



2011 Third Place

Last Dance

By Anne Schroeder



MORNING RAYS BOUNCED along the western edge of the Sierra Nevada, flooding the San Joaquin Valley with sunlight to burn off the morning chill. March winds fluttered the flags in the roping arena, their whipped staccato rhythm a poor substitute for the absent applause of the crowd. Leaning into her last figure-eight, Rosa circled the barrel and nudged her horse onto the straightaway. Dust devils whipped her hat from her head as she raced toward the gate, her shout lost in her horse's desire to beat the clock. "Bring it in, Blue. Let's go!"

At the gate she led Blue to a hitching post and slipped his saddle, pausing to check the bald spot that some previous owner's carelessness had rubbed raw. The gelding edged sideways, edgy until she slowed her hands. "Easy there." Blue Roamer was her same age and she respected his moods, figured that at seventeen he was old enough to know his mind. Like Uncle Luther had taught her, a horse needed to know it had a choice.

At the pasture gate she brushed the sweat from Blue's flanks and watched him trot off to roll in the dust before she turned toward the house. Enough play for one day. She had a job waiting.

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Her pickup practically made the drive to The Meadows by itself, at least it seemed that way while she spent the drive shaving seconds off the morning's practice. She was still racing barrels in her head when she pulled into the parking lot.

In the gloom of the shuttered room she almost missed the frail old cowboy. At first glance she figured him for a visitor with his Resistol cowboy hat and the neat mustache feathering his upper lip. It was his attitude that made her think he was visiting. His stiff carriage marked him curiously out of place in the beige plastic chair someone had stuck in front of the window where the commode usually stood.

Her hands filled with linens, she waited for the nurse to finish delivering meds to the patients in the room next door. Even though she was pretty careful not to make a sound, he'd sensed her presence because she saw a quiver run down his back—like Blue Roamer on a bad day. Curious, she edged closer for a better look. The man sat rigidly, his attention seemingly caught on a movement in the garden, but Rosa knew better. He was blocking her out by the pure venom of his wanting her to leave. Not just her—a minute later he heard the nurse arrive, and without bothering to turn his head he waved toward the bedside table. Rosa watched as the nurse set her tiny cup of pills beside a half-filled glass of water and turned to leave.

She was coming out of another room when Rosa caught up to her. "Mildred,

what's with him?"

The nurse snorted. "He's trying to disappear, I expect. Happens sometimes. A man doesn't expect to live as long as he has." "But..." Minutes earlier Mildred had taken a battle stance with another patient, four rooms down, who had tried the same gambit.

Mildred winked. "Our secret. Doesn't want to take his meds in front of anyone. Gave his word. He's ticked off, but he's a gentleman." Ticked off was the short version. She had seen anger in the jut of his jaw. But Mildred was continuing. "His name's Sterling Diamond. Listen, honey, jump in anywhere." A gentle reminder that she was still holding her stack of linens. "Help is in short supply around here. We're glad to have you."

At lunchtime Rosa found herself back in room 149 with a tray containing macaroni and cheese and vegetable soup. From the window the man waved her away. At the table the pill cup was empty.

She tried to summon the nerve to speak, coughed at the strangled sound that substituted for a command and tried again. "Mr. Diamond, your soup's getting cold. Is there anything I can do for you?"

"Yeah. Get out." She fled into the hallway with the heat of her anger warming her cheeks.

It was two weeks before she bothered to visit him again, at her mother's urging. She'd mentioned his name at supper one night and her mother had made her prom-

ise to make an effort. For Luther's sake. Her mother filled in with everything *she* knew, which wasn't a lot. But it was enough.

Late for work again and smelling like Blue Roamer, Rosa carried a tray down the corridor, past a row of wheelchairs. She smiled at Mrs. Bledsoe fretting her shawl, and dodged Walter slipping his way along the west wing escorted by a physical therapist in a blue lab coat. Mouthing an apology she moved from their path, trying to ignore the stale odor of urine, antiseptic, and the lunchtime smell of creamed broccoli soup.

Intent on her tray she almost missed room 149 and its lone occupant. Sterling was in his chair scowling at the hummingbirds' nectar frenzy at a red dish in the courtyard. "Lunch, Mr. Sterling."

He ignored her. She'd have been surprised if he didn't.

"Creamed broccoli soup. Probably not your favorite. But there's French bread and real butter. That ought to make it palatable."

