

(From)

A Collection of Truth & Lies

Short stories from John Morey & K W Sercombe

Published by Sercombe Morey Publishing

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Crossing The River

Longhorns on a long haul

Chapter 1

The Bighorn glistened like a silver snake winding through the mountains, as if shedding its skin as it faltered from rapids to deep pools - changing - but always a playground to shoals of Rainbow Trout shimmering in the afternoon sun. Now and then there was a flash of silver - an errant maybug snatched as it hovered, for the last time, over the glass surface.

"Better set camp over there," called the boss-man to the cook, pointing to a convenient grove among trees - shelter against any sudden late squall carrying a May snow shower, but also offering clear view of predators. In this case - mainly - Lakota Sioux rather than mountain lions (after the horses), or grizzlies (after anything, or anyone, edible).

"Sure thing, boss," came the reply. Cook knew it was pointless to suggest otherwise. In any case, Jesse Chisholm was usually right and they all knew it. The crew of 15 drovers, mainly from South Texas, were unused to the great plains of Wyoming and Montana, so they were happy to take the word of their employer. The Lakota were allegedly less fierce than the Apache *they* were used to, or the half-Creek Native American wife *he was just* getting used to, but the 2,000 head would be enough to embolden hungry tribes of any breed - now stripped of

most of their main source of livelihood, the buffalo, thanks to merciless culling by government to feed the railroad, but mainly just policy - to starve out the indigenous. In case there was gold in those hills.

Otherwise, the Texas Longhorns were immune from danger: The cattle's long horns protected them from wolves, they were immune from the disease carried by ticks (deadly for other breeds), ate virtually any grass no matter how poor, and could travel for days without water or losing condition.

Chet looked after the remuda, some 50-strong extra riding horses, most reasonably broken and proving small problem for seasoned hands. But some of the wilder mustangs - acquired soon after they'd left the Kansas railhead - needed more work. But Chet, plus half a dozen of the more accomplished horsemen, would soon fix that. Before bedding down for the night, he and his carefully chosen riders took turns walking each unbroken horse into the shallows before mounting them. Once chest high in water, any young horse would think twice before bucking, rearing, or trying any other mischief to unseat a 180-pound cow-hand. Even without a bit.

Both rider and ridden would emerge wetter, but quieter - and cleaner.

Dawn came too early - for most - but not for Vinegar Joe, the cook. He rarely slept through, most of the night worrying whether his recipe - for beef stew "plus additives" (anything from rattlesnake to prairie dog) - would satisfy the relentless hunger of saddle-weary cow-

hands. Leaving out the exotic additives, for now, it was a recipe he'd learned from his time as trainee chef at The Dorchester in London, way before a broken heart led him to quit, then - later but not sober - board a "Land of Opportunity" ship to America.

Joe's day began at 3 am, enough time to prepare breakfast for the first to wake - at 4 am and always Chisholm - followed by his head wrangler, a half-breed Kiowa, called "Rides Two Horses".

Actually, "RT" - as he was called by his fellow hands - had his pick of 8 horses from the remuda, the same as the other hands. On a typical 12-14-hour drive, he would change horses at least twice, depending on the terrain or pace they had to strike. His name came from his earliest days before he became a white-man, given to him by his father, a full-blown Indian, for his skill at leaping from one horse to another, showing off on a days buffalo hunt. RT "turned English" soon after his father died on their last hunt, killed by a female white buffalo, the alpha of the herd, protecting her young. The white buffalo, a rarity and considered holy, had been spared subsequent execution.

That night, the return of RT plus horse trainers, just as the sun disappeared behind the 13,000-foot Cloud Peak of the Bighorn mountains, signalled to the rest of the hands to finish their last poker hand, ready for a night's sleep - serenaded by a chorus of timber-wolves. Joe had already turned in.

First to rise but also last to bed down, Chisholm walked his strawberry roan quietly round the perimeter of

the camp, then down to the favoured crossing of the river ready for the next day - just to check the depth and flow of the ever-changing Bighorn one last time. He would be especially quiet for good reason, so he could hear anything out there that might just be trailing his outfit - human or otherwise.

Unsurprisingly, the faint rustling in the aromatic sagebrush to his left was heard by his roan, first, followed by a sharp pain in Chisholm's shoulder before both of them heard the actually 'crack' of the Winchester rifle.

He slumped in his saddle.

Definitely not a grizzly. He'd been shot.

Chapter 2

Instinctively, Chisholm hung onto the horn of his saddle whilst searching with his free - right - hand for the place where he'd taken the bullet. A similar instinct was to leave his gun hand free, ready to repel any further attack - assuming he could see where it came from. He could ride towards or away from the danger, but that decision was taken from him, by his horse - electing to rejoin the rest of the remuda and the camp, assuming his rider had no choice in the matter. The two - horse and rider - soon sought the safety of darkness, but a few moments later emerged into the light of the campfire.

