The Fool

Jolene Stevens*
"HELL, the Kid's good, damn good! It's too bad." Pete sat back in one of the scuffed leather chairs in the hotel lobby. The springs poked through the chair and made him uncomfortable. Yeah, I was like that once, and look at me now. Now what have I got . . . a stiff leg, no money, nothing. Pete rubbed his hand across his face, a face weathered by the outdoors and long years on the rodeo circuit. The gray eyes were cloudy, and the nose was a little offside from a fight in Laramie.

Pete sank his six-foot frame deeper into the chair and pulled a tattered hat over his face. His stiff leg throbbed. Must be going to rain, he thought. Fifteen years of rodeo have done something to me. If I had it to do over again, then what? He looked around the lobby of the Old Stockman. How many times have I sat in lobbies like this? Hell, fifteen years ago lobbies were just like this one. Pete smelled the strange combination of horses, manure and cigar smoke that filled the room. Little clouds of smoke floated about the lobby making a semi-haze.

Pete sat up and untangled his long legs. He absently fingered the peeling leather of the chair arm. At the same time, he grinned as he watched the hotel clerk. These old
goats don't change either, he thought as he watched the stooped, gray-haired man with a chewed-off cigar in his toothless mouth.

Several pairs of boots clumped down the stairs behind Pete. "Hey, Pete, you son-of-a-bitch." Pete looked up from the faded maroon and green carpet.

"Yeah, hi, Kid. Say, you look pretty bad this morning. How was she? Give you a pretty good time, did she?" The other cowboys in the lobby had stopped talking and heard Pete's last remark. They laughed loudly, and the Kid colored.


"By God, Kid," Pete continued, "you might be a pretty good bronc rider some day, but you'd better learn a little more about your women."

Pete watched the Kid. Here was his chance to keep someone else from becoming a nothing, an ex-bronc rider, but should he do it? Pete had watched the Kid ride and knew someday he would be at the top, at least for a while, and then? The Kid had that certain sense of balance and rhythm that made the difference. He had the timing and was seemingly without nerves.

But he's too good for rodeo, Pete told himself, too good. He wondered about the Kid's family. The Kid had never mentioned his folks. He'd told Pete that he'd gone to school for a while in Colorado, and the rodeo team trips had made the grades drop. It's funny, Pete thought, I don't even know where he's from, but that doesn't matter here.

"Ready to go, Pete?" The Kid broke into Pete's thoughts. "I feel lucky today, Pete, like I could even ride The Fool." The Kid smiled confidently showing straight white teeth. His eyes were a cold, steel gray, and he had black, curly hair. His cheekbones were high, and his jaw was firm. His shoulders were wide and well-muscled. He was almost as tall as Pete. Just right for a bronc rider, Pete thought, as he started to get up.

"I'm ready, Kid. Incidentally, saw you talking to Shorty last night. He even got pitched by The Fool. Hope you don't
get too confident, Kid. I've seen some damn good riders hit the dust because of him. He's like the old paint I rode once in Greeley. That's the horse that gave me this here," and Pete rubbed his stiff leg. "I couldn't ride a horse like him any more. I feel like it's been a mighty hard life, kid."

"Trying to discourage me, are you, Pete? Won't work. I'm in this here thing for life. Come on, let's get going."

Cowboys were scattered about the lobby. The Kid hailed a short, slender fellow across the room. "Jim, got room for Pete and me? We gotta' get out to the grounds and draw."

"Sure have, Kid. Pete, heard you were going to try to ride again today. Thought your leg was acting up a bit?"

"It's going to be all right, Jim," Pete lied. I'm doing this for the Kid, he told himself. "Say, Pete, know that little filly I had last night? Well, she has this sister and . . . ."

"Hell, Jim," interrupted Pete, "you know I don't want none of your goddam women. Now take this one at the desk. She may be built like a quarter horse, but damn, can she drink!"

The Kid grinned and broke into the conversation. "None of you had what I had last night. That little barrel racer from New Mexico! We sort of got acquainted yesterday afternoon, and I took her out last night. You old studs, just remember — hands off."

"Well, Kid, you'd better keep her close or one of us will be rustling her off," Pete retorted. "Just don't ever get any ideas about marriage while you're in this business, Kid. This here's no place for a woman."

No, Pete thought, I learned that. The women have to gamble with us, whether we win or lose. When we're through, we're through. And then what? Pete thought of Jane. She hadn't listened when he had tried to explain all this to her. To her, rodeo was fun and excitement, something to tell her friends about. Pete had tried to tell her that even though he loved her, he loved rodeo too, and that the two loves wouldn't mix. She'd begged to marry me, he thought, and I gave in. Christ, that seems like a long time ago!
Jane had never been a strong girl, and things got hard. They'd been married a year, and there was a rodeo at Denver. He missed Jane at the performance and thought she was sick. He went home and found the note. *Wonder where she is now,* Pete asked himself. It had been hard to forget; and ever since, he'd tried to have a girl in Laramie, in Butte, in Denver, at every stop. That was the way to forget.

"Play it safe, Kid. Have a girl at every stop. That's best," he concluded. Pete listened half-heartedly to Jim and the Kid on the way to the grounds. They were talking about the afternoon's events. Jim pulled into the grounds and got out.