He grunted and she knew she'd need

...she knew she'd need more than soup to get his attention.

more than soup to get his attention. "My mom says there used to be a bronc rider on the rodeo circuit named Sterling Diamond. Did some team roping with a fellow named Luther Dominquez." From the corner of her eye Rosa saw the old man shift and straighten, start to glance her way and then catch himself.

"There a point to this?" he growled.

"Might be." She held his gaze. When he didn't answer, she added, "Luther was my great-uncle."

A storm formed in his eyes. "Luther's dead." His voice was muffled.

"Six months now. You missed his funeral."

"Said my piece to him when he was alive. Same as I done with all my friends," he said.

Rosa watched as he rubbed his palms back and forth on the rounded legs of his trousers, pulling the wool taut against corded muscles. When he flexed his arthritic fingers his hands were supple, not those of an old man. Long fingered, deep veined, the knuckles surprisingly soft, they were scarred and callused on the palms like

her uncle's, his rope burns probably softened with neatsfoot oil. His left index finger was missing at the first joint. She had to force herself to look away. Luther would have said he was a dally man for sure; he had the roper's trademark.

She sat his tray down and busied herself with the little cleaning he needed her to do, which wasn't much. Although many of the other patients warmed themselves with crocheted afghans or old sweaters, he favored a leather vest, satin-lined, four pockets in the front, worn over a plaid wool shirt. One of two shirts. The other she picked up from the bed post and hung neatly in his tiny closet next to a gray western-cut suit and a pair of polished black boots whose heels gave testimony to their age.

She looked up to see him scowling, the soup untouched. All of his friends were dead, reason enough to scowl. At least Uncle Luther had died in the bunkhouse of her dad's ranch. "You the last cowboy left?" She asked.

"Reckon."

The silence was harder than his sarcasm and probably worse for his heart. His face was getting red; no point in getting his B.P. up, so she said the first thing that came to mind. "Ought'ta make some younger friends. That's what I'd do if I was bored." She snapped the closet door shut. "Anyway, I'm finished with your room. You need anything else, just call." At the door she hesitated. "And don't forget about your lunch."

That night she visited the old bunkhouse, empty now of hired hands until spring calving. In the corner, Luther's gear sat where he had laid it, neatly folded and hanging from hooks on the rough boards.

On her next shift she carried a paper sack into Sterling's room and set the sack on his table. "Luther's rawhide."

Sterling emptied the sack on his lap and his eyes widened, probably before he could stop himself. "Well, bust my tail feathers. It's a half-done lariat." He made a faint motion to push it aside, but his fingers couldn't ignore the twisted leather. "Anybody tries to finish it, gonna need to see it gets cured with goose grease."

Rosa kept her back to him. "Got some bear grease back at the house." She was rewarded by his snort of surprise as she

turned toward the bathroom. "Sterling... I'm supposed to ask. You take a shower today?"

His mood soured as quick as his comeback. "No business of yours if I did."

"Mildred says your therapist's coming. Today's Tuesday."

"I know what day it is. You gals don't need to be making my appointments—"

Rosa leaned in and took a deliberate sniff. "Ah, you even washed your hair. Is she pretty?"

Sterling half-rose with spots of color on his cheeks. "None of your sorry business. Finish up and quit fidgeting around here."

Rosa paused at the door and grinned. "Practiced riding this morning. You'd a liked it out there. Really quiet."

"All that riding you do, wonder you never won anything."

"Who says I haven't?" Rosa advanced a couple of steps with her hands on her hips before she backed off. "Won anything. I mean?"

"Well, I don't guess I'd be wrong if I was to bet that you ain't."

"How much?" Her voice sounded deceptively calm.

"How much, what?"

"How much you willing to bet?" At least she hoped it did.

He waved her off like he was shooing a fly, but the timbre in his voice gave away his excitement. Sarcasm or no, he was warming to the exchange. "I don't bet with little girls who can't ride a horse good enough to stay on in a parade. Guess I can tell the difference. Nearest you probably been to a rodeo is selling peanuts at the gate."

Rosa considered for a few seconds. "Tell you what—I win, I take you for a drive."

"What's the point?" He asked.

"You'll see. Is it a bet?"

"Fool's bet," he answered.

The next day Rosa detoured to the end of the hall, dumped a box onto bed 149 and left. When she returned Sterling was studying a photo of her and Blue Roamer leaning into a barrel turn. On the window sill, propped up against his coffee cup, was a photo of her riding as rodeo queen of the Fairfield rodeo three months earlier, and next to that, a silver buckle with her name and last year's date. There was more, but she didn't wait to see if he'd noticed. She'd proven her point. "Well?"

