

Looking for Eight

by Marcela Fuentes

You were small enough to pull up in a plastic milk crate by a rope slung across a tree limb, but I don't think you wore those blue-footed pajamas anymore. You insisted on taking the first turn in our makeshift elevator, because I was a girl and the first born, unfair in your eyes. An old rope and a very tall pecan tree, so my reasoning to test my weight on it seemed appropriate; I was heavier. But I wanted to make you happy.

I can still see your face peeking down at me, as I hoisted you higher and higher into the air, watching me, not smiling but serious, afraid but determined that yours would be the first glory.

You almost made the tree. I could see the leaves on the small offshoots from the limb start to touch your head and then the rope snapped. Even now, I can't remember seeing your descent, whether you screamed or even changed expression. That's where my memory stops, the sound stops, the bright day ends there and only begins again after you had fallen.

I saw you beneath the pecan tree, between two roots like giant, veined wings sprouting from your shoulders. The ground hard-packed, pale dirt and you were wearing your gray Batman t-shirt, which I realized in that moment almost matched the color of our grassless yard. Your eyes were open, staring straight up through the branches, past the leaves that left speckled shadows across your face.

A star-like wound. A little red mouth. Blood flowing from your forehead. You weren't crying.

I knew then, when you bled serenely into the dusty earth, that you could die. That at any instant, my brother could be taken from me forever. And so I began my guardianship in earnest.

Lorenzo was calling from a payphone again, probably at a gas station. Alma could hear wind scraping against the receiver when he said hello.

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"Hey," she said. "You still in Tampa?"

"I'm in San Antonio."

"When did you get here?"

"'Bout twenty minutes. How do I get to your house?"

Alma gave him directions then went out to the porch to wait.

She'd forgotten to replace the light and didn't want Lorenzo to miss the house number in the dark. He had called her from Cheyenne a few weeks ago about a rodeo in Tampa.

Lorenzo pulled up in a dented Chevy S-10 with Wyoming plates. Dry, white mud was spattered across the bumper. It wasn't his, or at least, it was not the truck he had driven away in eight months ago.

Alma stood up as Lorenzo crossed the broken sidewalk. He was much browner than the last time she had seen him. Thinner too.

"Where'd you get the truck?"

"Borrowed it. Mine's in the shop." Lorenzo hugged her, his cotton t-shirt warm and smelling of sunflower seeds. She gestured toward a patio chair, but he shook his head.

"No, I can't stay." He stuffed his hands in his pockets. "Super Bull's this Saturday. If I place in the top three I might qualify for the San Antonio Stock Show and Rodeo."

She knew there were a few rodeos in south Texas scheduled in the next two weeks. Mostly small-time stuff, but riders who hadn't had much luck might be inclined to improve their scores for the pro circuit. She guessed Lorenzo wasn't having much luck.

"Come see me ride?" he asked.

"I wasn't planning on going home this weekend," she said.

"It's only two hours away. You could drive down Saturday morning."

"Does mom know you're coming?"

Lorenzo shrugged. "I've got a place to stay. I just wanted to know if you'd be there."

She thought of the rider she had seen at the rodeo two years before. She had seen the bull deliberately shift its rider forward and throw its head back, into the rider's face. The rider had crumpled like a scrap of paper in a fist. He'd flapped against the bull's body,

unconscious, his hand hung up in the rope, while it dragged him in circles around the arena. Bullfighters had had to corner the animal in order to pry the rider's fingers loose. Every bone in the man's face had been broken.

She looked up at Lorenzo. A thin scratch ran high across his left cheek, somewhere between fresh and healed. And there, just at the hairline above his left eye, a faint mark, visible only because she knew it was there.

"Yeah, all right," she said. "I'll come watch you."

When I drive up to the house, I can see your makeshift bull at the far end of the field, lonesome as an overturned tricycle. The springs are sagging and the barrel hangs off-balance, close to the ground. Weeds sprout around the posts and the barrel has grown rust spots. But I'm the only one who gets close enough to look. Mom never goes into the field, and this year Dad planted his alfalfa at the other end, opposite the barn.

It's a ghost in the background of every visit, the undertone of conversation; when I go home, they want news. Mom prods and prods, jealous because you don't call her, and if I haven't heard from you, lectures me about going out too much—I might be missing your calls. I end up repeating what you said last time, and she worries every word like a terrier, looking for significance. I don't tell her that you mostly call when I'm at work, that all you leave on my answering machine are the names of cities. She doesn't ask when Dad's around, but I'm sure she gives her own reports after I'm gone. He hasn't said your name since you left, but he hasn't taken apart your practice bull either.

He wouldn't help you build it, so I did, though I wasn't very good at holding up the posts while you packed in the dirt. After we finished, you spray painted AINT SKEERT in red across one end of the barrel, and teased me into trying it out. Keep your arm slack, you said, tying my fist in the bull rope, or you'll lose your balance.

But when you started shaking the springs my legs weren't enough to hold that lurching barrel and I couldn't keep my arm from freezing. I fell off every time.

