

Prairie Rose

by Kyle Hemmings

Every Friday night she gets liberated at The Haymarket Square doing a bunny hop or a do si do with ex-members of The Saint Augustine Women's Choir. She remembers how as kids, shy or awkward in dresses, their voices formed the harmony, the flight of something V-shaped and perfect. Every Friday night, she feels him watching her, the man sitting under a Remington copy--one cowhand stoking a campfire, the others sleeping. He's too short to be considered average, which is why, she thinks, he rarely gets up, let alone dances. He's almost young, the face, slightly cragged, wide butte of nose, inviting cool-water creeks for eyes, the cheeks overly defined. She imagines he smells of sweet tobacco.

Sashaying closer, she convinces herself that he is good looking in a far fetched kind of way, in a way that she once thought about cactus, its survival against red obliterating sunsets. She wonders what strange heroes did the Old West really make. They must have come in all sizes. Her husband is talking to a man once a star of steer wrestling, until a bad neck sprain. She can sense his stiffness, his pain in turning towards her.

Feeling like the silly kid who once begged her father to let her watch him tie a goat, she follows the man who is too short to be average out of the bar and into the parking lot. She wants him to invite her into the cab of his old pickup. She wants to ask him who irons his cowboy shirts, who makes him feel special on Sunday mornings. She wants to tell him that she's been watching him sit beneath that same picture every Friday night. She hopes they exchange the huge spaces of their childhoods, endless days chasing themselves, mouths dry as dirt. She'll say that she's heard about his weak heart--the reason he had to quit tie-down-- but she'll say it real nice and all, so he won't detect what's roping him in. She'll tell him about the yearling calf a man once gave her when she was young enough to be called a Prairie Rose.

What she won't tell him: The calf didn't live long. A parasite in the blood, lodging in the heart, causing it to bloat, to eventually fail. It had some weird fancy name, like the kind gunslingers had in old paperback novels. After it died she kept walking barefoot for hours, her thoughts just dust and some queer stillness. There was the spell of yesterday's sun. She couldn't see the barge of gun-metal clouds, the lifeless fire ants under her feet, or that it was time to go home.