"Got to go get the paint on, boys. Good luck. See you in the ring."

"He's a hell of a nice guy, isn't he, Pete, and a good clown too?" The Kid and Jim had become good friends, *but then,* Pete thought, *the Kid has a way with all of us that makes us want to watch out for him.* He picked up the Kid's rigging.

"Glad to see you got this fixed. I think it'll help. These little things add the points, Kid. Sit deeper on your horse. Rake him more, and watch out for those sudden turns, especially if you get The Fool. We'd better be going to draw, Kid. I'm going to beat you today," Pete tried to joke. *Why do I keep encouraging the Kid? Why don't I just tell him to get out now?*

Pete and the Kid started over towards the chutes and the group of cowboys squatted on their haunches. "Domino, hell, he's easy to ride. You just never know what to expect."

"I've got the Twister. Hey, Pete, you lucky bastard. You've got The Fool." All eyes were on Pete. The Kid turned.

"God, Pete, you're lucky to get him. I've always wanted to see you ride him."

The Fool! Pete felt himself get weak. *Yeah, ain't I lucky. I'm scared as hell.* His stiff leg was aching again. "Well, Kid, guess I'll beat you now for sure. Who'd you get?"

"Bomber, Pete. You've had him before, haven't you? What's he like, Pete, how do I...?" Pete had turned and was walking towards the high fence beside the chutes.
He pulled himself up. The boards were rough and splintered. He took out a cigarette and lit a match with unsteady hands.

Pete's stomach was churning. If only the Kid had gotten The Fool, and I could have told him how to ride. I know the Kid could do it, but me? Oh, God! Pete watched the Kid joking with the cowboys running horses into the chutes. It was a familiar scene; colorful shirts and tight, dusty jeans and handmade chaps, big hats . . . but today it all looked different to Pete. He saw Jim with his baggy pants and checkered shirt leading his little donkey.

The grand entry was about to begin. Pete saw the Kid's barrel racer in a bright lavender outfit. Huh, he does all right, Pete thought, she's quite a filly; if only. . . . Pete fingered his rigging, testing each strap. He was tired. He barely heard the announcements over the loudspeaker. One of the roustabouts came over to tell him he was next. The chutes shook as the broncs were driven in. Pete saw The Fool come through.

"There he is, Pete, there he is." The Kid climbed the chute across from Pete and started to help with the rigging. Pete's mouth was dry.

"Well, Kid, this is it." He lowered himself on the horse carefully. "See how I'm sitting, Kid. You've got a better hold. Try holding the strap like this. Yeah, I'm ready . . . let her go!"

The chute opened. Pete gripped the rigging until his knuckles were white. His arm felt as if it was being pulled from its socket, and every bone in his body seemed to be grinding against another. The leg was really aching now. Pete swallowed hard, set his jaw and bit his lips until he could taste the saltiness of blood.

Over the loudspeaker, Pete could hear a muffled voice with a Western drawl. He heard only fragments of what the voice was saying and even these fragments were barely audible . . . "one of our favorites here at the Springs . . . it looks like a good ride, folks."

Pete gritted his teeth at these last words. "The hell it's a good ride! Something . . . no, nothing is right." His mind wandered a minute. He saw a blurred vision of the
Kid climbing over Chute 4 and remembered the Kid saying, "You're lucky, Pete, lucky. You've drawn The Fool . . . maybe someday. . ."

Pete heard another roar from the stands, a mixture of screams, applause, cheers. His body fought the thrashing horse. He moved in rhythm with the horse as he had learned through the years . . . forward-back, up-down. Suddenly, the animal made an unexpected lunge forward. Pete was caught off guard by a dizzying side movement. He could feel the separation between himself and the horse. He struggled to regain his balance with the wearied strength remaining in his jarred body.

"You son-of-a-bitch. You dirty son-of-a-bitch! I'll ride you yet." He defied the horse, his voice edged with hate.

Pete stiffened as he felt his own anger and hate returned by the mad fury in the horse beneath him. He raked the animal's shoulders with his sharp spurs. It was all Pete could do to move his one leg, and he was off balance. The rider knew he was defeated. Caught off guard a second time, Pete felt himself leave the horse, saw everything go by him like a blurred picture and then . . . then he heard the sickening thud of his own body hitting the hard-packed arena.

He was suddenly aware of the hot, piercing sensations shooting through his body. His eyes stung with pain. He opened his mouth to spit out some blood. "I've got to get up," Pete muttered to himself. He heard the faraway voice of the announcer.

"Coming out of Chute 4, the Kid on Bomber! Here's the boy to watch, folks. Look at him sit that horse. He's had a good teacher, Pete Riley, just out on The Fool. We'll see how Pete is in a minute, folks. Pete can be proud of the Kid."

Proud, yeah, proud of what? Pete thought, as he struggled once again to get up. He crumpled and fell with a groan wrenched from deep inside his shattered body. He was losing consciousness. Proud of sending the Kid to this? Pete wasn't proud of anything. He heard the voice over the loudspeaker grow farther and farther away, finally into nothing.