There She Is

The thing about celebrities, at least the two I’ve seen up close, is they seem to love rodeos. I say this out loud and my college-aged daughter gives me an eye roll. It’s not a big one—but I notice. It’s incredibly hot in the sun, over ninety degrees. My daughter, a freshman at Vassar College, is helping me conduct research on women in Guanacaste Province, Costa Rica. Our study investigates sources of resilience in low-income Costa Rican and Nicaraguan women. Today is our free day, our day without interviews, note taking or travelling between houses to find no one at home—or someone at home but not the person we hoped to interview.

It’s a rodeo festival day in Cartejena, and the actor Julia Stiles apparently got the memo about how to dress. The entire town has turned up in what look to me like stylish tight jeans, cowboy boots, pressed western shirts, or for the women, sparkling tee shirts. The women are perfumed and towering on heels. Tiny children transform into mini versions of adults and pre-pubescent and pubescent girls dress like cowgirls on Broadway. Julia Stiles has put together an understated version of Costa Rican rodeo wear. She has cowgirl boots, and her outfit of jeans and a plain violet-grey tee shirt suggest a gesture toward assimilation without the hyper-feminized approach. I believe she may be wearing a jogging bra.

It’s hard to pin down the type of American who makes the trip to Costa Rica. The adventuresome traveler who isn’t too adventuresome, the biologist in khakis with a fanny pack, the overly-tanned retiree, sinewy surfers with blond mullets and pierced nipples, middle-aged women seeking tummy tucks, and “dental tourists” economizing on crowns and veneers—these people populate the plane from Miami to the Pacific airport in Liberia, Costa Rica. On return trip, it’s common to see tourists with blindingly white teeth and beaded beach braids leaning tans against American Airline headrests.

Although it’s clear to me that tourists come to Costa Rica because it’s possible to see oneself as an accomplished traveler in a place where packaged deals make adventure manageable, and the culture of accommodation and agreeability prevails, it’s harder to understand why celebrities with teams of vacation and image planners would select a relatively common place like Costa Rica for their destination. Why does Julia Stiles come here, for example? My daughter
squints at me sideways and says she was wondering the same thing. Certainly, more exotic and brag-worthy places exist than Costa Rica. Julie Stiles trots past us on a chestnut horse in the company of at least one hundred and fifty Costa Rican adults and children. A Canadian tourist standing near us mentions that Julia Stiles’ American mother owns a ranch near Cartegena. My daughter and I look back toward Julia Stiles’ pack of horses wondering which middle-aged American woman in a bold halter top is her mother. Oh, that one! Things could be worse. We could be searching for the abandoned family of Mel Gibson or the family of Brittany Spears, celebrities who both apparently frequent the Costa Rican Gold Coast.

Julia Stiles’ horse pauses as she waits for a beer at the side of the ring, close to the outdoor, make-shift bar where my daughter and I are sipping water from plastic bottles. Julia Stiles doesn’t ask for her drink. No money gets exchanged. The crowd reads her mind and the bar tender climbs the high fence and holds out a brown glass bottle with the gold label. Her face looks unremarkable and then sparkles with expression as she offers thanks, takes a swig, and then passes the beer to someone on a horse near her, perhaps her younger sister.

“Maybe we’re fascinated because we wish she knew us like we think we know her,” my daughter says as we keep staring at Julia Stiles. We admit to feeling slightly disgusted with ourselves. We are someone too, I think to myself, perturbed. Our cameras are out of batteries, and we’ve been waiting, while digesting a heavy chicken, rice, and tortilla lunch, for hours in the sun. We are out of fashion too, both in outfits that would work well for a stroll in muggy Poughkeepsie, but not for a rodeo in Cartegena. Our Costa Rican friends, both young men we know from earlier visits, seem fascinated by our fascination. They haven’t heard of Julia Stiles but encourage us to take photos. They are pushy. “Come on,” they say. “Do it.” We say “shhh” and then smile at them as if we don’t mean it. We show them our dead cameras and look back toward Julia Stiles. Her face flushes as she gallops by, her blond ponytail lifting and falling like a blessing.

When Julia Stiles gallops in for her second beer, I wonder to myself how she manages to stay so thin, consuming two beers before five in the afternoon. She sits with excellent
posture on her horse while chatting easily with a local admirer in aviator glasses and crisp black jeans. She allows him to take her photo on his cell phone. Even though Julia Stiles is only one of two celebrities I’ve seen up close, I draw this conclusion: celebrities up close make the average citizen feel frumpy. Their fingernails seem effortless clean and the crowd falls around them in ways that emphasize their graceful movement through the world. I’m thinking about this conclusion again the next day when I receive e-mail from my Shakespearean scholar friend in New York who suggests perhaps it’s more that we are fascinated by celebrities, our eyes seek them out, because they make our own lives seem more vibrant—just as the sun’s glow lights up the dark moon.

I hear from another writer on the topic of celebrity worship. He’s a former reporter for News Day and he usually sends me Morse Code-like responses to my intrusive writing questions. His e-mail has a “get real” tone. I’m not surprised when to find that he’s suggesting I should write a different story. This one has already been written. There must be something else I would write about down there. This phenomenon of celebrity worship is old news, he says. “Take Jesus, for instance,” he says, and signs off.

