



Buckle Bunnies

Don't let your babies grow up. Elizabeth Gilbert rides the rodeo circuit to chronicle the true confessions of the women who love cowboys and the men who hate them for it.

"Charlie used to be able to call up Cocksucker any time of day and say, 'Cocksucker, come over here and suck my cock,'" a cowboy named Jason told me. "Cocksucker really liked Charlie," he added fondly. "She liked him a lot."

This is a story about women in rodeo. It's not about the women who rope calves or race horses around barrels, or these days, get tossed off bulls for a living. That's another story altogether. This is a story about the women who follow rodeo, or more specifically, the women who follow rodeo cowboys.

There's Nasty Wendy, T.J., Tammy, and Angie. There's a girl called Fisheyes, whom the cowboys told me I would know on sight. In Canada, there's someone called Motorcross, for no reason that anyone remembers. There's Hoe-Down, who's handy with a MasterCard, and Dawn, who will spend a week's paycheck on a bullrider, if he asks her to. There's a little woman in Montana named Andrea, whom a cowboy can always go home with at the end of the night, if he hasn't found anyone better. And there are the famous Clarksville, Texas, girls: Peterbelly, Blondysocks, Grapenuts, Copenhagen, Tiny Tim, Hammerhead, Skoals-a-Little, and Cocksucker, who likes Charlie a lot.

Buckle Bunnies like cowboys enough to screw random ones rapaciously, often several at a time, and then provide breakfast, laundry services, telephones, and medical attention the next morning. They like cowboys enough to pay their rodeo entry fees, which can run anywhere from \$50 to \$500, depending on the prestige of the event.

Buckle Bunnies travel. They hang out behind the bucking chutes at every rodeo with six-packs and ice-packs, waiting for the cowboys to finish tempting death in the ring. They stand in pairs at country bars, laughing crazily, as if standing with a girlfriend in a strange bar is the most fun a person can have in this life. They fill arenas with their tight jeans, their pink blouses with the geometric holes cut out of the backs, and their Loni Anderson hair. When the rodeo is over, the bullriders limp out of the ring with the adrenaline rush of firing-squad survivors, grabbing



I could have used a buckle myself, because the Bunnies didn't want to talk to me. I was only in Texas for a few days before word got around that I was asking folks about getting around. It's a small world for a big state. I was in Uvalde, interviewing a candidate in a bar when a woman came running over. "Don't talk to her!" she yelled, pointing at me. "She's doing a story about Buckle Bunnies!" Then she ran back out onto the dance floor. Her friend watched, then turned to me. "A few more drinks and she'll be taking her shirt off," she said sadly, then walked away. She wouldn't give me her name.

"You only came over because someone told you I was a Buckle Bunny," hissed a girl in the same bar.

I had some trouble denying this convincingly.

She went on. "Well, you can write whatever you want, but I think there's enough wrong with the world that we don't have to worry about other people's business. And if a girl wants to run around, or die of a disease, then that's her business. And I don't care what people think about me."

Well, I do. And she hated me. Finding a woman who wants to talk about her experiences as a Buckle Bunny is like finding a Frenchman who wants to talk about his experiences as a Nazi collaborator.

But guess what? Getting the cowboys to talk was no problem at all. In San Antonio, I met Kirby, a bareback rider who wanted nothing more out of life than to set me straight. "We don't call them Buckle Bunnies anymore," he said. "That's a '70s expression. These days, we call them good old dirty-legged rodeo whores."

Kirby had some swell stories. He sought me out one night in Cowboy Corner to tell me his favorite Buckle Bunny moment. It was about this girl in Somerville, Texas, who everyone tried to screw, and how he chased her down a road and caught her finally, and they screwed in the middle of the highway until a car came and scared her and she ran off into a barbed wire fence and cut her titties all up. Kirby was a million laughs.

I changed my approach. "I'm doing a story about Buckle Bunnies," I started telling women, dropping the little Texas two-step of innuendo and evasion. "Can you tell me anything about them?"

They were delighted to talk. Every woman had an alibi for why she herself was legitimately at the rodeo. Either she was a cowboy's wife or girlfriend, or a civic volunteer, or a former barrel racer, or the daughter of an old bullrider, or a rodeo

beers and girls. And every night the grabbed girls shriek and laugh, as if all of this attention is a big fat surprise.

"If you're a top cowboy," Jason said, "getting laid is never a problem."

"What if you're not a top cowboy?"

"It's still not a problem. It's just that the top cowboys have more selection."

A cowboy's trophy belt buckle is engraved with every kind of necessary proof.

