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# Meanwhile, Back Home

by J.R. Prince

When his name was announced, Cole was tightening the wrap of rope around his left glove and hand. Sundown and twilight had just passed into full night. Directly above, the stars pierced through the wash of the arena lights. All around the Jaycees' arena, however, the lights drowned out the night, shining down on the packed dirt inside the fence. The crowd sparkled as white T-shirts shifted back and forth to the refreshment stands and cigarettes were lit while others were tossed down and ground out underfoot.

As Cole's name reverberated over the P.A. system, he and the cowboys in and around the chute spoke urgently to each other, straightening and tugging on ropes. The bull stamped, snorted and slammed against the slats penning him in. In the high summer heat, the smell of the sweating bull and the dripping cowboys made it hard for anyone to breathe in the chute. Under his shirt Cole's bandages were soaking wet and filthy, and they itched. He would need help changing them later that evening, after his shower and a bootleg Demerol.

Cole wiggled his hand inside his glove to get it shoved more firmly against the rope and jamming his hat still further onto his head. In a lull between crashes against the chute, he clamped down into the bull's shoulders and quickly jerked his head up and down, staring at the bull's horns. At that signal, the chute door slammed open and the bull jumped out. The rope jerked tighter around Cole's hand.



At the tag end of another summer's night Cole had been looking out to the stars instead of down over

horns, staring out of a kitchen window over the sink. In his hand a cup of coffee turned cold, the first cup of coffee of the day poured well before dawn. While he stared, silently, out of the window at the stars, his mother worried at him in a low monotone from the table behind. Her coffee, too, was going cold.

Cole's mother collected and nurtured slights and insults as the memorabilia of her life. She could probe all her past hurts the way you can touch a sore tooth with your tongue, and just like a sore tooth she couldn't help probing them. Ten years after her mother-in-law's snub she could still be angered by her memory that baby Cole's grandmother had not bothered to come to his first birthday. Now that he was leaving home, not to go to college in Stillwater like he was supposed to do but to squander his life in the rodeo like white trash, she felt like screaming with pain. But she was all screamed out. He had not even told her until last night that he was leaving, precipitating a violent storm of argument that lasted for hours. Now, at dawn, after restless sleep for both of them nothing really was left to say. Not to say, however, that she would not say it all again.

"We've worked hard to get you the money to go to school, you know," she said.

"I know, Mama," he said.

"All our lives your dad and I thought you knew what we hoped for you, what we wanted for you to be able to do."

"I know, Mama."

"It would be hard on your dad for you not to be here to help, you can see he ain't young, but we were ready to sacrifice for your future; now you've gone and tossed your future in the trash," she nearly whispered.

"I know how you feel, Mama."

The sun was breaking over the bull pasture fence, coming up from behind the clump of blackjack oak at

the stock tank, with bands of orange and pink and light blue. I've got to get going soon if I'm going to get to Fort Collins tonight, he thought. If I don't get in tonight I'll be too stiff to ride tomorrow.

"I know we should never have let you play around at these little Jaycees rodeos. They're just amateur nights, son, you can't tell how good you are from them."

"I know, Mama," he said. I know I'm good, Mama, he thought.

He tried a sip of coffee, and discovered how cold it was. He threw it into the sink, and decided it was time to leave. He would stop and get breakfast on down the road, and wait until after to brush his teeth.

"I've gotta go, Mama," he said. He saw the tears in her eyes, but he also saw the familiar frown on her face.

"When will you come home, son?" she said.

"Soon, Mama, soon," he said, and he meant it. He kissed her quickly on the forehead and slipped out the kitchen door. The moment he stepped outside he filled his lungs with the only cool air of the day and he felt like running to his pickup. He did plan to come home though, to visit. He was still planning to do it, soon, when he could.

Heading north out of town he passed the section road turning down toward Marcie's house. He could just see the house, over on the first ridge up from the dry creek that ran by the section line. None of the lights were on.



When the bull jumped out of the chute on that late summer night, Cole shoved his legs hard against the bull's sides and speared his knees into its flesh. The shock of the first jump snapped his left arm and kicked the sharp pain in his rib muscles into action. The bull twisted his spine left in a kick of his hind legs and then planted those legs to throw his chest in a spin to the

right. Cole pedaled his weight side to side as if he were riding a bicycle with his thighs, trying to breathe in rhythm with the bull's feet. The bull was an ugly black Brahma with speckled horns and a white mask, and he had a reputation as a spinner. He was known to whirl around in circles, then plant and whirl in the opposite direction. Sure enough, after whirling to the right and snapping his legs out behind, the bull planted his weight and then lifted and hurled his head and shoulders to the left. But as Cole began to anticipate a hard thrust back to the left, the bull began to jump up and kick back behind, showing himself a buckler as well as a spinner. Cole lost an inch of rope on the back kick, and slipped to the left. He nearly touched the horn with his right hand, but saved the ride by throwing that hand up and away over his head.