"What happened, Boss?" asked the first cowhand to the scene, Chet, who looked after the remuda, helping Chisholm down from his horse.

"Snakes in the grass," he answered, "the two-legged

kind.”

“Injuns?”

“Unlikely. They’d have used arrows, not lead. If they were going to attack, they’d have been on us before we knew it.”

The cowhand knew Chisholm was guessing; but he also knew his boss was usually right. Letting Chisholm’s horse find its own company, the pair of them made their way to Cook’s chuck-wagon. In times like these, Joe doubled as doctor. After all, on a bad day, it was said that Cook’s breakfasts tasted like medicine, but that could have been down to the amount of whisky that same person had seen off the night before; its affect on their palate.

Soon, the rest of the hands had risen from light slumber - they were already dressed - checking their guns and ammo - first - and the horses - second. Chisholm explained what had happened, pointing to the place he’d been shot, but the crew dropped automatically into alert positions - some behind rocks over-looking the remuda, others staked out on the perimeter of the camp, three or four more deciding to go off on a scouting mission to take the action to the intruders, rather than wait like sitting ducks.

The fire had been doused; darkness was their major defence.

By now, Chisholm had been fixed up - for the time being - by Joe, happy that the bullet had gone clean through his boss’ shoulder. All he had to do, for now, was stem the blood flow either side. Chisholm felt lucky it was

his left shoulder, allowing him full use of his gun hand.

He peered out into the dark, hoping for just a brief break in the clouds for the moon to provide enough light to pick out any sudden, human, movement.

Nothing. And not a sound. It was quiet - too quiet - not even a light breeze disturbing the leafless branches above; the horses were restless, but otherwise quiet - just as vigilant and sensing something - but what - out there. Even the timber wolves were silent, absent apart from the occasional pair of yellow eyes, ghost-like, floating barely above the grass line.

Suddenly a scream split the silence, terror stricken, followed by another and a crashing of hooves. The screams came from two men; the hooves were from what they later learned (from the half-breed Kiowa and their head wrangler, RT), Mankayia - the Storm-Maker.

Always assumed to be a mythological invention from Native American culture and belief systems, this spiritual guardian of the Kiowa - unconsciously summoned by RT to protect them - had taken the shape of a horse, racing in circular motion and truly "kicking up a storm". His tail resembled that of a tornado, the force and intensity of which had drawn the terrified assailants into its vortex, carrying them to unfathomable height before releasing them to the ground, where they lay. Motionless.

RT stood, arms raised, as if in prayer to the guardian spirit, then pointed to the river where the crossing was to take place the following morning. The storm-maker responded by focusing on the river below, garnering the

force of the wind to create a way across, a path resembling the other, more well-known, Biblical story. Suddenly, the clouds broke open and a spear of moonlight beamed down on the parted waters.

Crossing the river would be a day early.

The crew simply watched, spellbound, disbelieving, themselves motionless until Chisholm, understanding his Kiowa top-hand's actions, barked his orders, spurring them into action - first to Chet, responsible for the remuda.

"Take three men and get those broncs and get across the river, pronto. The rest of you, saddle up and get the herd primed ready to cross. Me and Joe will stay in the chuck wagon and ride drag."

To a man, well schooled, each cowhand sprung into life, still reeling in ore and wonder at what had just played out before them, but working on automatic, gathering up the Longhorns and mustangs - the cattle and horses, both, remarkably calm as if lulled into compliance rather than disturbed by the Storm-Maker.

"Move 'em out!" yelled Chisholm from the rear, his instruction relayed in sequence from each point to the head of the herd until those close to the crossing encouraged the obedient cattle to embark to the far side of the Bighorn River.

The Kiowa head wrangler, RT, looked round and met the gaze of Jesse Chisholm, nodded, and smiled.

"Breakfast might be a tad late tomorrow," said Chisholm.

Cook, for once, agreed.

Chapter 3

The sun had lost its bite three days north of the Red River, trading the thick, smothering heat of Texas for a sharp, high-altitude wind that smelled of pine needle and crushed sage. Before them lay three thousand head of longhorns—a sprawling, tossing sea of horn, hide, and iron-hard muscle. They were trail-broken now, moving in a long, serpentine rhythm that stretched a mile from point to drag, their clattering hooves kicking up a fine, yellow dust that hung in the air like a ghost.

Jesse Chisholm rode point on the eastern flank, his hat pulled low against the glare, eyes slitted against the vast, unbroken rim of the horizon. To the rest of the country, the land above the Indian Territory was a blank space on a map, labelled only as the Great Plains. To Chisholm, it was a living, breathing monster. Every coulee was an ambush for a flash flood; every patch of belly-deep prairie grass was a potential firestorm waiting for a lightning strike; and every quiet ridge held the eyes of men who had lived off this dirt long before the first white man swung a leg over a saddle.

