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Prose, Poetry, and Art from West Marin

Seasons

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WHEN I MET the man I wanted to spend the rest of my life with, I thought I was a cowgirl making a film. He was Kenji, a small, pudgy Japanese-American film editor who, in the face of adversity (which abounds in the edit room), would throw his head back and laugh, his careless black hair a kinetic halo.

My best friend Gwen and I had just moved to San Francisco to spend the summer editing our documentary about the old-fashioned lives of cattle ranchers. For three years before, we'd been working on ranches in northeastern California, in the high, cold sagebrush desert known as Modoc County. In spring, under blustery, gray skies, we helped drive cattle sixty miles east from the home ranch to the Nevada desert. In the blazingly hot early summer, we rounded those same cattle up, heated irons over open sagebrush fires, branded any new calves, and pushed the herd into the high country. Come fall, when the aspen were golden, we rode thirty-mile circles to gather up the cattle and trucked them home for the long, cold winter. Growing up in New England, I'd loved horses from afar, but my family had the means only to give me glass figurines of horses and books about them, not access to the real thing. So despite the hazing Gwen and I received as young, single, college-educated women in such a traditional community, ranch life was my definition of heaven.

Gwen and I had chosen San Francisco because of its vibrant independent filmmaking community. Within weeks of our arrival, I was reminded anew that I'd never wanted an urban life. The hard angular

concrete made me want to free the dirt trapped underneath. I sensed it gasping for air (just as I was). Given the ranch country's attitude toward all hardship, "hang tough," I felt despicably neurotic. Even worse, I had also discovered that San Francisco lacked seasons. As that summer of editing stretched into nearly a year, the city's weather seemed an eternal spring, which, lacking the trial of winter, lost its sweetness.

Still, I was sure about Kenji and, hoping he'd eventually feel the same way about me, decided maybe he would like to become a ranch hand. Quietly, I started a campaign by inviting him to spend a weekend in the ranching country. Five hundred miles from the city, we stopped for a drink at the Niles Saloon. It was Modoc County's most (and only) charming bar, about twenty-five miles from the ranch I called home. The Niles was packed, but I didn't know anyone, so we wandered around, looking at the worn saddles, rusty farm implements, and sepia-toned photographs with which the owners had decorated the place. In a back room we found an old county map. Kenji, who loved maps, studied it and said, "Oh, Tule Lake. That's where my parents were interned."

I knew the place. A windy, desolate stretch of open ground where a plaque embedded in a rock commemorated the shameful four-year incarceration of thousands of Japanese Americans during World War II. Strike One.

We finished our drinks and shouldered into the Friday-night crowd of barrel-chested, beef-fed men wearing clean triple-beaver cowboy hats. We were in the middle of the crowd when a towering buckaroo looked down at Kenji and loudly chanted, "Sushi sushi sushi."

The bar went quiet. Kenji wordlessly stared up, the top of his head just a little higher than this guy's big-boned elbow. "Look at that," the guy hollered to the crowd, "he's got slant eyes and he don't even know what sushi is."

His remark caught me by surprise. Until now, Kenji and I had had no negative experiences as an interracial couple because it was so common in San Francisco. I felt as if someone in my family had just

behaved reprehensibly and wished we'd stopped at the bar in Cedarville, near the home ranch. I would have known people there and out of respect for me, they would have been kind to Kenji. We drove over the mountain pass to the schoolhouse I'd rented for the past couple of years and didn't talk about what had happened. Strike Two.

At three-thirty the next morning, under the stars, Kenji and I walked the quarter-mile between the schoolhouse and Roger Davis's low-slung, modern ranch house. In the bright, familiar kitchen, I cooked eggs, sausage, potatoes, toast, and coffee, fuel for the ride up into the Warner Mountains, where we'd be gathering the Davis's cattle from the meadows and forests they'd roamed all summer. In the corral, Roger casually sized up Kenji, who was so round he called himself Baby Buddha. Taking in the little blue-and-white-striped sneakers Kenji had bought for three dollars from a bin on a Mission Street sidewalk, Roger correctly judged he was no horseman and put him on trustworthy old Buck, the same horse he'd assigned me when I arrived three years ago. I rode the favorite of my two horses, Jasper, a bay Arabian gelding that I'd paid $200 for when he was unbroken and five years old. I, who had never ridden prior to moving to this ranching country, had trained him, and was the first to saddle and ride him. He'd become a good, solid cow horse.

