on the edge of the cell like I'm about to fall off, waiving my arms around and all.

When I regain my balance, I turn around and charge the kid. He bends at the waist ducking my lopping right hand and I run right into his shoulder. He straightens up, hands on my hips and pushes off at the same time as I launch myself back into the air in a front flip. We get a mile of air, boy. I fly.

I crash back down to the cell ceiling and, for a second, I think I actually might fall through to the ring below. That's at least a 15-20 foot drop. The fencing holds, barely. I flop around on it like a dying fish, thinking I might get it give. It would be a sweet spot, but it would ruin my big finish.

While the kid poses for the crowd, I crawl over to my bag of tricks. I pull out the lengths of chain I've got in there and clip them to the fence by the thick hooks on one side, and bury the first thinner hook in the side of my cheek. Blood pours down my face from the wound. I sink the second hook into my forehead.

Time to take it home.

The wrestling dried up. Nobody wanted to work with the joke opener with the fucked up face. The boys refused to do any jobs for me. I lost every match for three straight years. Then the bookers stopped calling and stopped answering. A 15 year hardcore veteran, excised from my world. From my brothers.

Jobs aren't easy to find when your face is bigger than most guys' chests and your body is covered in thick scars and burns. I got by. Not proud of some of the things I had to do for money, but I kept fed. I kept a roof over my head. If I was lucky, I could even book a table at a wrestling expo and sell a few 8x10s and maybe some T shirts.

BIG F'N CHAN.

HARDCORE TILL I DIE.

BLEED LIKE ME.

“Do you have any Big Chin, Great Chin shirts?”

Then the blackouts started. I'd be dumping trash at the highschool where I did janitorial work twenty hours a week, and suddenly wake up when the bell rang at the end of the day. Ten minutes here, thirty minutes there. Gone. Like I was being abducted by aliens.

I went to the doctor. Not like I had insurance. They'd have to get in line behind the hundreds of hospitals I owed hundreds of thousands of dollars to.

They did an MRI. Too many blows to the head, the doctor said. Compound trauma from years of concussions. Told me sometimes it takes years for the full effects to manifest.

Dementia. Early onset. Likely candidate for Parkinson's.

Do my hands tremble? Have I noticed any ticks in my facial muscles? I will. Strong likelihood. Should make adjustments to my lifestyle now. Do I have family? Likely be in a nursing home by 50.

I ignored him, of course. Went on about my life like nothing until I woke up in a bathroom at the school with the superintendent shaking me telling my I was fired.

That was Thursday. I've had four blackouts since then. And that tremble started in my left hand.

That's when I knew it was time.

All my life, all I ever wanted was to be a great wrestler. The Great Chan. On my terms. On merit. On skill. On passion.

You smart marks took all that from me. Took my body. Took my dignity. Took my everything.

Now I'm going to take it back. I'm going to do the sickest spot in pro wrestling history.

The kid stops posing and comes over to pick me up. "Let's get down there and get this thing going, Chan," he says to me. "They're red hot. This crowd is on fire for real. This is the best match of my life!"

Then he sees me.

"What the FUCK!"

I have six chains hooked in my face. Two in my forehead, one in each cheek and two in my big ass chin. "I want you to throw me off the side, kid. Throw me hard."

He falls on his ass. The color goes right out of his face. I look like a horror show. "Wha- Wha- Wha-" is all he can say.

"Do it! Throw me off the cell!"

He turns around and motions for the officials from the back. He yells down, "He's all fucked up! Bring the medics!"

The son of a bitch breaks kayfabe. He breaks character and the fans' suspension of disbelief. Wrestlers NEVER break kayfabe. It's the golden rule of pro wrestling.

The show must go on.

I climb to my feet and grab him from behind in a choke hold. I wrestle him to the ground and switch it to a head lock while I hit him with some soft punches. "You can't ruin this for me, kid. I'm sorry. This is it for me. There ain't no next time. This has to be perfect."

The fans are half confused, half into the spot. They're not sure if it's a work or a shoot. Real or fake.

I pull out a utility knife from my bag, but keep it palmed so the fans can't see. The kid is struggling, but I've got my weight on him. He's not going anywhere.

A pair of referees and the promoter dash down the ring and start climbing the cell as I drag the knife across the kid's throat.

“Chan! Cha- For the love of GOD! Call the fucking cops!” the promoter screams, halfway up the cage once he gets a good look at what's going on up here.

The kid's blood, and the blood from my hook wounds mingle together, gushing down onto the ring canvas below like crimson rain. A woman in the front row screams.

I release my headlock. I make it look like the kid's asleep, never breaking character. A dozen more officials pour out the back along with all of the security in the house. The promoter and his two refs are on top of the cell now, slowly inching their way toward me. They keep looking down like the cage floor is just going to fall right out from under them.

It ain't. I know. I've done moonsaults off of ladders up here. Broken legs up here. They don't know about wrestling. They don't know about shit. Neither do you smart marks. Watching this shit on TV. Just because they know my real name.

What drugs I do.

Who I fuck.

They don't know me. They don't know my sacrifice.

The suits are all up here with me now. Their hands are out like they can will me to stop.

“Don't do it,” their mouths say. The crowd is silent.

Everything happens in slow motion.

The suits keep moving toward me. I keep walking backward. EMTs get to the kid, turn to security and shake their heads.

I get to the edge of the cage. Their eyes widen. Their mouths become giant Os as I put my arms out, turn, and leap off.

Watch this.

The slack comes out of the chains about a third of the way down the side of the cage. A normal person's neck would snap, but mine is as thick as a bull's.

I'm still alive, hanging by the hooks.

My face holds. Some of it.

The entire right side rips clean free. The meat drips and dangles next to my eye.

I feel the left side slowly stretching, the tendons tearing, the skin pulling free of the muscle.

Two more hooks pop, sending blood and gore flying into the crowd.

I did this for you. For the camera still trained on what's left of my face. For the internet where this match will live forever. For you smart marks who will finally show me the respect I fucking deserve. Finally judge me for my ability. Not my fucking face.

One hook remains as the fans covered in my blood scream and run. As they flee.

The hook in my chin.

Big Chin.

Great Chin.

Fuck you.

The hook tears.

I fall.

This is the greatest moment of my life.