"Champion Bullrider," it might read, "San Antonio Stock Show and Rodeo, 1993."

It's the shape of a shield and a little bigger than a nice bar of soap. Since it's a hideous offense to wear a buckle that you didn't earn yourself, it's a pretty safe way to tell quickly who matters and who doesn't.

A cowboy will pass through a crowd with one hand casually on his buckle, touching it and shifting it, like it's a satellite dish emitting and receiving information. Which, of course, it is. The buckle is conveniently portable, a trophy that only comes off when the jeans come off, at which point its work is done, anyhow. Girls in bars kneel or squat in front of guys to read the buckles closely, a gesture rich with promise for later. In a sport without any protection, a buckle is the only point of invulnerability on a cowboy's body. And in a community where divorce and desertion are epidemic, a buckle is the only token of real worth.

One morning, bored in San Antonio, I called 68 local pawn shops and had this conversation 68 times: "Hi. Do you have any rodeo belt buckles in stock?"

"No, ma'am, we sure don't."

"How about wedding rings?"

"Yes, ma'am, we've got hundreds of wedding rings."

It means something to be given a belt buckle. Wives get belt buckles. Sweethearts get belt buckles. Mothers get belt buckles. Buckle Bunnies,

break up so often because cowboys have sex with their horses.

Then I called my sister to complain that the only thing a woman can be in Texas is somebody's good girl or somebody's bad girl. "Or somebody's governor," she added.

Then I called a friend in Philadelphia and she told me to watch what I wrote, unless I wanted to become the Salmon Rushdie of rodeo. She called my story "The San-Antonic Verses."

On my last night in San Antonio, I went to a place called Midnight Rodeo—one of those strange Texas bars big as Kmart, sunk in some epic parking lot. I met Tonya, who was born on an Austin ranch, but now worked in the city. She was smart and funny and her hair wasn't big. I asked her about cowboys, and she told it straight. "None of them are worth a shit," she said. "They can't keep a job. They cheat on their wives. They're never home. They're lazy, and you can't trust them. None of them are worth one shit."

As a visual aid, good old dirty-legged Kirby came over just then. He was staggeringly drunk, and he wanted to talk to me some more about girls. "I got a beautiful girl I'll probably marry someday," he said. "Sometimes I like being nice to girls, like, 'Hey, how ya' doing, nice to meet you.' Other times, I just go around like, 'Fuck you, bitch! Suck my fucking dick!'"

I was writing all of this down. "You're going to make someone a great husband someday," I said.

Kirby considered this. Then he howled, "Hey! I'm young, I'm dumb, and I'm

They just think they know him because they recognize his name."

Jennifer seemed happy with this answer.

Later, I was interviewing a bullrider named Ronnie, when the bartender asked him, "Do you think all women should be treated with respect?"

"Every woman should be treated with respect," Ronnie said.

"What about Buckle Bunnies?" I asked.

"That's different. Buckle Bunnies don't count."

Hell, who wants not to count? Sluts? Whores? Trash? Who wants to sign up for that mailing list? For all the cowboy talk about the freedom of the lifestyle, rodeo is basically a small town on the move, a road show of the same bulls, the same cowboys, the same bars, the same girls. It's a circus, and everyone knows you don't see the world when you run away with the circus. You just see the inside of the same grimy circus tent from Beaumont to Buffalo and back.

In a community where the only liberal thing around is the use of makeup, it's not surprising that no woman is ready to stand up and say it loud, I'm a dirty-legged rodeo whore, and I'm proud. Which is a shame, because they subsidize the whole show. Without their cash and ass, the sport could not exist as it does, and if Buckle Bunnies ever unionized, the changes would come fast and hard.

But there's no danger of this. The ethic of rodeo forbids boat-rocking from any angle, and the urge to conform shows up in weird ways. One night in Houston, the announcer asked the 58,000 spectators, "Is anyone here not from Texas?" A dead silence fell over the Astrodome. It was exactly as if he'd asked, "Who here likes taking it up the ass?" If there were any among us who were guilty, we weren't talking. I sure didn't volunteer. I may be from out of town, but I'm not stupid. When in Houston, Ich bin eine Texan.

A bullrider named Will said to me one night, "Buckle Bunnies get a bad rap. But when you're 1,000 miles from home and broke and hurt, and it's 2:30 A.M. in Iowa, and the bar is closing, they're pretty nice to have around."

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Love: A couple steal a kiss outside a rodeo bash, the night of their engagement; right, two teenage usherettes.