Behind him came the crew—a ragged, sun-cured mosaic of men who had little in common save for the fact that none of them fitted in the civilized towns back east.

At the rear, swallowed by the suffocating cloud of dust, rode the drag-riders, cursing in three languages as they nudged along the weak calves and the sore-footed steers. On the far flank, keeping the outer herd from straggling into the timberline, was Rides Two Horses.

He was a half-breed, born to a Kiowa mother and a

French-Canadian trapper who had vanished into the mountain mists twenty years prior. To the white hands on the trail, he was just "the Kiowa," a man who spoke only when the weather changed or when a horse was about to throw a shoe. He carried himself with the fluid, watchful stillness of a hunting cat. He rode a piebald gelding with a wall-eye, bareback more often than saddled, and though he wore a faded wool shirt and greasy trousers, he kept two hawk feathers woven into the thick black braid that hung down his back.

"They're getting flighty, Jesse," called out Silas, the old trail cook, who was bouncing along in the chuck wagon off to the west, his team of mules leaning hard into their leather harnesses. "Smell water, or maybe something they don't like."

Chisholm didn't turn his head. "They smell the mountains," he said, his voice like gravel grinding under a boot-heel. "Air's changing. Keep 'em tight, Silas. If this herd splits in these foothills, we'll be hunting steers until the snow flies."

Their destination was a myth to half the men on the payroll: the northern stockyards across the 49th parallel, up in Canada, where the British crown and the boundary commissions were paying top dollar in gold coin for beef to feed the timber camps and rail crews. It was a journey of two thousand miles, a distance so absurd that when Chisholm had first laid out the route in a San Antonio saloon, three men had walked out, calling it a suicide march.

But Chisholm knew the trail. He knew where the

sweet-water springs hid beneath the limestone ledges, and he knew how to read the clouds when a norther was brewing over the Rockies. What he hadn't counted on was the sheer, brutal isolation of the high country as they pushed deeper into the northern territory.

By the second week of the northern push, the terrain had transformed from flat, grass-sea prairie into a jagged, buckled landscape of dark timber, granite outcroppings, and treacherous shale slides. The beauty of it was staggering—valleys so green they looked painted, rivers clear as melted glass running over beds of white quartz, and peaks that scraped the underside of the sky, capped in eternal ice.

Yet every mile was a battle against physics and panic.

Crossing the Bighorn gorge had cost them three steers and a mule when a shale bank gave way under the weight of the herd, sending the animals sliding two hundred feet into the churning white water below. The crew had worked sixteen hours straight in knee-deep, ice-cold water, using catch-ropes and sheer manpower to haul the remaining stock up a narrow switchback.

That night, around the campfire, the mood was heavy as lead. Hands were raw, boots were soaked through and rotting, and the chill in the air bit through thin denim and grease-stained leather.

Silas banged a wooden spoon against the iron kettle. "Dutch-oven biscuit and salt-pork," he announced. "Eat it before it freezes solid on your plate."

The men gathered around the flames, their faces carved out of shadow and firelight.

"We ain't gonna make no Canada," muttered a young cowboy named Billy, staring into his tin cup. "The horses are losing shoe iron, my knees feel like they got gravel in the joints, and the sky looks like lead every morning. Snow's coming early, Jesse. You can feel it in the air."

Chisholm sat on an overturned saddle, scraping a strip of dried beef with his pocketknife. He looked around the circle. These were hard men, but hard men broke if they couldn't see the light at the end of the drift.

"Snow's a month off, Billy," Jesse said calmly. "And the grass in these high meadows is rich enough to put fifty pounds of tallow on every steer before we cross the border. You want Texan wages, you stay in Texas and ride fence for eight dollars a month. You want Canada gold, you ride through the dark."

From the shadows just beyond the ring of firelight, the soft, melancholic notes of a harmonica began to drift. It was Rides Two Horses. He sat against the trunk of a fallen spruce, his long legs stretched out, playing an old Kiowa lullaby wrapped in a Western key—a melody that sounded like the wind sighing through canyon walls.

The music settled over the camp like a blanket. Men stopped grumbling. One by one, they leaned back against their saddles, pulled their blankets over their shoulders, and listened.

Rides Two Horses played not for the men, but for the dark. His mind was miles ahead, floating over the ridges, reading the signs of the land that the white hands missed: the strange absence of game along the timberline, the stripped bark on the cottonwoods, the

complete silence of the valleys. Something was wrong with this country. It was too quiet.

Two days later, the storm Jesse had dismissed caught up with them—not as snow, but as a freezing, driving rain that turned the trail into a soup of grey mud.

They were pushing through a narrow gap known as the Black Ridge when the lead steer suddenly stopped, its nostrils flaring, ears pinned forward. The three thousand cattle behind it began to bunch up, horn grinding against horn, a low, nervous rumble building in their chests.

"Hold 'em!" Jesse shouted, spurring his mare toward the front. "Rides! Get up here!"

