

Timbre

By Raian

Follows “Song Sung Blue”

She heard him mutter, 'Can you take away this grief?'

'I'm sorry,' she replied. 'Everyone asks me. And I would not do so even if I knew how. It belongs to you. Only time and tears take away grief; that is what they are for.'

– Terry Pratchett, *I Shall Wear Midnight*

For each thorn, there's a rosebud.

For each twilight - a dawn.

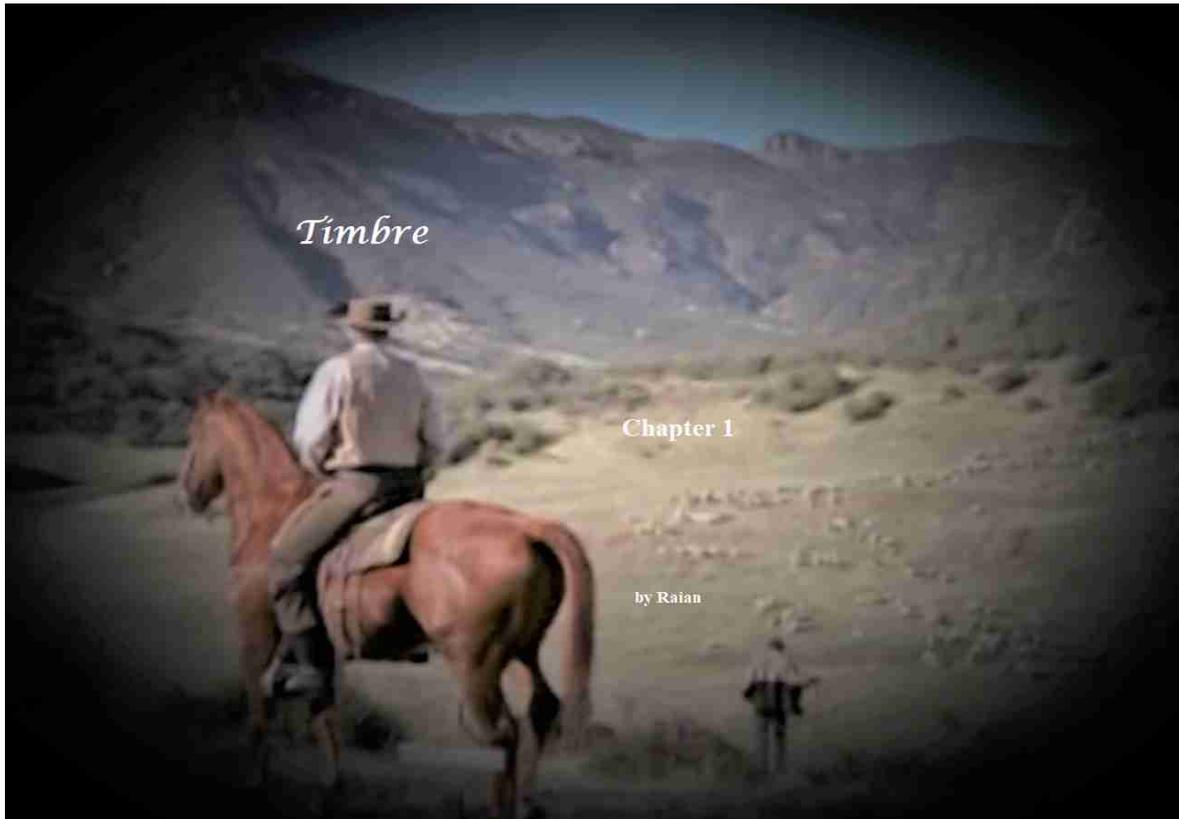
For each trial - the strength to carry on.

For each storm cloud - a rainbow.

For each shadow - the sun.

For each parting - sweet memories when sorrow is done.

– Ralph Waldo Emerson



The grave marker stood sentinel over her grave and the valley below.

Lucy Webster... painted with care over letters stenciled on the crosspiece for the grave marker Scott had built. Johnny still had white paint in the creases of his hands and under his nails, though he'd tried to wash it off.

Murdoch said a few words after they'd set the marker in place. Listening, Scott rolled the brim of his hat in his hands. The view from the hill caught at his throat. Too beautiful for words and a place a young woman should not have died. A place of peace invaded by the thoughtless and reckless.

