

# AT THE RODEO

CATHERINE NOSKE

The blonde one is fourteen. The dark one is older, probably sixteen, and different – the blonde one looks like a china doll. They sit, the three of them, behind the cattle trucks, and the faintly sour smell of urine mingled with manure seeps out and rolls away through the cold. The man lights a cigarette, and looks at the blonde.

It is their rodeo. He is a rider. He wonders vaguely what they are doing here, but he is too drunk to really care. His ride went well. He won the saddle bronc. He is celebrating. The blonde one is nervous, on edge. He suspects vaguely that she has been pulled along by the brunette (who has, he decides, the advantage of being older, and more his type). There, behind the trucks, her skin catches the glow of the ring-side lights, a golden-yellow. The brunette's is a darker bronze. The music blares on – the bull ride is almost finished.

He is sick of the rodeos, really. He has been following them since he left school, town to town for two long years, parading in the bright shirt, and flashy hats, winking to the girls in the crowd. At every town bored girls line up for the novelty of dusty cowboys, their mouths sticky, cans in hand, sneaking backside in covert groups. Dead-beat boyfriends are left ring-side, distracted by bright lights. Rural girls. Forward, open; ready flesh. He sleeps with them, and feels slightly queasy each time. They like him, the flesh-girls. He is young, and flashy, and attractive. They parade for him, bulging curves crammed into over-tight tank-tops, short skirts, jeans. Sometimes he dreams of them, of burst stitching, and suffocating in their flesh.

These two, though. These two are different. The blonde is a painting, an oil painting. He can imagine her like that, as a nude, all glowing skin, budding breasts, waves of golden hair. The brunette is different, harder, more real. He couldn't touch the blonde, but the brunette is doing things to his head. He kicks at the grass. It is their oval. It is the same everywhere. They trucked the sand in, middle aged farmers with the P&A society and busy-body wives, hauling hay bales and cutting sandwiches, giving the farm hands a night off. Local big wigs donating sausages, pictures of benevolence. A community event. The older generation always seemed to congregate, gossiping, around the barbie or in the club-house, tinnies in hand, and as the night wore on turned a blind eye to the drunk youths and vomiting teenagers clustered in ragged groups behind the stands. A family night out. Kiddies on jumping castles, and buying fairy floss or fake cowboy hats from the slightly pathetic carnival stalls. And then, suddenly, every time, there came the change, and the mothers would drag over-excited kids home, and the dark side of the rodeo began to take over. A while ago he saw the first of them leave. He wonders what these two are still doing here.

He finishes his cigarette. He doesn't smoke, as a rule, but he always needs one after a ride. The brunette leans over.

'Can I 'ave one?' Her voice is surprisingly high.

'What, you smoke?'

'Yes.' It was defiant. 'Well?'

'Here.' He smiles lazily. He is calm now. 'Sure.'

'Reeny!' The younger one hisses at her, terrified. 'Dad'll kill you!'

Sisters, then?

'So?' She says it out loud, easily. 'He's not my father.' She leans in for him to light the smoke, stretching herself forward suggestively. He looks at her properly for the first time. She is slight, with good breasts, and long loose hair. Her eyes are ringed rather heavily in dark make-up. Her eyes are not young. She wears a thin t-shirt and tattered shorts. There are goosebumps on her arms and legs.

'Do you girls want a drink?' His voice is thick. It sounds sleazy. It isn't meant to, but he's had a few and it comes out wrong. The brunette nods. When they first found him, the boys had had a go, catcalling, yelling.

'Fans of yours, Sutto?'

'Bloody cradle snatcher!'

'Shotgun the brunette!'

'Raw meat!'

And he had turned his back and walked away. He had felt it, a flip in his stomach. He heard them whistle once he was behind the trucks. But they had followed him. They had followed.

He stands up and heads back to his van. Someone is behind it with a girl. The speakers rumble fuzzily something about the turnout, then start the national anthem. The night is over. There is a spattering of applause, most of the hay bales are already empty. Somewhere over by the club house a band has started up, perched on a flat-bed trailer. A small crowd of dancers shuffled unenergetically around their base, the P&A wives sit further back, giggling and tapping their toes. He fits the key in the lock and hauls himself in. The boys are gone, out somewhere with girls. A couple of six packs sit huddled in the bottom of the fridge. He rips one open and takes a drink out. God knows he needs it. He opens it and drinks half, the bourbon is sour-sweet. Sticky. He grabs the other sixer and walks out.

He hears the girls before he sees them again. Their voices are hushed, low, angry.

'You tell, you little cow, and I'll kill you.'

'Let me go!'

'Not until you promise!'

'Reeny, let me go!'

'Yeah, let you run off to Daddy, princess!'

'Reeny, please, you're hurting!' The young one is almost sobbing.

'Siddown! He'll be back in a sec.'

He coughs, and walks in noisily. The older one is still kneeling. She stands when she sees him. The cigarette has disappeared. He looks at her, and tells himself again that she followed him. He passes her a drink.

They sit for a while. The blonde doesn't drink, but the brunette sips it eagerly. It slowly stains her lips, dark and shiny in the yellow light. The blonde one is shivering, eyes wide.

'Come back to my van. It's warm at least.'

The older one looks at him sideways, then at the young one.

'Sure.'

The blonde snaps round, looks at her. 'Reeny...' Her voice quivers.

The brunette stands up, reaches down, and hauls the blonde up by her arm. 'C'mon.'

He looks at her as she walks beside him. She is tall, for her age. The blonde is much shorter. She bulks, after a few steps. The brunette looks at her and shrugs, before turning her back and walking on. For a moment he is caught in between. He looks at the brunette. When he looks back, the blonde is gone. He walks on.

'What's your name?'

'Ellen.'

'Why's she call you Reeny?'

'Everyone does. I wanted to be a ballerina.'

'What?' He looks at her again, puzzled. She takes a swig from the can.

'Ballerina, idiot. Reeny.'

He laughs.

'Good luck with that.'

She looks at him, hurt.

'I could be. Look.' She puts the drink down, runs forward and leaps, legs split, hair flying. Her skin catches the arena lights, orange-bronze. He swallows.

'I take it back.'

She stops and stands in front of him. She looks a little dizzy, and he wonders if it is the drink. When he pulls her in behind a van, she doesn't resist.

A small blonde shadow hovers behind the cluster of vans. A can slowly empties itself onto the grass at her feet, she jumps sideways out of its puddle. She stands first on one foot, then the other.

A taller girl runs out towards her. There is the sound of grazing from the pens of cattle. She stops, shaking, then wobbles the last three steps. There is blood on her legs. The blonde one catches her, grabs her arm.

'You OK?'

The dark one looks at her. Her mascara has run.

'I didn't tell.'

The dark one looks ahead. The blonde stamps her foot.

'I didn't!' She hesitates, impatient, unsure, wriggling slightly. 'Oh, come on. Dad's waiting for us.' She turns and drags the older girl back towards the lights.