Rides Two Horses was already moving, his piebald picking its way deftly across the slick rocks. He reined in beside Jesse and pointed toward the tree line at the edge of a wide, barren basin.

Emerging from the grey curtain of rain were human figures.

They were on foot, mostly, with a few scrawny, skin-ribbed ponies dragged behind them. There were perhaps forty of them—men, women, and hollow-eyed children—wrapped in tattered buffalo robes that were slick with moisture. Their faces were sunken, cheeks hollowed out by months of starvation.

"Absaroka," Rides Two Horses murmured, his voice dropping into the low guttural clicks of his mother's tongue, then switching to English. "Crow. But not a war party. Look at the women. Look at the babes."

Jesse pulled his hat brim down to keep the rain out of

his eyes. "Where are their horses? Where's their winter meat?"

"The white hunters came through the lower basin in the summer," Rides Two Horses said flatly, his dark eyes tracking a young woman standing near the front of the group. "Killed the buffalo for the tongues and the hides. Left the carcasses to rot. The winter came early in the high country. The game ran north."

At the front of the starving band stood an old man. He was tall, despite a heavy stoop, his hair silvered and braided with strips of faded red cloth. He carried a bow with no string, using it merely as a walking stick. His ribs showed starkly beneath a gap in his worn elk-skin shirt.

"That is Chief Morning Bear," Rides Two Horses said softly.

Beside the old Chief stood a young woman. She wore a dress of bleached Bighorn skin, decorated with blue glass beads, though it was stained with mud and torn at the hem. Her name was Prairie Willow, the Chief's daughter. Despite the dirt and the terrible, visible ache of hunger in her posture, her head was held high, her dark eyes flashing with a fierce, quiet pride that struck Rides Two Horses like an arrow to the chest.

She caught the half-breed looking at her. For a long, breathless moment, as the rain drummed against the saddle leather and the cattle lowed in the background, their eyes locked. Rides Two Horses felt a strange, hot pulse in his throat. He had lived his life between two worlds—never white enough for the towns, no longer fully wild enough for the lodges—but in her gaze, he saw

no judgment. Only a desperate, enduring fire.

Chief Morning Bear raised one emaciated hand, palm outward. A gesture of peace, but more than that—a gesture of absolute surrender to fate.

"They won't survive the week," Rides Two Horses said, his hand tightening on his reins. "If the frost hardens this mud tonight, the children will die in their sleep."

Jesse Chisholm sat silent in the saddle. He was a businessman. Every head of cattle behind him represented profit—gold coins that meant payroll for his men, repayment for his backers, and his own survival for another year. Cut off stock here, and he was throwing money into the wilderness.

He looked at his crew. Silas had pulled the chuck wagon up, his broad, weather-beaten face tight with pity. Billy was staring at a little girl whose feet were wrapped only in strips of raw bark.

"How many?" Jesse asked softly.

Rides Two Horses turned to him. "Fifty steers would feed them through the deep ice. Seventy-five would let them save their seed ponies for the spring."

Jesse swore softly, a breath of steam rising from his lips in the cold air. He looked back at the sprawling herd, then at Chief Morning Bear, who had not begged, had not moved, but simply stood waiting for the white man's verdict.

"Cut off eighty head," Jesse commanded, his voice sharp to hide the weight of the choice. "Pick the fat ones, Rides. No culls. If we're doing this, we give 'em meat

that'll keep 'em alive, not old leather."

The crew didn't argue. Billy scrambled off his horse and began helping to turn the lead steers, while Silas reached into the back of his wagon and hauled out two fifty-pound sacks of coarse flour and a salt block, dumping them onto the mud.

Rides Two Horses rode into the herd, his rope swinging low. With practised, effortless grace, he cut eighty prime longhorns away from the main body, driving them toward the timber line where the Crow warriors stood in stunned silence.

Prairie Willow stepped forward as the cattle were herded into a natural timber basin. As Rides Two Horses passed her, he swung down from his gelding, reaching into his saddlebag. He pulled out a small, dried strip of sweet-grass and a horn flask of salt, handing them to her.

"For your father," he said in the trade sign-language of the plains, his fingers moving like birds in the air. "The winter is long, but the beef is strong."

Prairie Willow took the gift. Her fingers brushed his—a touch so light it sent a shudder through his chest. She looked up at him, her lips parting slightly.

"You walk with two shadows," she signed back, her eyes searching his dark, half-blood features. "But your heart carries one light."

Chapter 4

The herd moved on the next morning, but the encounter changed the spirit of the trail. The grumbling

among the hands ceased. The knowledge that they had pulled forty human beings back from the edge of the grave seemed to warm their bones far better than Silas's thin coffee.

Two days later, they hit the High Pass—a narrow, terrifying shelf of rock three hundred feet above a roaring gorge. The wind here was a howling gale that threatened to blow the hats straight off their heads and send the cattle tumbling into the abyss.

They were halfway across when the blizzard hit.