Teresa and Johnny stood silent with heads bowed. Murdoch stopped speaking, put on his hat and gave Johnny's shoulder a pat on the way to the horses.

Teresa wiped her eyes. "I'm sorry, Johnny."

Johnny tapped a leg with his hat and nodded.

At the bottom of the hill behind Johnny, Gabe's sheep camp stood empty. The ewes had all lambed. After refusing to participate in the marker ceremony and after constrained and awkward goodbyes, Gabe had started the flock on a journey to wherever he wanted to go next.

Lucy's rest here could be temporary. Val had sent word to her family but they hadn't replied yet whether they wanted her sent home.

Scott pulled on his hat and followed Johnny to where their horses stood ground tied. He mounted Boots and rode after the others toward the hacienda. They were accompanied by leather creaking and horse hooves swishing through tall grass and thumping on rocks and dirt. From the other side of the ridge, the wind brought faint sounds of sheep calling to each other.

Before they'd reached the tree line, Murdoch looked back. "Wait." They all pulled up. Gabe stood next to the grave, silhouetted against the sky.

Murdoch tipped his hat upward and squinted. "Scott, when you showed me that business plan of Sabina's, you warned me this day would come."

Scott glanced at Gabe before turning his head toward Johnny. Johnny, staring in a direction away from Gabe, sat with shoulders hunched over hands folded on his saddle horn.

Murdoch rubbed a finger over his upper lip. "As I said then: *never say never*. It's a good thing I didn't, because it appears today is a cold day in Hell. I'm going to tell Gabe he and the sheep can stay." Murdoch turned Spot and trotted up the hill. Teresa followed a short distance before stopping to watch Murdoch approach Gabe.

Johnny dipped his head and pitched his voice low, looking at Scott from under his hat brim. "You tell Murdoch about me and Sabina's sheep?"

"No." Boots stomped at a fly and Scott lifted the reins to keep the horse from moving. "You stay a silent partner until you tell me otherwise."

Johnny spurred Barranca into a gallop heading away from home. The horse's feet threw clods of earth high into the air. Boots tossed his head and tried to follow. Scott brought the horse to a bouncy halt, turning him toward Murdoch and an approaching Teresa.

Teresa stopped her horse next to Boots. "Where's Johnny going?"

"I don't know." Boots champed at the bit and Scott rubbed the horse's neck to further soothe him.

"Shouldn't you go after him?"

They hadn't planned for a stay away from home when leaving that morning. None of them had bedrolls or fully packed saddlebags. "I will but let's go home first." They didn't wait for Murdoch to finish talking to Gabe.

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Johnny might be home that night but Scott didn't want to wait. He made quick work of packing and included what he thought Johnny would need.

Events had happened quickly once Porter got Johnny's friends stirred up – Johnny might want more than a day to think things through now dust had settled. Scott would find him. They were at Lancer – none of the family should have to face life's trials alone.

Scott's bay stood ready to ride while Scott finished tying or hanging all he wanted to bring onto the saddle. The reins were in his hands when Teresa arrived at the corral pushing a wheelbarrow full of bags and blankets and... Scott pushed his hat brim up and pointed. "What's all that?"

"Things you might need."

Scott looped the bay's reins over the corral fence and rummaged through the load. "I hope we don't need all this." All of it was potentially useful though. It would mean living on more than beans and jerky.

"I don't want Johnny to leave Lancer again."

"He wouldn't do that."

Teresa lifted her chin, compressed her lips and stared down her nose at the wheelbarrow. "I'll catch the pack mule."

They'd loaded the mule's panniers and were pulling canvas over the packs by the time Murdoch rode into the corral.

Teresa tucked canvas under panniers and helped Scott with the rope that would secure the top load. "Did Gabe want to stay?"

Murdoch dismounted with a huff and a limp. "I think he's leaving. He headed in a direction off Lancer land." Murdoch draped Spot's reins over a rail. The horse sidled sideways to a stock tank for a drink. "There's no reason for him to stay. He told his side of the story to the judge. Porter and the others won't be out of jail to bother anyone else for a long time.

"I can't blame him for leaving." Murdoch rubbed his eyes. "Perhaps it is time to rethink the stance on sheep in the valley but I don't want to push a change in Association policy right after becoming president."