At least he didn't hold a grudge. "Fine animal. Who picked him out?"

"I did. Luther and I trained him." She didn't care if her pride was audible. She'd earned it.

"You're Tom Dominquez's kid. Knowed about you since the day you was born. Your dad was some roper."

It was her turn to be surprised. "You knew about me?"

"Wasn't much we didn't cover. We talked horses for forty years, 'cept when he was cheating me at cards."

Rosa gathered her things back in their box. "Some cowboy won the silver buttons off his gelding's headpiece. Was that you?"

"Come by 'em fairly."

"Uncle Luther, he never got over it. He tried to rub out the leather where the circles were so nobody'd know." Rosa kept her hands busy.

"His shame was in the way he played poker. Face gave him away every time. Ever time he had a full house... the whole table knew it."

"Is that why you're such a sourpuss?" She teased. "You practice your poker face?" Rosa pulled the covers up over the single pillow and smoothed the last wrinkle from his bed. She didn't tell him, but she tried to save his room until just before lunch so she'd have an excuse to stay. She liked to watch the way he ate. Luther and he both had a way of handling their bread like it was an extension of their fingers. Right now he was using his to sop up the gravy. Next he would be scooping peas with it and folding them into his mouth.

"Huh!" Sterling ate his lunch without saying a word while he swirled and sopped figure eights in the gravy, treating a plate of food like it were a dance.

"When you want to go for that drive?"

"You got a license?"

"For the last three years. Since I was fourteen. Used to drive six miles to the end of the cattle guard to catch the bus. Sometimes I missed the bus on purpose so I could drive clear into town."

"I can believe that." He paused to take a gulp of coffee. "Don't matter to me. Won't even complain if we get in an accident. You'd be doing me a favor."

"Tomorrow. Right after lunch. I'll have you back by two. Wouldn't want you to miss your nap."

He swallowed down the wrong pipe and sputtered. "Don't need no nap, girly."

On her way out the door Rosa was laughing so hard she almost tripped on Mrs. Bledsoe's shawl.

On her day off she borrowed a step stool from the janitor's closet and used a spare wheelchair in the lobby to push him to the front door. She helped him into the cab of her pickup and stowed the wheelchair in the bed.

The rodeo grounds were seven miles from town. They rode in silence until Rosa pulled in to the arena and cut her engine.

Sterling searched the empty arena.

"What's the plan?"

"I won the bet so you ride my way. Remember?"

"Was a fool bet, anyway. I knew you was a rider."

Rosa climbed up and pulled the wheelchair open. When it was steady she pushed the seat down and centered it in the bed while Sterling climbed out and filled his lungs with the scent of the soft, churned dirt. Eyes closed, he listened as if he were hearing a roar from the empty stands. When he opened again she was uncoiling a length of rope. "I ain't riding in any wheelchair," he growled.

"Got a better idea?" Taking his grunt as a negative, she changed the subject. "You ever rope here?"

"Has a bull got attitude? Only about a hundred times. Before the War, Luther and me, we used to swap championships about every other year. I'd take it and then he'd win it back." The arena made him talkative. "Back in the days before they had steel fences, folks used to line their cars in a great big circle. When night come, they'd turn on their headlights till the batteries run low. When we got thirsty we'd nip on whatever we had stashed under our truck seats. Sometimes one of the horses would rear up and come down on top of a hood and the cowboy'd pick himself up and try to bang out the dent in the fellow's fender. Nobody much cared. Either that or they was too drunk to notice."

Rosa finished tying one wheel to a hook in the side wall and started on the other. "Ever been married?"

His voice lowered. "Nah. Cowboying ain't ever been a life you could count on. Hard enough to support myself. My grand-

daddy was one of the last cowboys on the Miller Lux, back when it was the biggest ranch in California. My daddy took to staying home and ranching, but me, I guess I took after my granddad. He sired a couple of kids but he was no great shakes at stick-

"My daddy took to staying home and ranching, but me, I guess I took after my granddad. He sired a couple of kids but he was no great shakes at sticking around."

ing around.

"You probably should have married."

His change of mood surprised her it was so quick. "Look, girly, you plan to keep me here till I miss my supper?"

Rosa finished tying the wheelchair with a rope attached to each wheel, then to cargo hooks on the pickup. When she finished they weren't tight, but they weren't loose. She set the stepstool at the tailgate and helped Sterling climb up and settle in the chair. Against his will she strapped him in with a belt. "My rule. Don't you dare have a heart attack or anything. I don't want to have to explain to the nurses what we were doing out here."