It was not a gentle snowfall; it was a white-out—a wall of blinding, frozen needle-dust that cut visibility to zero in a matter of seconds. The thermometer plummeted. The trail turned to smooth ice under the hooves of three thousand panicked animals.

"Hold the line!" Jesse's voice was torn away by the gale. "Don't let 'em turn! If they mill, they'll push each other off the shelf!"

In the blinding white chaos, tragedy struck. The lead steers, blind and terrified, began to sheer away from the edge, crowding hard against the rock face. A young cow, blinded by the snow, stumbled over the lip of the gorge, her shrill scream lost in the roar of the wind.

Then came a sound that made every cowboy's blood run cold: a sharp, booming crack from the slopes above.

"Slide!" Rides Two Horses roared, his voice cutting through the tempest. "Avalanche!"

A wall of blue ice, rock, and packed snow detached itself from the high peak above the trail, hurtling downward directly toward the middle of the herd.

Suddenly, through the blinding curtain of white, a high, warbling cry sounded from the ridges above.

Out of the snow emerged a dozen riders—not enemies, but the young men of Chief Morning Bear's band, led by the Chief himself, mounted on sturdy, sure-footed mountain ponies they had managed to feed and save thanks to the slaughtered beef.

They moved with impossible speed across the dangerous terrain. While Jesse's hands were frozen with fear, the Crow riders knew the mountain's veins. They rode directly into the path of the panicked cattle, waving red buffalo robes and shouting ancient trail-chants, turning the front of the herd away from the slide area just seconds before thousands of tons of rock and ice slammed down, obliterating the trail behind them.

They had saved half the herd from being swept into the gorge.

As the dust and snow settled, Chief Morning Bear rode his pony down to where Jesse and Rides Two Horses stood, their horses trembling.

The old Chief dismounted. He reached into his deer-skin pouch and pulled out an object wrapped in oilskin. He unwrapped it carefully, revealing a heavy, polished medallion carved from black river-stone, inlaid with pure mountain silver in the shape of a crossing river and a rising sun.

"This belonged to my grandfather," Morning Bear said, his voice deep and resonant, as Rides Two Horses translated. "It is the *Pah-Sapa* token—the mark of safe passage through all the northern lands. Long ago, the

nations agreed that he who holds this stone is a brother to the river. No warrior of the northern tribes will ever touch your cattle, and no chief will deny you land or water."

He hung the heavy stone around Jesse Chisholm's neck.

Then, Morning Bear turned to Rides Two Horses. He smiled—a rare, deeply lined expression of warmth.

"My daughter says you carry two shadows," the Chief said quietly. "A man who belongs to two worlds belongs to none, unless he chooses his home. When you have driven these cattle to the big salt-water in the North, come back south along the river. There will be a lodge waiting for you by the sweet-water creek. And my daughter will be watching the ridge."

Rides Two Horses felt the wind catch his breath. He looked past the Chief to the ridge above, where Prairie Willow sat atop a grey pony, her blue-beaded dress stark against the white expanse of the mountain. She raised a hand to her heart, then extended it toward him.

He raised his own hand in return, holding her gaze until the snow began to swirl between them once more.

Three weeks later, the herd crested the final ridge of the high country.

Below them lay the vast, rolling green plains of the Canadian territory, dotted with the wooden buildings and smoking chimneys of the boundary post and the great northern stockyards. The sun broke through the clouds, reflecting off the rivers like ribbons of liquid gold.

Jesse Chisholm pulled his mare to a halt, looking

down at the destination they had fought two thousand miles to reach. He reached up, his fingers brushing the cool, smooth surface of the stone medallion resting against his chest.

Beside him, Rides Two Horses reined in his piebald gelding. His face was weathered, his lips chapped by the mountain ice, but his eyes were clear, fixed not on the gold and the towns in the valley below, but on the long, winding trail that pointed back south toward the river.

"We made it, Jesse," Silas said, riding his mule up beside them, a grin breaking through his grey beard. "By God, we made it."

"We did," Jesse said softly, turning his horse to look back over his shoulder at the great white peaks they had conquered. "Now, let's sell these steers and get paid."

He looked over at Rides Two Horses. "You riding back with us to Texas, son?"

Rides Two Horses smiled—a slow, quiet expression that reached all the way to his eyes. He reached down and adjusted the hawk feathers in his hair, feeling the cold northern wind blow past his face, carrying with it the faint, sweet scent of mountain pine and home.

"No, Jesse, I've found my own path to follow. I'll come part way with you," he said softly, turning his horse pointing toward the south, "then I'm crossing the river."

~ *** ~

Deadly Nightshade

A childhood remembered

He remembered it as one of the first words of caution his father had impressed upon him - ironically (one of a pile of ironicalities) during his first real expedition alone with his father. Foraging. Mainly for blackberries.

“Don’t eat those if you want to see another sunrise. It’s deadly nightshade.”