Sometimes at night, after they fall asleep, I go out and sit on the barrel. It's so low that my feet almost touch the ground and if I rub my finger across AINT SKEERT the paint flakes off. If I bounce on it, the broken springs creak and flounder. This old barrel is tame. It can't buck anymore, it can't spin and it won't chase me if I fall. It's held up by car springs and wood. It's a toy, like a trampoline, not a study guide.

You ain't scared. But I am.

"I cried a lot when I was pregnant with Lorenzo," her mother said.

Alma had only been home an hour, and already her mother had begun her monologue of theories about her son. She had somehow managed to work herself into the idea that Alma didn't mind.

Combing her hair before the bathroom vanity, Genevieve was short enough so that Alma could stand behind her, watching, and see both their faces. Alma's mother was much smaller and lighter skinned; Alma felt like a large brown moth hovering over her.

The brush made slow, quiet strokes. Genevieve flipped her hair back and the ends grazed Alma's face. Genevieve's face, light as cream, trembled on the edge of remembered pain: her eyes shiny and round, full of tears, her mouth gathered tight.

"Your Dad was already getting really bad. You know he left me twice before Lorenzo was even born? Twice in nine months. I don't know why I kept letting him come back, I was so stupid."

She made the brushstrokes shorter and harder, dragging the bristles against her scalp, as though to punish herself. "Things like that can affect the baby. I think that's why Lorenzo is very insecure. Every once in a while, he needs to touch and know you're there."

Alma tried to catch her mother's eyes in the mirror. "Are you going to watch him ride tomorrow?"

"No." Genevieve set the brush on the counter. "Your father would have a fit. You go, mi'ja, you like rodeos." She began sorting through her jewelry box for earrings.

"That's why I came home this weekend."

Genevieve hugged her, so small that Alma could rest her cheek on Genevieve's head. "God gave me a girl first because he knew I needed you."

Pig-tailed and in red corduroy, I stood beside her bed watching her cry. Just after Christmas, I remember, because I kept finding strands of gold tinsel in the carpet. I held some, my hands on the comforter, hoping to show her how beautiful it was, and draw her away from wherever she was. Her eyes were open, itchy-red and puffed, but ignoring me. So I looked at her stomach, where her shirt had pulled away from the waistband. This is how I first saw you. Screened by a light blue blouse and the elastic waist of a pair of warmers, a lump in the middle of her, smooth and round and alive beneath the bland anonymity of her skin. I touched you, my hand small and brown against the pale swell of her belly, and you felt like an eyeball beneath a closed lid.

"That's your brother," she said, "and it's your job to take care of him because I don't know who else is going to do it." Her eyes were angry and I dropped my hand.

Little tadpole, silent, eyeless, breathing liquid in a world as dark as the inside of a closed mouth. How was it there, feeling the rising tide of an unnamed anger, the tremors of your weeping universe, listening to sobbing while you slept and waited out your months of cell division? Tears slipped into your umbilical cord, shedding into the pocket of your belly-to-be so that they grew with you and when you were born, stayed.

You must have heard them when I did not. Did he hurt you when he hurt her? He must have. The memory of rage before you were born. Is that what drives you to look for violence, to let it skin your lips back over your teeth?

Lorenzo could sit in a group of men and fit into the pattern of hats and knuckles and boots. His voice was the last heard, his figure blended easily into the backdrop of maleness. It was easy to look past him and not notice.

Still, Alma immediately picked Lorenzo out among the other smallish, whip-thin cowboys climbing and hopping from the chutes or sitting on the rails around the arena. He stood balanced on the railing of the pens, one hand gripping the big red pipe of the gate hinge, watching the bulls.

The crowd murmured restlessly, unhappy because the bull in the first chute lay down when the rider straddled him. Rodeo bullfighters in oversized Levis cut-offs and suspenders tumbled into the arena, jostling each other. One, setting up a dummy in the middle of the ring, began bantering with the announcer. Like the rest of the bullfighters, he wore athletic shoes.

The attendants got the animal up finally, by poking it in the eye with a salt stick. The bull lunged at the chute gate, thudding hard. Its rider settled himself and gave a curt nod. The gate swung open.

It amazed Alma how a stubby-legged creature weighing about as much as small car could move like a cat and leap four feet in the air. This one had a brindle hide and small, round-tipped horns. The rider pitched back and forth, limbs flailing like a cloth marionette. Two seconds. The bull spun in a tight circle then broke hard to the left, swinging the rider sideways, pulling him off-balance. Five seconds. It leaped again to the left, twisting its body so that its hindquarters shot left, forequarters pointed right. The rider slapped into the arena railing. Six seconds. Two bullfighters pulled him up and half-walked, half-dragged him from the arena.

"C'mon ya'll and give this cowboy his due," the announcer chided them. The audience clapped respectfully.

The bull trotted around the arena, thrilling the crowd by goring the dummy and grinding it into the dirt before being chased back to the pens.