Three hundred miles away in a hospital delivery room a young woman named Marcie Gibson was screaming with each push. She was soaked with sweat and the hot wash of blood and fluid between her legs. As she forced her exhausted body to push through the pain to hear the nurse say, "The head is coming out now, honey, just another push." Marcie panted and cried, and watched her baby's purplish head appear. Through the haze of hours of labor she had been focused on this one sight. Upon seeing her child, she felt all of her earlier life fall away before this moment. She began to cry, in fear, in awe, in joy.



Cole cried out, in an involuntary half-grunt and half-scream, as the bull cracked its back around into a clockwise spin, twisting away from the side to which he could feel Cole's weight slipping. Cole wrenched his left arm into a tight curl and shoved hard with his left buttock and knee, grabbing desperately to pull himself



out of a fall. The back of Cole's jeans were plastered to the back of his legs with his sweat and the bull's. In the spin his hat flew away. The strands of the strained muscles in his chest felt like they were tearing. He could not completely recover control, and felt off balance to his left, so it was only a matter of time before he fell, at least if the bull kept spinning. But it was only a matter of time before the whistle blew, so Cole was in a race with his own loss of balance.



"I guess I knew it was only a matter of time," Marcie had said, "before you took off."

"Now, honey," said Cole, "I'm not taking off. I'm going on a job, like, to make it big, to make you proud of me."

They were sitting at the lake watching the moon, pale bone white in the stars and broken and dimmer in the choppy water being pushed by the steady wind against the shore.

"I'm not joining the Army or whatever. I mean, you thought I was going off to school, right? So I'm going off to school, just like."

"I'm going to school, sugar, not you. I'm going to finish high school and go to OSU, where you were going, remember? So don't tell me it's like you are going off to school, I'm not buying."

"I love you, Marcie. I'll call, I'll write, I'll visit you all the time. You know I won't cheat on you Marcie," he said.

"What difference does that make? If you're gone, you're gone," she said.

They stayed there until the circles of talk tightened until the futility of saying more became too obvious to go on. But going to her house, Marcie and Cole did keep talking, because it was too hard to end. As he pulled up in front of Marcie's house, Cole felt relieved

when he saw her father peeking out the front window as he drove up. That meant they could end this useless conversation. As he helped Marcie out of the car, Cole said, "I'll call you and tell you all about the circuit. I'll make it like you are there."

"Yeah, sure, I know it, Cole. You call me, OK?"

Cole walked Marcie on to the porch of her house and squared around to face her. He leaned over, kissed her, and said, "I'll call as soon as I get there, OK?"

"You do that, sugar," she said, but she thought, you'll stop calling soon enough.



Which, after a few months, he did. He hadn't spoken to her since October last, when in the process of hiding from her that, once in a while, he'd been with someone in a small town, he felt her withdrawing. Was it really she who pulled away or was it his own wall of hidden feelings? Either way, that call made him feel too cold to ever want to call again. He still thought he wanted to call, but when the time came he never really could get around to it. He wound up sending her a card at Christmas, but she hadn't sent him one back. He wanted to ask his mother about Marcie, but his mother had never acknowledged Marcie's existence when they were dating, and anyway he didn't call home too much, either. He had spent Christmas with a friend in Laredo and Easter in a hospital in Roswell, New Mexico, and basically he and his mother weren't on the best of terms. His father, well, his father and he had needed an interpreter to talk to each other for a long time.



For what seemed like a very long time, while Cole felt himself slipping, the bull stayed tight in his spin without wavering at all. Cole knew he could make eight seconds and out, but he knew it would be close. If he just kept digging his knees, if he could just lean into the

turn a bit more.... His left elbow began to lock. Cole felt the rope cut into the meat of his hand through the tough buckskin of his glove. A moment of panic rushed through his stomach and tightened his lungs. A quick moan cracked his lips. Then he heard the buzzer.