The trail to summer pasture was narrow, steep, and pointedly not maintained by the Forest Service. In a terrifying section of rushing water and slippery granite, the trail was one with the creek. If you were lucky, your horse's iron shoes didn't slide on the wet rock, sending both of you surfing down the slick granite creek bed. Kenji was lucky on Buck. I sat deep in my saddle as Jasper, who hated water, charged through it, snorting.

At the top of the ridge, Roger and I rode through pine forest and alpine meadows searching for his cattle, which had grown wild as deer since we'd driven them there in spring. We galloped after them, but Kenji and Buck mostly walked. He smiled when our eyes met and was

athletic enough not to weave much or fall off. Back at the schoolhouse, he lightly mentioned that he expected this day on horseback had forever ended his prospects of having children.

The next day, Kenji and I helped Roger brand some calves, and, as the weekend drew to a close, we returned to the schoolhouse and drank beers in the living room, basking in the warmth and light streaming through the tall, west-facing windows. Overall, I thought, the weekend has gone wonderfully, and with only two strikes against me, my plan was still intact. Kenji set his beer on the table, looked into my eyes and solemnly said, "I never want a lawn."

"Who said anything about lawns?" I asked.

In the kindest possible tone, he told me that from age eight to eighteen he had worked in his father's gardening business and in their small family orchard in the San Francisco Bay Area. He had hated the

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Wendy Schwartz, *Wood Shop, Route One,* 2007, oil on canvas, 6 x 8 inches

heat, the way people treated him like a second-class citizen when he was sweaty and dirty. As he talked, I realized that he loved me. He'd been on to my mission all along and hadn't wanted to spoil the weekend by saying so, but he was never, ever going to trade his urban life for anything having to do with a ranch, a farm, or even a garden. Strike Three.

On the long drive to San Francisco, we were both quiet. I asked myself what I was going to do. There was no doubt in my mind that Kenji was right for me. But how was I, who loved extreme seasons and open spaces, to make a life in a temperate city? Could I begin to see myself as a filmmaker who had once been a cowgirl?

A few weeks later, Gwen and I drove in my 1963 Chevy pickup more than an hour north of the city to visit her friend Jim, who was working at a dairy in Marshall. Jim had studied cheese making in France and had married a French woman, who had recently given birth to their first child in the brush and willows edging a creek. We sat in the dirt near the tent Jim had pitched alongside the creek and, in halting French, I praised the baby's beauty (Jim's wife had refused to learn English). We talked a bit about how, remarkably, there were cattle ranches out here, next door to the city. But to Gwen's and my eyes, these ranches were "inside operations," meaning they kept the cattle fenced in. The open range that made our desert ranch experiences so grand was not to be found here.

On the way back to San Francisco, just south of Olema, Gwen and I approached a ranch where Angus cattle grazed on grassy hillsides and many horses stood in paddocks near the barn. I pulled in and asked the affable owner, Boyd Stewart, about the cost of boarding a horse. It appeared I could afford to board Jasper in one of the Stewart Ranch hill pastures. With that, I began to believe I could make a life with Kenji, find work as some kind of filmmaker or film worker, and escape urban life often enough to stay sane. But what of the seasons? How could I live without them?

I arranged for someone to trailer Jasper from Modoc to the Stewart Ranch. Trotting him in any direction from the ranch, I discovered tens of miles of parkland: redwoods, bishop pine, rolling grassland, windswept sand beaches, and wet meadows lying atop the San Andreas fault line. From horseback, I gradually began to discern the subtle markers of seasonal change in this place where, having found love, I had resolved to make my home. I came to know and accept the biting, cold fog as a sign of summer. Driving to the Stewart Ranch on weekend mornings, I saw that the orange California poppies competing with the roadside grasses and weeds marked spring's arrival as surely as the lilacs of my native New England had. I knew the purple-blue swath on a flank of Bolinas Ridge was lupine, and that the yellow lupine growing on bluffs and sand dunes gave off a fragrance sweet and heavy as honeysuckle. In the sound of water rushing from the Inverness Ridge east into the Olema Creek or west into the Pacific, I heard a sign of winter as telling as the roar of a blizzard had been in Modoc. And I identified the pale-blue flowers scattered on the mesa overlooking Tomales Bay as pennyroyal, hardy, square-stemmed plants that, deep into autumn, when they were brown and brittle, still gave off their spicy scent.

And so I stayed. Now, nearly thirty years after I first heard my future husband's laugh, I am still glad I made that choice. We laugh. We make films. We grow an exuberant flower garden that blooms in every season. We have never had a lawn.