

Time hasn't changed the rodeo—over the past decade of barrel racing, I've competed on one circuit or another. Management's still blowing smoke about adding additional events for us women, but we've heard that crap before. Tradition it seems is as stubborn as the men in charge.

Spectators haven't changed much, either. I don't care if you saddle up in Abilene, Reno, or the Cow Palace; sell-out crowds display the transient qualities of the affluent—well-heeled fans able to travel on a whim and deal with exorbitant ticket prices and their scalpers. This weekend isn't any different.

Would-be stockmen sporting the deviled look of Kentucky Colonels patrol the calf pens, their Stetsons adorned with competing plumes plucked from barnyard fowl. Lizard booted bottling company executives from Seattle, Denver, or Salt Lake City, deposit their families in box seats. Two-stepping politicians decked out in straw hats and cheap sneakers glad-hand in the shade of the grandstand canopy. Tinhorns bake in the ninety-degree heat of the bleachers.

Pointy-toed cow princesses balance on the arena's top rail, hitting on grimy pick up men. I'm not the first to call these girls saddle tramps. Sun up will find the latest Calamity Jane abandoned out back of the cattle chutes, spitting grit and drowning the seed of bad judgment with the remnants of yesterday's six-pack.

The last time my bedroll bulldogged a dusty wrangler, I'd got my run of ranch romance. Besides, my rig isn't geared to pull a two-horse trailer. I lit out for the Methow Valley, leaving my best saddle blanket stuffed behind the seat of Ray Yoakum's '52 Ford pickup truck.

Before I split, Ray told me that lovers, like rodeo performers, were only as good as their

mounts. Goddamn, I never signed on to be an object of anybody's adoration! Still, given the chance, I knew we'd bunk together again. Hell, if Ray were here now, I would forgive him his occasional lapse into weirdness. He swore that I was the strange one, but I have three rules I live by; I never wait in line for a meal, I won't go out of town just to get laid, and if Johnny Walker or Jack Daniels aren't standing top shelf, back bar along the wall, I'll go home thirsty.

I trailer my rig to the only watering hole in town. As I fuss with my Chevy's door lock, I hear the sound of sledgehammers driving metal stakes to earth. Young men dressed in white shirts with rolled up sleeves erect a round circus-style tent, hurrying to finish in time for this week's series of revival meeting.

Next door, a southerly wind ruffles the banner tacked above the saloon's entry. It proclaims: *Bull Testicle Festival . . . Come In and Have Yourself a Ball!*

The saloon, The Bull Shed, corrals the post rodeo overflow. My journey around barstools and belt buckles mimics that of my horse, Spook, in the finals of the barrel race. Spook, a six year old gelding, stumbled at the final turn. I lost my seat and plowed a dead furrow through the center of the arena. Labor Day spectators cheered when I was hoisted from the dung. Why all the applause? I just lost another payday! I stutter-step but regain my balance and reach the bar where I shout to capture the attention of an aproned man standing on the supply side: "Bar keep, set me up with a jug of Old Number Seven!"

"It's gonna cost you a pretty penny, miss. Say, you're the gal who took the tumble! Denver Jill is it?"

"Durango Jill."

"Jilly, you're a real crowd pleaser, here's what I'm a gonna do, I'm setting you up at cost."

The bartender is one of those creeps who don't make eye contact. When my chest doesn't

return his wink, he tips a shot glass over the bottle of Jack and slaps it across the counter. His sudden movement sends the rows of gold chain hanging beneath his chin into a jangling chant:

*I'm a shaking it boss; I'm a shaking it.*

It hurts to legally separate myself from the dwindling supply of dollars in my hip pocket, but I have a greater need to renew my friendship with Mr. Daniels. Ah, the men in my life—Jack Daniels, George Washington, and Ray Yoakum—whiskey, money, and sex. I never drank anything good named after a woman, Queen Elizabeth isn't at par with dead American presidents, and no one has ever done me like Ray Yoakum—if only he hadn't acted so strange.

Ray claimed that his was a religious upbringing and that he only worshipped with his own kind. That might explain his penchant for disappearing several days at a time. Heck, in Tulsa, he missed the short round of bulls in an event he was leading. I didn't see him again until Reno, Nevada. I confronted him about pulling up stakes like that, but his reasons were vague and he seemed out of sorts, like he was coming down from a weeklong binge.