Marcie groaned one last time and she pushed the baby's head out and the rest of him slid through into the obstetrician's waiting arms. Marcie saw the first miracle of her life in the mirror at her feet, then dropped her head back in exhaustion and numbness. Suddenly she could not see or hear anything except blue and red dots dancing in front of her eyes against the blinding white backdrop of the overhead lights. Then she heard the baby cry. For a moment, a confused instant, she thought her son was being taken away, the nurses were doing something, she couldn't tell what. But then the second miracle of her life took place. They put her baby down against her panting breast. Her child was bruised and misshapen by birth, but she could see how beautiful he was and would be, the most beautiful person in the whole world.



Cole slipped his left hand free of the rope in time to grab the pickup man and swing himself over to the ground. He briefly swung his head into the bright lights and caught his breath before dropping his eyes to the sea of shifting white T-shirts. He swung his hand up in a wave as he jogged over to grab his hat from the dirt. The clowns had the bull under control, playing him with the barrel and flopping giant handkerchiefs, so Cole was free to be gracious and look calm to the crowd. While he was bending over for the hat, though, the bull made a move toward his direction that Cole saw out of the corner of his eye. He scooped up the hat and scooted over and up onto the fence, before dropping down after the clowns

drew the bull back. He waved his hat at the grandstands and jogged over to the back fence and climbed it to get back behind the chutes. As he jogged over, the announcer called out over the P.A., "Let's give a big hand to that young cowboy, Cole Brown, from down in Cochise, Oklahoma! Looking over the scoreboard we can see that he's got the score to beat!"

Back near the calf pens, Cole stripped off his shirt and tried to stretch his left side. That may have been a mistake, but it felt good in a perverse way to explore the



Photo illustration by John Shear



burning that it caused. He reached into his gym bag, sitting on his saddle shoved up against the fence, and pulled out a clean white shirt. While he was buttoning the shirt, Billy Bejcek beat Cole's score to beat. By the end of the evening, Cole finished in third, worth a fair piece of change but not enough on which to get rich. He'd only spend part of his winnings with the doctor and some decent money would be left. Just enough, in fact, to keep him moving down the road and building his hopes for the National Finals in Fort Worth. Maybe he would go to the doctor here in town tomorrow, he thought, but he'd need to get on to Billings by Thursday.

After the crowds had left that night, before he left the fairgrounds, Cole asked Bull Conway, one of the clowns, to rewrap his bandage. Bull was an old hand and did a job good enough to last until the next day's stop at the doctor's office. A lot of the boys were heading to a bar they'd found the night before, but Cole didn't feel up to it. In fact, Cole was a little lonesome for someone he really knew, someone to whom he could really talk.

Cole went back to his truck, took off his spurs, threw his gear on the seat next to him, and drove back to the little strip motel where he had a room. In the room, he stripped off his chaps and shirt, sat on the bed and flicked on the television. The local news was on, talking about brush fires near towns of which Cole had never heard the names in his life. He turned the sound all the way down, and started to dial his home number. But at the last moment, after he dialed the area code and local exchange number, he changed his mind. Instead, he dialed Marcie's family's house. The telephone rang three, then four times, but there was no answer. It was not yet 10:30, so probably they wouldn't be in bed, but they might have been out. They didn't go out much, so

Cole thought perhaps they were just taking their time getting to the telephone.

Cole didn't let it ring a fifth time. He lost his nerve. It had been so long since he had spoken to her, and he would have no idea what to say to anyone in her family. He was a little afraid of what her parents might say to him. So instead of letting the phone ring a fifth time—it's not that big a house, anyway, they must be out, he thought—Cole hung up. When the telephone was back in its cradle, Cole sat and stared at the television, as the news became the *Tonight Show*, letting the images flicker in the silence.



In the hospital in Lawton, Oklahoma, Marcie was nursing her baby for the first time. The sensation of the little mouth fastened to her nipple, coaxing the flow of liquid not yet mother's milk, was like nothing else ever in her life, better than anything she had ever felt in a different way than anything had ever felt good. That was the third miracle of her life.

Next to her bed was a tall, thin boy of twenty, with auburn hair already beginning to show signs of receding, with shining red and freckled skin well on the way to becoming the wrinkled tanned leather it would be by the time he reached middle age. The boy had a look of exhausted worship in his eyes, swallowing in both mother and child. His face was so full of adoration that Marcie had to laugh. He grinned when she laughed, then he laughed too.



Cole finally turned off the television when he realized it was close to midnight. He never bothered to shower, and he slept on top of the bed with his boots still on. He had a long drive to make the next day. 