

A Yellow Raft in Blue Water • • • 117

held in a vise, a wind-up toy that has been turned one twist too many, a spring coiled beyond its limit.

"Now!" I cry, aloud or to myself I don't know. Everything has boiled down to this instant. There's nothing in the world except the hand of the gate judge, lowering in slow motion to the catch that contains us. I see each of his fingers clearly, separately, as they fold around the lever, I see the muscles in his forearm harden as he begins to push down.

I never expected the music.

Wheeling and spinning, tilting and beating, my breath the song, the horse the dance. Time is gone. All the ordinary ways of things, the gettings from here to there, the one and twos, forgot. The crowd is color, the whirl of a spun top. The noises blend into a waving band that flies around us like a ribbon on a string. Beneath me four feet dance, pounding and leaping and turning and stomping. My legs flap like wings. I sail above, first to one side, then the other, remembering more than feeling the slaps of our bodies together. Things happen faster than understanding, faster than ideas. I'm a bird coasting, shot free into the music, spiraling into a place without bones or weight.

I'm on the ground. Unmoving. The heels of my hands sunk in the dust of the arena. My knees sore. Dizzy. Back in time. I shake sense into my head, listen as the loudspeaker brays.

"Twenty-four seconds for the young cowboy from eastern Montana. Nice try, son. Hoka-hay."

A few claps from the crowd. I know I should move. I've seen riders today limp off when they fall, their heads hung, their mounts kicking two hind legs at the end of the ring until the clowns herd them out.

But Babe is calm. She stands next to me, blowing air through her nostrils, looking cross-eyed and triumphant. She wins the hand. Her sides ripple. It could be laughter, it could be disgust for having been touched. Dayton's horse.

So I don't leave with a wave to the stands. The first toss is warm-up, practice. I grab the rope, throw my arms around her

neck and swing aboard. She stiffens, fuses her joints. The broad muscles of her shoulders turn steel under my gripping legs.

And bang! We're off again. This time instead of up and down she bolts straight ahead. The wind whips my braid, blows dust into my eyes till I have to squint them shut. She runs one fast circle around the pen, her body in a low crouch. She's thinking.

When you don't know what to expect, you hang on in every way you can. I clasp the rope in one hand, her mane in the other. I dig my heels into the hollows behind the place where her forelegs join her ribs. I lean into her neck, and watch the ground rush by on either side of her ears.

Without warning she slows, moves close to the rough plank fence where the Brahmas are milling, and shifts her weight. She stops on a dime and, still clutching her with every part of me, I roll to the left. I'm pinned between Babe and the boards, with my back against the wall. My breath is squeezed out and there's no way I can protect my head, lolling above the pen. Then, without once lightening on the weight she presses against me, Babe walks forward as if to clean herself of me, as if I'm mud on the bottom of a boot.

It works. The next thing I know I'm on the ground again, Foxy's jean jacket ripped and torn across the shoulder seam, the air rushing back into my lungs, tears smeared on my cheeks. My ribs hurt, and behind me the bulls knock on the fence with their horns.

And before me is Babe, her lips drawn over her yellow teeth, her head low and swinging back and forth, her legs planted far apart. She looks astonished, at herself or me I can't tell.

As I stand she begins to retreat, one foot at a time. For an instant, I hear the crowd again, but I can't bother with them. I have Babe in my bead, our eyes in a blinding fix. Our brains lock, and she stops while I grab her mane and hook a leg over her back. Before I'm balanced, she rears. Her front legs climb the air, and I dangle along her back, suspended. When at last she drops, I'm low on her flank, our hips one on top of the

① In the towns, on the edges of the towns, in fields, in vacant lots, the used-car yards, the wreckers' yards, the garages with blazoned signs—Used Cars, Good Used Cars. Cheap transportation, three trailers. '27 Ford, clean. Checked cars, guaranteed cars. Free radio. Car with 100 gallons of gas free. Come in and look. Used Cars. No overhead.

A lot and a house large enough for a desk and chair and a blue book. Sheaf of contracts, dog-eared, held with paper clips, and a neat pile of unused contracts. Pen—keep it full, keep it working. A sale's been lost 'cause a pen didn't work.