Another of his quirks bothered me, I never once saw him with his shirt off, not even in the bathtub. I teased him about maybe having Mother tattooed on his chest. It's not as though he's modest, usually, he waltzed around bare-assed and, depending on the cut of his shirt, hangs lower than the buttoned front tails. He even makes love long sleeved.

I snatch the bottle and glass from the bar top and snake my way to the only unoccupied table, ignoring the pats on my behind from liquored-up line dancers. Unison boot scooting has about as much appeal to me as attending an all girls' academy. Ray got mad when I told him this line dance craze was just another mindless activity. I mean, find someone brave enough to lead and the rest follow . . . how original is that? According to Ray, I exhibit antisocial tendencies. Be that as it may, I intend on drinking myself into tomorrow—alone.

A dozen years ago, at the age of seventeen, on the run from a Midwest farm town, I changed my name to Durango Jill. I was vain enough to think that the Durango Boot Company might send endorsements my way. My given name, Mary Ellen Johnson, didn't smack of rodeoing much less the Old West. Even John Wayne tried to disguise the fact that he was from Iowa, back in the days that he billed himself as Sandy the Singing Cowboy. If I had been savvy about marketing I would have dyed my hair blond, named myself Golden Jill, and been every bit as phony as Lilly Sundae, the "Million Dollar Cowgirl", who is now heading my way.

Lilly's father is one of those fallen, silver-tongued television evangelists who could never do enough for his "Little Girl." Rumor has it that he's sprung for breast augmentation surgery. She does seem to bulge out at eye-level a little more than usual—did I relate that she is way taller than me?

Lilly began riding the circuit a few years after I had become established. She didn't start winning until her father bought her the top horse in the country, you may have heard of him, his name is Nation. In all fairness, I must admit, her cute dimples have worked to boost rodeo stock with television audiences. Lilly has won the Nationals for the past three years, and I for one would like to see her reign come to a screeching halt.

A drunken cowboy ogles and then lunges at Lilly, bumping my table in the process. My bottle of Jack scoots against a too full ashtray and trips. As I reach for the whiskey, the legs of my chair slip out from under me and, for the second time today, I lay on my backside, looking up.

"Jack fell down and Jill went tumbling after!" Lilly cackles, sidestepping the cowpoke. I find my feet and slowly stand. The saloon had become embarrassingly silent.

"Cowgirl Up!" Someone cries; the slogan is accompanied by whistles and catcalls. The

crowd starts clapping and shouting: "More . . . More . . . More . . ."

I'm not loose enough yet to climb up on the bar and shoot the moon. The bottle of whiskey is resting on its side, half of its contents spilled, a stream cascading over the table's edge. I right the jug, while cursing the loss of my evening's companion.

During the applause, Lilly sidles over to a barmaid and demands a towel. On her way back, when she turns sideways to negotiate the booted sprawl of rodeo hands, I notice that she still doesn't have much of a behind. Her rear end is one bony little pony.

Once at my table, she dangles the towel from her thumb and forefinger, saying: "My Daddy didn't raise me to swamp saloons." She seems to be showing off an enormous diamond ring, I grab the rag.

I feel kind of catty when I inquire: "Your Daddy buy you that?"

"Heavens no! I got me a real God-fearing hunk of a man!"

"I'll bet you do. By the way, what are you doing here? I figured you All- American types would be working the Ellensburg Rodeo."

"The network flew me here. The public demand is such they want maximum exposure for us superstars. I've been run ragged nearly every weekend!" She puckers her lips, taking annoying little sips from her ever present can of low-cal soda. My shot glass is missing in action, so I pick up the bottle of Jack and knock down a mighty slug, causing my tear ducts to kick into overdrive.

"That sure is ladylike!" Lilly sniffs. "I was going to introduce you to my fiancée, but I don't want him to think that I hang with white trash!" I have my fist cocked when I notice Ray Yoakum making his way toward us. He doesn't see me as he zeros in on Lilly.

"My two favorite parts of the rodeo! Ray coos, hugging Lilly from behind, his hands enveloping her bosom.

"Honeeeey! I got me an image to uphold!" Lilly wiggles her shoulders as she tries to break the cross my heart groping by her very own "God-fearing hunk of a man."

"Hello, Ray." I hear myself say. Startled, his hands drop to his sides as he notices me.

"Ha . . . hi," he stammers.