The colour similarity with the former was potentially confusing for a five year old living on a smallholding on the outskirts of the village - but it was just one of many lessons he *had* to learn in his new rural playground. It was also his first introduction to the language of poetry that his father employed seamlessly and instinctively - in this case matching death and the dead of night with the glory of a morning sunrise.

Just one quality he loved about his father. One of many.

His hero knew everything there was to know, or seemed to. Every question answered correctly (how could he challenge the answers anyway, with so little knowledge himself?) and without hesitation. No. How could it be otherwise? His father had already experienced the same stream of questions - predictable curiosity from one so young - thanks to the mirror pattern set by his brother before him, some seven years his senior.

But even blackberries carried risks which his father -

some would say cruelly - left the young boy to discover for himself. Risks clothed in black and yellow striped pyjamas. Wasps. Ironically (that word again) aggressive insects “coming into life” to coincide with an abundant harvest. He recalled that particular lesson even now - now in his eightieth summer - after which he vowed never to be stung again. And certainly not in the same way as that first time - on the inside of the mouth. Doubly unfortunate, since it couldn't be addressed with the usual remedy - the effective, but internally poisonous, blue bag - a remedy that his mother reached for instinctively nestled within her washing basket.

Strange. But with toxic alkali that normally soothed the acid nature of insect stings.

Reflecting on his experiences of some seventy five years previously he began to count the many lessons that he'd learnt then, many upon which he'd drawn over the decades.

Yes, many, but not all. In fact most had been stored away in his memory for those 'just in case' emergencies when he might need them. Some he'd learned under his own steam, such as when walking his beloved collie cross, Bess, over the neighbouring farmer's fields. It was simple enough.

By all means walk safely through a herd of dairy cows - unless accompanied by a dog and the 'mother' had a newborn calf to protect. On the first - and only - occasion that rule was broken, he learned just how fast an 800 pound Friesian could run - out of sheer maternal instinct, as could he - out of sheer fright. Bess had no problems

with the threat and, if someone had said to him with any certainty that a dog could laugh, it was then.

The chase was a game to her, even though she was the cause.

Yes, and running on its own could have its downside. He discovered that when, on discovering a partridge's nest and after pocketing the eight eggs in his school blazer before running up to show his father, only to find the remains suitable for a rather earthy omelette.

"If you had only taken four," his father had counselled, "the mother would have stayed to hatch the remainder. Now, returning to an empty nest will have broken her heart."

That was one of many lessons in respecting wildlife and the countryside.

I mentioned Bess earlier and recall how she arrived at their remote smallholding on that first day, traumatised having been delivered by his sister and her husband - on the back of his motorbike, albeit nestled on her lap. Somehow.

It was the beginning of car sickness - that Bess never got over - and, so father said, her bouts of fitting, early on in her life. She would suddenly, without warning, run and run and run in circles round and round their ten acres. Until she tired; and father caught her. Calming her with words of kindness and safe within the darkness of a hessian sack until she was well again. She may have fited for three or four more times before, with this remedy, she was eventually cured.

Where and how father gathered this knowledge he

never knew. After all, his father's own father was a tailor. Working in his grandfather's shop.

They never had a dog.

But John did. Living too far from the village itself for fellow classmates to walk out after school, Bess was his playmate. When not being chased by cows he would play hide and seek among cabbages taller than his small frame, look for illusive plover's nests and, later, strike out on a cold frosty morning at weekends across fields, through woods, and over a nearby stream. Or, on one occasion, in it.

"Come on over, John," Bess seemed to say after first crossing the iced-over brook. "It's quite safe. I've done it, and it'll save time having to trek all the way to the bridge."

Just one short step into the unknown saw the surface give way and John waist high in freezing water. He had to confess to his father what had happened and the reason for wet clothes on his return. He even blamed Bess, saying she had "made me do it".

Father understood and, with that came his wisdom. "What Bess failed to mention was that ice is always thinnest next to the riverbank. And another thing..." he added.

"What's that father?" John needed to know.

"Never trust the words of a border collie!"

~ *** ~

Frozen Indian

...and an unexpected wake-up call

Jake was looked forward to a return to civilisation - if you could call Cheyenne in the late 1800s 'civilisation'. It wasn't called "Hell on Wheels" for no reason, the railroad mainly responsible for its lawlessness - lack of order down to an inability to cope with so many immigrants into what was referred to as "the magic city of the plains".

For one thing, coming down from Pole Mountain after three months fur-trapping he was ready for a bath. Normally you would say that for social reasons; he was beginning to smell somewhat rank - more so than the pelts hanging to dry in his make-shift camp, an abandoned bear cave. Not that he would notice that himself, normally, except that his sole companion on these hunting trips - a Coy-Wolf (half timber wolf; half coyote) - seemed to be keeping its distance. The hound wasn't that friendly anyway, just there for a free cooked meal whenever they ate - its reward for tracking anything with fur - apart from mountain lions and grizzlies.

