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SUNDAY AT THE ANGOLA PRISON RODEO
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If we didn't know we were entering a state penitentiary, we might think we were on a plantation or a golf course, and we'd pretty much be right. Driving onto the grounds in early October, hay bales dot flat green fields and quaint white barns rise in their midst. Fountains spew from the placid rectangles of designer catfish ponds. A golf course sits next door, the aptly named Prison View. And the view is wide. At 18,000 acres, Angola is the only prison in the world with its own zipcode: 70712. "The Farm" produces enough fresh vegetables to feed Louisiana's entire inmate population year round. Until its purchase in1880, Angola was a working plantation. Bent over in the fields, the men in the "potato line" don't look that different from Lucretia Glorioso's painting of cotton picking slaves, entitled "The Gatherers."

A mile beyond the barbed wire fencing and sniper towers, adolescent guards in oversized hats usher cars towards empty spaces, while their beefier colleagues zoom about the parking lot on ATVs, directing the public to the annual prison rodeo. Inside the gates, poster board signs advertise fried coke and an old fashioned black hearse is polished to gleaming. The $5 dollar program brags that this horse drawn relic continues to be used for inmate burials. We venture through a long row of food vendors: Men of Hope hawk corn dogs and balloons from a lavender cinder block

structure, the Drama Club makes shrimp tacos (hard and soft), and the Horticulture Club specializes in Spicy Cajun Chicken Necks. The Lifers Association offers snowballs.

Past the snacks is the offender hobby craft fair. The propane piggy banks, faux Gucci bags, alligator belts and LSU bling are nearly as big a draw as the rodeo itself. A bald man selling Tinkerbell handbags doesn't look us in the eye when he tells us he's in for 75 years. "I've been working leather since middle school. I dropped it for the street life. Being here has given me the chance to pick it up again." He turns to show off the barbecue he made in welding class, which is display only and not for sale, then says he just heard good news about his mother whom he hasn't spoken to in eight years. "She always said she'd kill to have the talent I have."

A car tire carousel marks the entrance to the kid's section. Inside, a local humane society tries to give away sad looking mutts, and children housed in what looks like spacesuits for clowns throw themselves at an inflatable sticky wall. A teenager with a dip can imprint on the back of his Wranglers lobs tennis balls at the inmate-dunking booth. A small blonde boy shouts, "This is like a video game."

Inside the 10,500-seat stadium, inmate pinball is all too real. We have a seat and lean forward as a rodeo clown drops eleven purple hula-hoops on the dirt outside the bullpen. Each contestant, in his black and white striped, state-issued, full-body button up, picks a circle and stands inside. The angry bull is released. Within seconds a man flies several feet into the air, landing mid-flip. The crowd guffaws. Most of the players scatter. Two stand their ground. The bull paws the dust with his left hoof and charges. A winner is declared.

Other events include Wild Cow Milking, the Barrel Race, and Convict Poker. During Piggy Back the Pink Panther theme song continues to play after a rider is kicked in the head. Over the loudspeaker, the announcer reminds the audience that posters are collector's items and can be purchased at the Souvenir Booth. "The men are here voluntarily," he adds. "They want to do this."

This rest of his words are lost as a clown motors from the gates in a three-wheeled jalopy. An older white gent in a white leather suit meets him mid-field. The clown says to the announcer, "So my wife asked me what I wanted for Christmas. I told her an SUV. Socks, underwear, Viagra!" He revs his little engine and the jalopy dies. The announcer suggests he try rubbing the naked wires together. The clown refuses. "I'm not rubbing any naked anything together," he says. Then the car catches fire. Later this man waves his handkerchief at an angry bull, saving several lives.

The prize for Guts and Glory, the penultimate event, is five hundred dollars at the prison canteen. Any inmate can participate. Fifty file into the field and spread out. From the nosebleed seats, the men's hats—sombreros, straw fedoras, and rain caps—are the only way we can distinguish them from one another. We watch as they crack their knuckles and shake out their legs in nervous preparation. In minutes, a 2,000 pound Brahma Bull will be released in their midst. The announcer explains that a red poker chip is taped between the bull's eyes. The first man to face the bull and grab the chip wins.

