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Jon Remmerde

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Bullfight

I've never been to Spain, but I watched a bullfight. I didn't intend to get as close to the action as I did. I thought I might get trampled in the melee, but John rescued me and took me to lunch.

Early that morning, before I knew there would be a bullfight, I parked my pickup at the southeast corner of the ranch I took care of in northeastern Oregon. I carried my tools and supplies and walked north along the fence that ran through the edge of timber, just above the meadow, at the base of the rapidly rising, forested ridge. I stopped, removed my backpack, and repaired fence damaged by the previous winter's snow and all the other vagaries of time, then picked up my tools, my lunch, and my water bottle and walked to the next spot that needed work.

Midmorning, the crew from the owner's home ranch, on horses, moved cattle down the trail outside the fence, on their way from one forest service allotment to another. No one rode point, so the first cattle tromped, bellowed, and mooed down the outside of the fence far ahead of the riders. I kept working on the fence from inside, and the cattle began to pass by me.

Two bulls walked heavily near the leaders of the herd. One must have said something insulting to the other, or perhaps one, avoiding a stump or a tree, got too close to the other. In any case, one bull took umbrage over something, turned, and pushed the other bull. Not one to take aggression lightly, the second bull pushed back, and the fight began. The two bulls placed forehead to forehead and began pushing. They seemed evenly matched. One brown and white hereford bull pushed for fifty feet. The second bull found traction, stopped backing, and pushed for fifty feet.

They skidded, chopped ground to dust with their hooves, and roared at each other too close to where I worked. I left everything on the ground and retreated down the fence. I was fascinated enough by fighting bulls to want

to stay close enough to watch. I also didn't want to abandon my tools, lunch, and water bottle.

One bull pushed the other through the fence, broke all the wires, and sent my possessions scattering into the dust. That put them on my side of the fence and didn't slow down their contest that seemed to test their strength against each other without hurting either of them. However, I, much smaller and much more breakable than one-ton bulls, could get trampled just by coincidence, the way bushes, fence, lunch and tools were getting trampled by coincidence. I started to leave, and one bull pushed the other into my planned path out of the arena. I thought I'd pick another direction to retreat.

Just then, John, owner of the ranch rode out of the forest, high up on the old grey mare. He rode between me and the bulls, stopped, let the mare take the responsibility for watching the bulls, which she did well and carefully, and spoke to me. "Looks like they're making a lot more work for you."

"Does look like that."

"Have you had lunch, yet?"

"No. Not yet." I didn't mention that my lunch had been bull-stomped. John missed little in the world around him, and he had probably already seen that.

"Well, why don't you climb up here behind me and ride down to the gate with me? We're going to put the herd through the gate and then have lunch. You can eat with us. We always pack extra."

So I did. He moved his foot to give me an empty stirrup and offered me a hand up, and I scrambled up behind him. I felt much more secure up on a mare who knew how to stay out of the way, behind the old cowboy who'd been around bulls all his life. We rode on down the trail, cows all around us, and ate lunch in warm sunshine with the whole crew.

By then, the two bulls had settled whatever it was they decided by shoving each other around and walked side by side again.

We finished lunch and visited a while in mountain sunshine. Then the crew gathered all their gear together and rode on down the river to load horses into trailers and head back for the home ranch. I walked back up the

fence and gathered everything together in the abandoned arena and went back to work, repairing fence the bulls had ruined. The sun still shone, and it was a good day to be working.