

How the Hell Did I Get Here?

By: Alicia Auping

Dust swirls. It's a staring contest, and I'm losing. My opponent's eyes are pools of black bulging from his head. His head is the size of my entire body, and he lowers it, swinging it back and forth. Never mind the horns.

How the hell did I get here?

Even though I lived in Fort Worth, Texas for almost ten years, astonishingly I never stepped foot into the Fort Worth Stock Show and Rodeo. The closest the annual rodeo ever came to affecting me was the overflow parking that invaded The Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, where my dad is the Chief Curator. That's my world: art, poetry, literature.

I spent my formative years in Buffalo, New York, my hometown. I'm a city girl. I don't like horses. My encounters with horses have been limited to Susan Rothenberg's abstract renderings. Horses terrify me. I don't feel safe around an animal so much bigger than me. The biggest animal I've ever been comfortable around was my black lab, Amigo, and until today, my only glimpse of the inside of a rodeo is a picture sitting on the front desk of the Spur Hotel in Archer City, Texas.

Seven days ago I arrived in Archer City to attend a Literary Journalism class. I've learned a lot over the past week about writing, and about myself. I've bonded with an 80-year-old Archer City icon and a 10-year-old cowgirl, attended a cattle auction, won bingo at the Community Center and learned how to play pool at the American Legion.

Now, I'm running for my life.

I'm at the Boomtown Rodeo in Burkburnett, Texas, with my classmate Jason Yang, and with our teacher George Getschow. My bug-splattered Toyota RAV4 sits in a grassy lot dwarfed by heavy-duty pickup trucks extended in length by horse trailers. We follow a chorus of whoops, hollers and whinnies toward entrance to the rodeo grounds, and our noses are met with a rare mixture of sweet and pungent aromas. Nachos, cotton candy and living, breathing animals. Young and old cowboys are walking around in worn jeans and boots with huge hats and belt buckles. Their women are wearing head-to-toe denim dripping in sparkly sequins and rhinestones. I wish I'd packed my Bedazzler.

Enormous dragonflies and beetles swoop and dive amid the festivities. Young wranglers practice their roping skills a few yards away. A small child passes by on a miniature horse, and I do a double take. It's a country-western circus.

We've never been to a rodeo. A veteran of the rodeo circuit, Archer City resident Don Masey, explains all the events to us—barrel racing, calf roping, bull riding. And one of

our favorites, the calf scramble. It's adorable. A ribbon is tied to the tail of a calf, and children chase after it to get the ribbon.

When the adult scramble is announced, George practically shoves Jason and I off the bleachers. We hesitate but then give in. Why the hell not? We can chase a calf. It'll be fun.

We join the parade of good ole boys heading toward the entrance to the arena. I look around at the muscle-bound young men sporting wranglers, boots and cowboy hats, strutting into the ring. Their hands are calloused. I rub my hands together self-consciously; they're as soft as peach skin.

I look at Jason's crisply pressed button-down shirt tucked into his slacks and my jeans and sneakers.

"I'm going to be the only girl out there!"
"I'm the only Asian at the entire rodeo!"

And those are the last words we exchange before we step into the ring.

I look down at my neon yellow Nikes kicking up a combination of sand, dirt and manure. They leave a foreign footprint on the ground, which is accustomed to the familiar imprint of cowboy boots.

There is a wall of cowboys in front of us. I can't see over their Stetsons. I feel like everyone's staring at me, a Lilliputian under the bright rodeo lights. *Who are those weirdos? What the hell are they doing in our rodeo arena?*

I'm ready to get this over with.

All of a sudden, the wall of bodies scatters. Jason and I stand in the middle of the mayhem as still as stones.

My heart stops.

"Oh my God, it's a fucking bull!" I don't know which one of us says it before we run in opposite directions just in time for the bull to trample the ground where Jason and I were standing seconds ago.

My heart has kicked back in at double-time.

I lose sight of Jason in the commotion. I'm disoriented. I don't know whether to run towards or away from the bull. I'm caught in a cyclone of broad shoulders and cowboy hats. My eyes sting from the dust. Where's Jason?

Then I see him.

He runs head on towards the bull. What is he doing? He's so close. He reaches out toward the ribbon tied between the bull's horns. Oh my God, I think, he's either going to get that ribbon or he's going to die.

He doesn't get the ribbon, and he doesn't die.

The winner, a seasoned cowboy, struts around the ring, grasping the ribbon in his hand like he had just won a million dollars. In reality, it was fifty dollars and bragging rights.

Jason and I meet up and walk out of the ring with the crowd. Our fellow participants pat us on the back laughing because even that bull knew we didn't belong there. We laugh back, relieved yet proud knowing we've shared an experience we'll never forget.

Fear is a valuable emotion for a writer. Adrenaline kicks in, and our senses go on hyper-alert. When we are scared we remember every minute detail. This is what writers do to find a story. I've learned that being a writer is scary, and it's normal for me to feel that way. It takes courage to write. Not just courage to translate your thoughts onto paper but courage to step outside your comfort zone, into a world that is so strange and so terrifying.

Like a rodeo ring occupied by a gigantic, ornery bull.