After Jesus was reported to live, but before the time of internet, cell phones or seat belts, when I was a prepubescent kid in red, white and blue bell bottoms and long thick braids. It was our bicentennial year and kids in Oregon were excited. I became friends with the freckled, be-speckled, pencil-thin daughter of a celebrity. I’m pretty sure I was mainly interested in her because her father was a celebrity. She was the kind of kid who left food in her braces. I wasn’t befriending her to increase my social viability—although it would be fair to say there wasn’t much farther for me to fall.

One day, during the start of summer in our sleepy, alcoholic town, my parents reluctantly allowed me to attend a rodeo in Sheridan, Oregon with this celebrity and his daughter. The celebrity was actor Dallas McKennon, best known for his live role as Cincinatus on Daniel Boone and for his voice as Woody the Wood Pecker. The daughter and I climbed into the doggy smelling back of a VW hatchback to leave seats for the adoring friends of Dallas, one of them a beautiful woman from Ecuador who kept getting nose bleeds on our ride. The route we took along highway 101 was one to inspire gushing circulation. Precipitous drops and astonishing views, the
seascape stays with me thirty years after the day of this ride to a North American rodeo with my first celebrity. I also remember being carsick most of the way.

Perhaps because Dallas McKennon was grizzly, jolly and old in my eyes, he didn’t make me feel frumpy or unprepared for life. What I remember is feeling dazzled when it turned out that we, or rather, Dallas McKennon, would be the Master of Ceremonies at the rodeo. My friend and I were the chosen daughters riding in an open-top antique car at the front of the town procession. Waving at ordinary townspeople, I felt the power of people grinning back at me. I preferred waving to citizens of Sheridan to waiting for an hour outside of the local bar for Dallas McKennon, something my freckled friend seemed accustomed to doing as we stood there in the late afternoon with our knee socks falling down, needing to pee.

I remember an hour in the bleachers, watching pretty cowgirls clip by on horses, shirts ruffling, a dark Chinese restaurant, and a mysterious hour or two in a florescent-lit police station with plastic chairs sticking to our legs waiting for Dallas before the sleepy ride home up highway 101. When Dallas finally returned me to my parents’ porch at three in the morning, I watched his theatrical apology. I think he went down on a knee to what I know now would have been my very pale father and red-faced mother. I can almost see my mother in her quilted bathrobe with her arms crossed and my father breathing through his two eye teeth. Celebrity status wasn’t buying Dallas a pass.

But back to the question of why celebrities have so much power with most people. I think of rodeos again, Jesus, Dallas, and Julia Stiles.

In Costa Rica, time goes a little slower than most places I’ve lived, daylight on the equator snapping off by six p.m. as the sun sinks into the Pacific. In Costa Rica, Nicaragua and other Latin American countries, people pay large sums of money to travel between fiestas built largely around rodeos, where ordinary citizens can pretend to be a celebrities and where real celebrities sometimes emerge. Because night comes so early, rodeos require powerful overhead lighting that buzz with local insects and pop and sizzle with current surges. Broadcasters seem excited to have the microphone and shout names of horses, cattle, people, politicians and products. They tell endless jokes. Local men in jeans act the part of jesters.
chasing around in the bright light of the field, trying to annoy panicked bulls. The local person who might draw the most attention at the rodeo is the cowboy on the spine-tossing back of an oversized bull. Towns in Central America take turns hosting rodeo fiestas. One woman I talked with said it would cost her family a month of her salary as a grocery clerk in Tamarindo, Costa Rica to go to Santa Cruz to attend the rodeo, buy a simple carnival refreshments and perhaps a balloon or trinket for each of her three children. Rodeos set her back financially but she goes because she says she needs to break the routine, get dressed up, go out and be seen. She needs something different. It’s necessary, she says, to dream.

Julia Stiles may allow us to dream. She’s a fixed light in an otherwise whirling context. The grocery clerk, my daughter and I will be different tomorrow or next week, and certainly next year or decade. Julia Stiles, wherever she is or whatever she is doing, will still be running alongside Matt Damon in *The Bourne Ultimatum* or Heath Ledger in *Ten Things I Hate About You*. She won’t age, not for us at least. We know even as we see her shining so brightly that we can navigate something of our own lives.

Dominating beasts and riding across an arena with body and soul united, the cowboys usually survive. Bucking and thrashing, the neck releases heads to bob, wobble and thrash. One Costa Rican friend tells me he thinks the public rises to their feet when a cowboy flies off not because we want him to live but because we want him to die. I think about this theory as I pass a fatal car wreck where a man has left crystallized skull print on the front windshield of his car near the town of Matapalo. Whole families line the road near the wreck for a half mile stretch looking expectantly toward the police officers who investigate. Maybe common people, the non-celebrities, are not longing for death on roadsides or at rodeos but rather longing for the miracles of rewinding the film and making the broken man whole again.

Perhaps we lean out to look at wrecks and gawk at celebrities to remind ourselves of some sense of direction. We are living, breathing humans with places to go. Dreaming with direction expands our lives from being one dimensional into vibrant and thirsty as a young star tipping back a beer on a horse in the sun. Perhaps we wish to have eyes follow us as we figure our next step, our next ride, our next string of words, or our next story. There’s that white lady, professor, writer,
Judith Nichols

poet, walking across the bleachers. There she is again on the dance floor. She sure can’t dance—but there she is!