Sterling motioned her off. She jumped into the cab and eased the pickup into first gear. The first loop was slow while she watched through her rear-view mirror. The wheelchair bucked before it settled. When it looked like Sterling wasn't going anywhere, she shifted into second.

The arena was dry. Fine-ground dust crusted onto the window and covered the windshield with a gray cloud. She eased the clutch and let the tires dig in while she concentrated on keeping her circles tight—first right then left until the truck was taking the turns like Blue Roamer. On the straight-away she raced down field toward the second barrel. Circling tight, she slipped the clutch, gunned the engine and headed for the opposite field. With each pass she glanced at the mirror. He was gripping the arms of the chair with both hands, his legs squeezing an invisible mount.

Outside, Sterling's voice was hoarse from shouting "Whoopee" like a boy on his first pony.

Dust clouds rolled around the cab and obscured her view. From the mirror she saw that he'd pulled his red neckerchief

over his mouth and rode with his eyes closed, satisfaction showing in the lines of his face.

Finally she coasted to a stop and cut the engine. A brown sack had rolled out from under the seat. She pulled it open and unscrewed the cap from a bottle of whiskey. When she passed it over the side of the pickup, Sterling met her grin with a surprised grunt, his smile as sure as the sun after a tornado. He grasped the bottle and put it to his lips, closing his eyes as he savored the taste on his tongue. He took another sip with the ease of a man who had probably drank from a screw top bottle more times in his life than from a glass, until the wind and the alcohol brought a ruddy color to his cheeks.

Rosa felt the sting of tears. "Next time, don't lose a sucker bet or I'll go harder on you," she warned.

"Next time, try leaning into the curve a little sooner. You're leading on the wrong tire." His smile was smooth now. Apparently so was the whiskey.

Rosa unhooked the ropes and returned the bottle to its sack. "Save the rest for our next date," she said. He looked over and his smile warmed her.

In the cab she voiced the question that wouldn't let her rest. "Sterling, how did you end up at The Meadows? Seems like you could have bunked out your last days on a ranch somewhere. You must have a few acres, someplace." She fixed her gaze on the far mountains and watched a cloud top the highest peak as she felt him stiffen.

"Think I want to be in that cussed place?" The anger in his voice was different from the tone he used on the nurses. This time he had a desperate, steel edge to his words. "I was living out east of the Bitterwater, minding my own business. Must have passed out. Was two days before someone come by and found me. By then I had complications. Ended up in the hospital with a broken hip. Time they fixed me up I was as weak as a newborn calf." He, too, stared off at the distant mountains and his voice softened. "County social worker moved me in that boneyard—saddle, stock and bit."

"You don't have any family?"

The gritty edge was back. "Told you, I never married." They traveled a couple of miles in silence before he continued. "Gov-

ernment pays for it. Don't reckon I'll ever see the Bitterwater again."

She tried to think of something to say. "I ride on the Camatti."

"Yeah?" His eagerness was his undoing.

"One of the boys in Rodeo Club lives out there. I trailer Blue Roamer out to his ranch and we ride, sometimes."

"That waterhole holding up in the southeast corner?"

"It's doing OK. They got enough rain this year to run a few extra head. Nolan'll be selling them off for his college tuition."

"Nolan...you don't mean the kid? Heck, he ain't even shaving yet. It'll be some time before he thinks about college."

"How long since you've seen him?"

Rosa's laughter bounced as she hit a pot-hole on the way into the parking lot.

"Well, let's see..."

"If it helps, he'll be eighteen next month. He's smart. Top notch roper, too. Came in second last month at the Regionals. You're a little behind on the times, Sterling."

He ignored her. "Sounds like you're sweet on the kid. He'll be graduating and going off to school. Too bad about that."

"I'm not sweet on him. We're just friends..."

"Don't know where this notion of being friends came from. In my day a man knew how to kiss a woman into a kinder mood and study the night sky with her till the sun came up. Things was a whole lot simpler back then."

"Don't know where this notion of being friends came from. In my day a man knew how to kiss a woman into a kinder mood and study the night sky with her till the sun came up. Things was a whole lot simpler back then."

"Mom says it's the woman gets a man into a sweetheart frame of mind. You think that's true?"

"Can't speak for everyone. True enough with cowboys. I had me a gal that I couldn't hardly stand being away from. She was sweeter than a peach and twice as pretty. Lord knows I loved that woman."