"You know her?" The expression on Lilly's face would cause a bullring clown to seek the safety of a wooden barrel. "Come along dear, I was just saying goodbye to this . . . this person! I promised Daddy we would set up the lighting for the revival."

She drags Ray away, her shoulders square and her chin set at such an angle that it just has to interfere with her vision. When she stumbles, she uses Ray as a crutch.

Under ordinary circumstance, an ordeal such as I have just suffered would be an invitation to get blistered. I doubt I have enough liquor left and, like I already said, my funds are approaching an all time low. The fact is; I let Ray go pure and simple. But, he sure latched on to that sweetheart of the rodeo right quick!

Above the din of the bar crowd, snatches of gospel music duels with the three-piece cowboy band. "Rock of ages . . . I'm so lonesome, I could cry." I've got about one good swallow left in my jug. I slip out the saloon's back door and decide to take in the good preacher's sermon.

The tent pitched next to the saloon is a ragged moth eaten affair, most likely cast off from some old-timey circus. The perimeter is round and the roof of canvas sags between two great poles. The sides are rolled up to allow for the free flow of air, creating a missionary appeal to curious bystanders gawking at the goings on from a respectable distance.

The rear stairway of the Bull Shed is my vantage point and I'm not more than a dozen yards from the pulpit. Young men dressed in white dress shirts with rolled up sleeves patrol the

buffer zone, warily eyeing the spectators as the sermon gets underway. "Those of you who fail to kneel before the Lord," Preacher Lee cries with a beseeching shriek, "are asking to be hurled into the infernal pit of damnation!"

A chorus of "Amen Brother!" pries itself from the righteous lungs of the devout.

"We gather here, in this temporary holy house of the round, because the devil cannot corner us! If you tithe freely, the foundation of a permanent structure will be laid!"

The congregation rises, shouts "Hallelujah!" then pours the contents of their wallets and purses into baskets passed by young men in white shirts.

I savor the remnants of my whiskey bottle and settle against the top step to enjoy the alcohol's warmth. For years, Preacher Lee's crusades would preempt scheduled network programming. He lost his television faithful when they discovered he was doing more than preaching hellfire and damnation. Wire services worldwide carried the photos of him exiting his secretary's hotel room, a scant towel doing little to hide his naked girth.

After the collection, the lights dim and a spotlight is cast upon a tall woman wearing a sleeveless flowing white gown. She starts singing: "Amazing grace, how sweet the . . ." The voice is beautiful; of course it's Lilly's. Why do I bother to compete with her? Even with the helpful acoustics of a tile shower stall, I still sing like a little girl with sinus problems.

When Lilly finishes, the lights are turned up full and Preacher Lee starts in again: "I stand before you a happy man. I wish to announce the betrothal of my daughter, Lilly Sundae, to a fine young person, a devout servant of the Lord who wears the proof of his faith like the campaign ribbons of a war hero. Ray Yoakum, please step to the pulpit."

I damn near fall from my perch when Ray strolls into view. Once, I owned a horse that was bit by a snake . . . the horse survived, but for months after, the hide near his flank knotted in

a kind of tuck. Imagine a belly button if you will. Ray took his place at the pulpit, shirtless. His whole upper body, neck down, is a rash of the same type of scars. A real live rattlesnake coils around his neck.

"They shall take up serpents, so sayeth the Good Book!" Preacher Lee screams. "In the days to come, we will sort out those of you who are less than devout!" He rolls his eyes heavenward, "Lord, please say that you favor us with your presence . . . that you are in attendance . . . that you approve of our countenance. Lord, send us a sign!"

What can I say? Perhaps I'm a messenger sent from above, Gabriel's the name, hand me my trumpet. I draw a bead on Ray and heave the empty bottle of Jack Daniels. The jug takes a flyer and lands dead center between the great posts of the tent's roof, where it thumps ass over teakettle, somersaulting toward the edge. A roll of side panel keeps it from crashing to the ground.

Preacher Lee looks shaken, then proclaims: "It's the sign!" Camp followers collectively leap skyward, shouting "Praise the Lord!" Women sob tears of joy and grown men faint straight away.

An angry young man points me out to his comrades and exclaims: "She flung a missile at the Preacher!" White-shirted men with rolled up sleeves give chase. I lead them into the saloon. The lone stall in the women's john is the perfect place to cry.