The crowd is giddy as the men run towards, and then frantically away from, the charging beast. It's hard to watch, but it's impossible not too. The bull's horns

have been painted blood red and it's entirely conceivable someone might die. One zealous contender throws himself at the bull's maw. The crowd laughs when he appears to have been trampled. Other men run for the fence. We're so focused on the felled man's recovery that we both miss seeing the winner snag the chit.

Not far from the rodeo grounds, Angola has built a short, grass runway. Wealthy patrons arrive in private aircraft. The money raised today will be used to build interfaith chapels and donated to the Offender Welfare Fund. The Prison Rodeo began in 1964 as a way to channel some violent energy out of the prison walls. Though initially a private affair, Angola's Rodeo has been open to the public since the prison administration recognized the economic opportunity. Netting more than 450,000 dollars a day, the rodeo and surrounding crafts fair runs every Sunday in October. Tickets sell for fifteen dollars.

Though rodeo-goers are here to see the inmates, a few sideshows are brought in from outside. Tim Lepard rides into the stadium on the hood of a stars and stripes, king-sized pick-up. His shiny windbreaker matches his truck. Four tiny rams follow the vehicle at a trot. With toddler-proof fencing, he sets up a miniature pen. The crowd leans in. They're glad to have a break from the violence. "I was born in 1962. All my life it was my dream to own a monkey," Mr. Lepard announces. The gates to the bullpen open. Three sheepdogs run out. On their backs bounce tiny monkeys in neon, fringed riding vests. We're not positive, but it looks as if their legs are tethered to the collies' dappled flanks. Mr. Lepard whistles and the dogs stand still. "I didn't do this by myself. You were a part of it and God made it happen." He opens the pen. The rams run out and the dogs chase after them, yipping gleefully.

The monkeys' heads bob. "A lot of us out there are Christians. This country's in deep trouble. It's time to take this country back." The dogs manage to round the rams into a tight circle and one by one they jump over the fence into the pen. "It's time to take this country back," he says again. The crowd erupts.

In order to leave the stadium, the spectators must exit by the female inmates, who remain in the stands, surrounded by guards. It's difficult to know where to direct your gaze. The women wear navy jumpsuits. Their identification cards glint in the late afternoon sun. Parents tell their children to hush up. No one looks happy.

Outside the bleachers, we're not quite ready to go. There're miles more crafts to see. We wander past the animal pens where grown men in bolo ties are having their photos taken with the bulls. The crafts in this section are domestic kitsch. The words "onions," "taters," and "bread" are spray painted on more cabinets than we can count. Rows upon rows of rocking chairs lilt in the late afternoon breeze. They're empty, designed for someone else's comfortable old age.

We're tired. The booths behind the bullpen are full now with elaborate clocks. Everywhere we turn, a second hand twitches. Cuckoos and model courthouses and a gigantic wooden Swatch. And eyes. A fence separates us from the vendors. Men are lined up, their knuckles resting on the chain links. These are the bad men, the ones who aren't allowed to walk freely amongst the crowd. They call out, "two for the price of one." One of us picks up a wooden board and a man says, "do you like my paddles?" It's a gravel desert here. We walk down a corridor towards what we think is an exit. There are no more booths. Wire fencing rises on either side. The corridor narrows. In front of us is a bus. Guards direct long lines on

board. Louisiana's incarceration rate is triple Iran's, seven times China's, and ten times Germany's. This state imprisons more men per capita than any other state. Louisiana is the world's prison capital. A few of the men turn and wave at us. We're thirsty and overwhelmed. We want to get away from here.

Back by the Horticulture Club, craftsmen and tourists are on their best behavior. There are inmate's families here. It's a day full of play and tearful reunions. A rodeo worker and his girlfriend exchange bootie grabs. Three quarters of the offender population will never leave this place. They have life sentences. As the rodeo worker's girlfriend makes her way towards the exit, he waves. She vanishes then reappears in the parking lot beyond the barbed wire, and his gestures become frenzied. He calls out, waving now with both hands, but she's too far away to hear.

Children walk by with snowballs and adults hold onto tickets they will use later to redeem the inexpensive table sets they've bought. We want to lean against something, but the only structures nearby are tent poles and wire. We've been here all afternoon and our skin feels baked. "People all over the world ask me, how you get dem monkeys to ride dem dogs," we hear Tim Lepard's voice echo from the arena loud speaker. Though the inmates have exited the stadium, he's decided to do an encore. "I tell them," he continues, "it's a thing called love."