"What happened?" They were parked outside. Rosa cut the engine as a light drizzle formed on the windshield, making the cab feel cozy.

"There was always one more year of

rodeo ahead of me. Finally she found a marrying man. Got herself some grandchildren now...an' a great big ranch outfit."

"That's kinda what Nolan's grandmother was telling us the other day. She said her first beau had a way of kissing that sent her clean into tomorrow. Said she never has forgotten that easy talking cowboy."

Sterling's reflection in the entry window looked thunderstruck. His chin shot up a couple of inches and he took a belly breath that filled his chest. The expression in his pale blue eyes was stormy. He fumbled for the door handle. "Thanks for the ride, missy. I reckon you got better things to do than to ride trail on me. I can take myself in for the chow bell. Run on along."

Rosa was thoughtful as she pulled the wheelchair from the pickup and watched Sterling push it inside—until one of the aides rushed at him and began pushing him in the direction of the dining room. In the hallway he seemed smaller.

"Sterling, you going to the party tonight?"

"Heck no."

Rosa waited until she finished arranging the wildflowers she had picked at the Camatti Ranch the day before, then leaned over the arm of his chair, close enough that her hair fanned his arm. "Sterling, I'd really like to dance with you. Just once." She watched his eyes searching for someplace to settle while she fought an urge to place a kiss on his freshly shaven cheek. "Think about it, please?"

The flowers were a peace offering after she'd told him he was stubborn, after he'd refused to ride along when they had both been invited to take supper with Nolan and his grandmother. He'd been furious when she suggested it.

When he refused to answer, she carried the rest of the flowers to the recreation room, already decorated with crepe paper ribbons and streamers for the party that was underway. She helped Mildred serve punch while a guitarist, fiddler and bassist wound up a thigh-slapping rendition of the "Cannonball Express." The song ended and they played another.

A half-dozen songs later she stopped watching the door, but she knew by the soft smiles and the flustered titters of the ladies that he's changed his mind. In the hallway,

Sterling paused. Tall and cowboy proud, his expression poker-faced, he walked steadily toward her, his black boots making a dull “thunk” with every step. She stared, stunned at the change in him, at the flush in his high cheekbones, the knot of his string tie against his spare wool shirt; noticed that his suit had been brushed to a nappy sheen, even his hat.

Somewhere in the background the strains of “The Tennessee Waltz” filtered off the violin strings. Motionless, she waited until Sterling advanced the last ten steps and bowed low. He was silent as he led her onto the floor and folded her hand in his, his right arm crooked close. His touch on her back felt like Blue Roamer’s nuzzle. Ramrod straight, he brought her cheek against his own and led her in tiny steps that were more a shuffle, but loose, as if he’d forgotten to favor his hip. She closed her eyes.

Sterling kept rhythm, shuffling her in a tight circle. She opened her eyes to discover that they were the only couple on the floor. From the chairs, aides and patients watched, their soft, remembering eyes a

counterpoint to the fiddle’s refrain.

Too soon, the music ended.

Sterling guided her to a vacant chair. When she turned to voice her thanks he shushed her with a brief nod. With stiff, slow steps that no longer came easily, he walked back in the direction of the doorway and disappeared.

The rest of the evening was a jumble of confusion, but Rosa forced herself to stay until the last cake crumb was swept away. By nine o’clock she was free to leave.

With a will of its own, her truck headed to the Camatti. The moon and Sterling had been right about one thing; sometimes a girl had to take things into her own hands with a reluctant cowboy and watch the night sky until the sun came up. Sterling

The moon and Sterling had been right about one thing; sometimes a girl had to take things into her own hands with a reluctant cowboy and watch the night sky until the sun came up.

had been right about another thing; she could no longer count Nolan as just a

friend. Maybe things were a little trickier between men and women than she had counted on, but it was going to be fun finding out.

The next morning she pulled into her own driveway, fighting exhaustion. Her mother was already at work, probably a good thing, considering.

Someone had written a message for her on the chalkboard. It was from The Meadows. She gulped a glass of milk and punched the number, and listened while the milk turned sour in her stomach. Slowly, she set the glass on the counter and felt her knees buckle. “When?” The voice on the other end barely registered. “Thanks for letting me know.”

He had been wearing his suit and boots. She was glad for that.

Outside, a mockingbird sang from a willow branch. Rosa bolted through the door and raced towards Blue Roamer, tears clotting under her eyelids. It was a good day for a ride.