So, as soon as Jake realised what that weird shape was, resting against a Quaking Aspen - he caught his breath, instinctively reaching for his side-arm.

He relaxed as soon as he saw the figure an Arapaho - a friendly Native American - recognisable and symbolised by the sacred Flat Pipe. It was clearly visible, laying on the ground, fallen from the grasp of an open palm of the unmoving figure; motionless - another cause

for him to relax.

The Arapaho was clearly dead. Otherwise why give up the pipe, such a precious artefact central to their religious beliefs, prominent at all ceremonies?

"The last thing I need," muttered Jake. He rarely spoke now, after so long a spell of isolation, and only if the Coy-Wolf was in earshot.

What was the point? Speech had no meaning out there in the wilderness - rendered unnecessary in any such situation where there was nobody to hear, let alone answer back.

The reason for Jake's irritation was that he knew he just couldn't leave the dead Indian. From the way he was dressed he was - or had been - of some importance, an elder, but left to die away from his tribe. It was their normal custom of 'abandonment' - voluntary on the deceased part, because he knew he was about to die.

Actually, the frozen Indian, who he soon recognised as 'Sharp Nose', had chosen to die out of sheer grief - never recovering from mourning his own son's death. Jake saw he had cut off his own braids, symbolising the depth of such grief. That's how Jake knew who he was, and why he couldn't leave him.

(Yes, he wrestled with his own conscience in terms of "who's gonna know if I just walk away? Nobody's seen *me* see *him*. Maybe I just leave him to the wolves and coyotes." Ah, but he already knew the answer to that one: *he'd* know. Although Jake was a man of few principles, those stashed away in the unspoken lores of those parts could not be ignored. Not by Jake.)

For the whole winter it had been barely above freezing, even at mid-day. Jake cursed the cold - usually - now he was glad of it. He had no idea how long the frozen Indian had been dead, but he was still perfectly preserved. He'd be easy to move. Sharp Nose's remains would not fall to pieces when wrapped in his blanket.

The blanket was the only possession the Indian seemed to have, apart from the Flat Pipe.

Jake sniffed what was left of the substance in the bowl of the pipe. He chuckled to himself. "At least he died happy." He was referring to its contents, a special kind of 'remedial tobacco' brought up from the Mexican border, used for its spiritual properties in ceremonies.

Jake considered extending it to his own recreational use, but then good sense spoilt that illusion, "Nah."

He needed a clear head navigating his pack horse through rough terrain, the corpse draped precariously over it, down the mountainside until, hopefully, finding members of the Northern Arapaho on the way - rather than having to take it all the way into town, on the fringes where he knew some tribe members lived.

Jake struck camp an hour before dark to make sure he could collect enough wood to keep the campfire burning until dawn. He relieved the pack horse of the weight of Sharp Nose, resting the Chief respectfully against an upright rock, facing the fire. He knew that because he noticed with some amusement the corpse head poking out of the top of the rolled blanket, almost as a natural much needed response to the fire's warmth.

An hour went by.

The sky drew dark but all that served was to emphasise the brightness of the stars. All three were facing south: Jake, Coy-Wolf; and Sharp Nose. He thought his Native American guest - albeit now somewhat unresponsive to stimuli - would appreciate facing the Pleiades, the Seven Stars. They were revered as holy by the Arapaho.

It was the least he could do.

Jake was dropping into a drowsy, tired, state of unconsciousness - partly because he'd lit the pipe after all. But he was jolted awake when he heard a rustling. Silence - then - the unmistakeable clearing of a throat?

He looked across - first to Coy-Wolf, instinctively, since the animal was, or so he naturally assumed, was the only 'living' creature nearby.

He was asleep.

Then - through a process of elimination - Jake turned to Sharp Nose.

"Seicha."

One word.

It was enough. And Jake could speak Arapaho.

"Sitee nii-bee'ci-" An arm struggled to release itself from the blanket. "Seicha, hiatha."

Jake's powers of translation had not dulled.

"Give me back my f**k**g smoke, white man."

The frozen Indian had thawed out.

But not his sense of humour.

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About the Authors - John Morey & K W Sercombe

John Morey and K W Sercombe: - connection & distinction

These stories are released under the co-authorship of John Morey and AI-assisted content attributed to the pen name K W Sercombe. This name serves a dual purpose: it is a tribute to the inspiration gathered by the author's father, K W Sercombe Morey, and it also acknowledges the collaborative role of artificial intelligence in creating a major part of the following narratives. While the core vision, storytelling, and emotional depth originate from John Morey, AI assistance has been invaluable, not only in the plot development and characterisation of the leading players, but also providing historical references, ensuring contextual relevance, and helping to vividly bring to life historical events and characters - where relevant - ultimately aiming for a more enriching and immersive reader experience.