Those sons-of-bitches over there ain't buying. Every yard gets 'em. They're lookers. Spend all their time looking. Don't want to but no cars; take up your time. Don't give a damn for your time. Over there, them two people—no, with the kids. Get 'em in a car. Start 'em at two hundred and work down. They look good for one and a quarter. Get 'em rolling. Get 'em out in a jalopy. Sock it to 'em! They took our time.

Owners with rolled-up sleeves. Salesmen, neat, deadly, small intent eyes watching for weaknesses.

Watch the woman's face. If the woman likes it we can screw the old man. Start 'em on that Cad'. Then

you can work 'em down to that '26 Buick. 'F you start on the Buick, they'll go for a Ford. Roll up your sleeves an' get to work. This ain't gonna last forever. Show 'em that Nash while I get the slow leak pumped up on that '25 Dodge. I'll give you a Hymie when I'm ready.

What you want is transportation, ain't it? No baloney for you. Sure the upholstery is shot. Seat cushions ain't turning no wheels over.

Cars lined up, noses forward, rusty noses, flat tires. Parked close together.

Like to get in to see that one? Sure, no trouble. I'll pull her out of the line.

Get 'em under obligation. Make 'em take up your time. Don't let 'em forget they're takin' your time. People are nice, mostly. They hate to put you out. Make 'em put you out, an' then sock it to 'em.

Cars lined up, Model T's, high and snotty, creaking wheel, worn bands. Buicks, Nashes, De Sotos.

Yes, sir. '22 Dodge. Best goddamn car Dodge ever made. Never wear out. Low compression. High compression got lots of sap for a while, but the metal ain't made that'll hold it for long. Plymouths, Rocknes, Stars.

Jesus, where'd that Apperson come from, the Ark? And a Chalmers and a Chandler—ain't made 'em for years. We ain't sellin' cars—rolling junk. Goddamn it, I got to get jalopies. I don't want nothing for more'n twenty-five, thirty bucks. Sell 'em for fifty, seventy-five. That's a good profit. Christ, what cut do you make on a new car? Get jalopies. I can sell 'em fast as I get 'em. Nothing over two hundred fifty. Jim, corral that old bastard on the sidewalk. Don't know his ass from a hole in the ground. Try him on that Apperson. Say, where is that Apperson? Sold? If we don't get some jalopies we got nothing to sell.

Flags, red and white, white and blue—all along the curb. Used Cars. Good Used Cars.

② Today's bargain—up on the platform. Never sell it. Makes folks come in, though. If we sold that bargain at that price we'd hardly make a dime. Tell 'em it's jus' sold. Take out that yard battery before you make delivery. Put in that dumb cell. Christ, what they want for six bits? Roll up your sleeves—pitch in. This ain't gonna last. If I had enough jalopies I'd retire in six months.

③ Listen, Jim, I heard that Chevy's rear end. Sounds like bustin' bottles. Squirt in a couple quarts of sawdust. Put some in the gears, too. We got to move that lemon for thirty-five dollars. Bastard cheated me on that one. I offer ten an' he jerks me to fifteen, an' then the son-of-a-bitch took the tools out. God Almighty! I wisht I had five hundred jalopies. This ain't gonna last. He don't like the tires? Tell 'im they got ten thousand in 'em, knock off a buck an' a half.

Piles of rusty ruins against the fence, rows of wrecks in back, fenders, grease-black wrecks, blocks lying on the ground and a pig weed growing up through the cylinders. Brake rods, exhausts, piled like snakes. Grease, gasoline.

See if you can't find a spark plug that ain't cracked. Christ, if I had fifty trailers at under a hundred I'd clean up. What the hell is he kickin' about? We sell 'em, but we don't push 'em home for him. That's good! Don't push 'em home. Get that one in the Monthly, I bet. You don't think he's a prospect? Well, kick 'im out. We got too much to do to bother with a guy that can't make up his mind. Take the right front tire off the Graham. Turn that mended side down. The rest, looks swell. Got tread an' everything.

Sure! There's fifty thousand in that ol' heap yet. Keep plenty oil in. So long. Good luck.

Lookin' for a car? What did you have in mind? See anything attracts you? I'm dry. How about a little snort a good stuff? Come on, while your wife's lookin' at that La Salle. You don't want no La Salle. Bearings shot.