Two-and-a-half hours later, only seven riders out of twenty-five had completed all three of their rides. Lorenzo had made eight each go-round and taken second place. Alma waited in the bleachers long after it was over, and he finally appeared near the pens. She knew he was hurting when he opened the gate and shuffled through rather than vaulting over it. Crossing the arena, he was a tiny scrap of a boy, his chaps stirring up dust around his boots. Alma stood up as he reached her side of the railings and began climbing them slowly.

"You are one dirty hombre. Ready to go?"

"Yeah." A stripe of clean brown skin lay over the ridge of his eyebrows when he took his hat off.

"I saw that bull step on you when you jumped off."

He grinned. "Stomped me right in the ass."

"You okay?" asked Alma as they left the fair grounds.

"My right cheek is still numb."

They had come in his truck, but Lorenzo asked her to drive back. He fiddled with the tuner as they pulled onto the street and found a scratchy AM station playing Patsy Cline.

"I qualified for PBR," he said quietly. The radio light made a curious shadow pattern across his face. "You gonna come?"

Alma didn't want to answer, but he kept looking at her. "Yeah. I'll be there."

In the darkness of the cab, she peeked at him. There was a clot of dirt clinging to the hair above his ear. "Aren't you ever scared?"

"I guess." He settled himself against the seat.

"I get scared," said Alma, "I don't know how you do it."

"You have to be quick and you have to pray," he said simply.

"You're telling me you're up on that thing praying? That's what you're doing the whole time?"

"Hell, yes. What else would I be doing?"

There's a photograph I have of you and me; I must be in first grade; Mother bought me those wide-leg, plaid pants that year, and

you are one or so; you are wearing square, white infant shoes that make your feet look like tiny hooves. I'm feeding you something and your face is mashed into my palm, your arms stiffly away from your sides. Was it candy? I can't remember, but anytime gave you something to eat you never used your fingers. You would press your face into my palm. When you bent I could see light-brown baby curls kicking up at the base of your head. Your mouth sometimes plucked at my skin, but mostly, I would feel your chin, small and hard as a pebble, digging in—not enough to hurt, but enough for you to hang on. You would teeter, elbows crooked like baby bird wings, back and forth between your feet and my hand. And I would hold as still as I could, balancing you in the center of my palm. You never reached out to steady yourself, safe in the perfect truth that as long as I was holding you, you would never fall.

Freeman Coliseum smelled like sausage wraps and beer. Alma had bought a good seat, fifth row, close enough for her to smell arena dust. She twisted uncomfortably. Already the arena was hot and loud with overhead music and the rumblings of the crowd. The announcer kept teasing the audience, and when the lights went out, there was a massive roar in the darkness.

“Alright, San Antone, ya'll ready t'see some bull ridin'?”

Blue and white spotlights swirled over the arena as the announcer made the introductions. There were forty cowboys, all about the same size and shape, hidden under hats and fringed, leather chaps. Alma waited through a dozen or so before the announcer got to him.

The spotlight caught him. Lorenzo looked short and anonymous, like a gunslinger with his black chaps strapped low around his hips. He lifted his hat at the crowd, blinking against the hard light. People around her cheered. The white competitor flag taped to his safety vest fluttering as he trotted across the arena.

When the lights came on again, Alma sat back in her seat and shut her eyes. The announcer called out the first go-round. It

wasn't Lorenzo, and neither was the next. By the time the fourth rider had gone, it was a game to see how long she could keep her eyes closed. Alma counted the riders, counted the seconds. Two and five, then three. His name was not called. A swift thrashing in the chute, cowboys hollering. Seven and four. And still nothing. The dust thickened in her nostrils. An eight. She heard spectators screaming, the announcer chipper as an auctioneer "Folks, we got a score on the board! Eighty-nine and a half points for number twenty-two, Blake Kelly! Eighty-nine and half on Jim Jam!" And beneath everything, the low whine of the eight-second buzzer.

"Number sixteen, Lorenzo Ybarra, ridin Gas Hog from the Bad Company stockyards."

Alma opened her eyes. They were strapping him in. Two rows down, a man could not find number sixteen's stats and the woman next to him pointed them out on the program. Lorenzo bobbed, trying to get settled, one hand knuckled on the top bar of the chute.

She saw the brim of his hat dip once, and the gate swung wide. A pale yellow bull surged into the arena, flinging Lorenzo along its back like a banner. Alma let out her breath when he made it through the first hard spin. He clung there, his chaps flapping away from his knees like fringed wings. The force of the bull's landing wrenched him forward. The bull made three short hops, gathering momentum, and snapped him around. Lorenzo let it, riding out each leap and spin like fishing bobber in a fast eddy.

He lost his hat, and Alma saw his face under the harsh lights, clamped down upon itself, eyes nothing but black slashes, silver mouth-guard flashing every time his head jerked. She began to know how many prayers could fit inside the sound of the buzzer. She stood up slowly, watching the jolting line of his shoulders and finding there a violent rhythm.

"C'mon, Lorenzo! Come on!" She screamed, fists drawn tightly against her sides,

"Stay on! Don't you fall! Damn you, don't you dare fall!"

Beneath the announcer's balcony, the clock hit six and half seconds. And still Lorenzo hung on, loose as a rag, balancing on the palm of his hand.