It is important to distinguish between the author John Morey's other works of purely original fiction, published under the sole name of John Morey (such as the contemporary romance series 'Love Should Never Be This Hard' and the modern western series 'Wild Hearts'), and works released under the pen name K W Sercombe. **The John Morey titles represent fiction solely crafted by the author's own hand**, born from his imagination and personal experiences - *and with no assistance*

whatsoever from AI.

The K W Sercombe works, on the other hand, are projects where AI serves as a powerful research and creative tool, assisting in the intricate process of fictionalizing historical settings and figures. This collaboration allows for a richer tapestry of historical detail and a more nuanced exploration of the past, while still being guided by John's narrative vision.

John believes that, amidst the often-harsh realities of power struggles and societal change, it is the threads of empathy, kindness, and the courage to stand for one's beliefs that offer enduring hope.

This collection, under the joint authorship of John Morey and K W Sercombe, often includes individual stories and pieces with a heartfelt exploration of courage, resilience, and even suffering that shape our world, much of which, in terms of storytelling, has been enhanced by the capabilities of modern technology. Perhaps even Artificial Intelligence.

As we speak - the jury is still out on that one.

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Thank you for reading - from both of us!

But there's more... on the next page.

Further Reading by John Morey

For readers who have enjoyed the storytelling and themes first explored in "[Lakota Whispers in the Wind](#)," - AI assisted - the author, John Morey, previously also penned a diverse range of fiction under his own name, available on Amazon in eBook and printed format.

The following are NOT AI assisted.

The series 'Love Should Never Be This Hard':

Book 1: The Sign of the Rose: Step into a world of tangled emotions and unexpected connections. This captivating romance introduces characters grappling with past hurts and the daunting prospect of opening their hearts again. When fate throws seemingly incompatible souls together, they must navigate a landscape of misunderstandings, vulnerabilities, and the undeniable pull of attraction. Can love truly conquer all, even when the signs point to anything but a happily ever after?

Book 2: The Black Rose of Blaby: Journey deeper into the complexities of love and relationships. This instalment explores the shadows that can linger from past experiences and the courage it takes to confront them. Amidst the charming backdrop of Blaby, characters face difficult choices, testing the boundaries of trust and the resilience of the human heart. Can a love forged in the face of adversity truly blossom, or will the darkness of the past prove too strong?

Book 3: Rose: The Missing Years: Unravel a poignant story of separation, longing, and the enduring power of memory. This emotionally resonant novel delves into a period of absence and the profound impact it has on those left behind. As the years pass, the characters grapple with unanswered questions and the hope of reunion. Can lost connections be rediscovered, and can love withstand the test of time and silence?

Book 4: Finding Rose: The culmination of the series, this book promises a journey of discovery, healing, and the ultimate triumph of love. As characters confront their deepest fears and navigate the final obstacles in their path, the possibility of finding lasting happiness hangs in the balance. Will they finally find their way back to each other, proving that even after the hardest trials, love can indeed find its way home?

Modern Westerns (set in Wyoming):

Wild Hearts Roam Free: Experience the rugged beauty and untamed spirit of Wyoming in this contemporary western. Follow characters who embody the independent and resilient nature of the West as they navigate modern challenges against a backdrop of breathtaking landscapes. Expect tales of adventure, romance, and the enduring connection between people and the land.

Wild Hearts Come Home: Return to the captivating world of Wyoming where the bonds of family and community run deep. This instalment explores themes of homecoming, forgiveness, and the challenges of reconciling the past with the present. As characters grapple with their roots and the meaning of belonging, the wild heart of the West offers both solace and unexpected turns.

Wild Hearts Bright Stars: The saga continues in Wyoming, where new journeys unfold under the vast, starlit skies. This novel delves into stories of hope, resilience, and the unexpected connections that can illuminate even the darkest trails. Expect a blend of compelling characters, dramatic landscapes, and the enduring spirit of the American West.

Other Titles:

Those Italian Girls: Escape to the sun-drenched hills of Tuscany in this evocative novel. Immerse yourself in the beauty of the Italian countryside and the lives of compelling characters as they navigate love, loss, and the rich tapestry of Italian culture. Expect a story filled with passion, picturesque settings, and the timeless allure of Italy.

Blaby - The Lost Village: Growing up in a typical Leicestershire village in the 1950's and '60's. (But, for an AI-assisted fictional version, try [The Blaby Chronicles](#).)

Wood-Spirit - an anthology of poems about trees: Discover a collection of poems that celebrate the majesty, mystery, and profound connection between humanity and the arboreal world. Through evocative language and imagery, this anthology explores the beauty, resilience, and spiritual significance of trees.

Love Can Be The Death of You: This title delves into the darker complexities of love and obsession. Expect a gripping narrative that explores the dangerous edges of passion and the devastating consequences when love takes a perilous turn.

Readers are also invited to visit the author's website:

[Visit newnovel.co.uk](http://newnovel.co.uk) for more information and updates.