Scott finished tying a diamond hitch over the canvas. "When you're ready to do so, I think you'll find you have support to change the by-laws."

"You and your young rancher friends?"

"Among others." A trickle of sweat ran down Scott's spine. He shrugged his shoulders, making the cloth of his shirt stop the sweat from reaching his pants. He retrieved his horse.

Murdoch scratched the mule's neck and smiled at Teresa. "Are you two going somewhere?"

Teresa untied the mule. "Not me. It's things for Scott and Johnny."

"Where are they going?"

“Scott's going. Johnny's already gone.”

Murdoch's eyes opened wide. “Gone? Gone where?” He laid a proprietary hand in the center of the diamond hitch.

Teresa threw up her hands. “I don't know.”

“Scott?” The eyes, less wide now, showed concern.

Scott mounted Boots. “I think I know where he went.” There were a few good places to hole up in the direction Johnny had taken.

Murdoch took off his hat and used it to whack dirt off his pants. “No need for you to go after him. He needs time alone after what happened with Gabe and Lucy. He'll be back when he's ready.”

Scott maneuvered his horse past his father. Teresa handed him mule's lead and Scott nodded his thanks. “Then I'll be there to follow him home.” He sent the bay forward but Murdoch hooked fingers in its bridle.

“Wait. I'll go with you.”

Teresa grabbed Murdoch's free arm. “You're needed here, Murdoch. The lieutenant governor and Mr. Benedict are coming to see you tomorrow. For the location of the prison farm?”

“Oh, yes.” Murdoch let go of the cheek piece. Scott headed through the corral gate. Murdoch called after him. “Watch out for yourself and your brother.”

Scott waved a hand to acknowledge the directive. Before leaving the barnyard, he whistled. Red Dog appeared and trotted alongside the bay and the mule.

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Red Dog ranged ahead with nose to trail. Johnny had ridden a winding route but Scott took a straighter path once he'd determined Johnny's probable destination. Scott whistled repeatedly to keep Red with the bay and the mule.

They met up with Johnny's tracks where traces through Lancer pastures converged along the base of a cliff. Farther along, a cleft in the rocks revealed itself when Scott got close enough. Through the years, the crack had gathered dirt which created a narrow and steep trail to the top of the ridge. With Red taking point, the horse and mule dug toes in and scrambled up. When the gap narrowed, the mule's pack rubbed against rock. The bay snorted at the sound made by scraping canvas.

At the top, bent grass showed the direction Johnny had taken. Scott followed in Barranca's hoofprints down and around two hills. The trail turned muddy through a grove of trees whose leaves murmured in the slight breeze. There was no dry approach to what lay ahead. Depending on the time of year, the best a rider could hope for was *less wet*.

Water got deeper and mud thicker. By the amount of recent footprints in the mire between bushes and thin-trunked trees, Johnny had spent time clearing debris from the path and repairing the corduroy trail laid over the worst of the muck. Judging from the amount of manure left where Barranca had been tied, the job had taken some time.

He'd almost caught up to his brother. Splashing along a rill flowing through gravel between boulders brought Scott to a grassy mountain saddle hanging between high crag and steep ridge. Near the far end next to a grove of trees, Barranca stood ground tied, nosing grass within reach.

Scott found dry ground for a camp and turned horses and mule loose to drink and graze until dark. The equines would overnight tied to a high line.

Scott started a fire and put stew to warm next to the coffee pot. He mixed a pan of biscuits and set them to bake. If they failed to rise, Johnny and he could eat one of the loaves of soft bread Teresa had sent along.

The lowering sun dropped behind the ridge and temperature fell fast thanks to a landscape rife with water. It trickled and whispered a duet with wind in the trees surrounding the camp. Scott breathed in a chest full of cool air.

Murdoch claimed springs in this part of Lancer fed a stream that never went dry. The drought had lowered levels but as yet water still flowed. As Johnny had once observed, it was too bad cattle couldn't fly. The valleys up here weren't big enough to support a large herd for long, though.

Lancer had never used this area for livestock. Trails leading to and through it were narrow, steep and rocky and could become dangerously muddy and rock-slick when springs were in full flow. If conditions were right, there were good camping spots but used so seldom, Johnny and he had joked when they'd found this one that they were the first ones to see it. The vaqueros had been here – Scott had been told there were a few caves in the area but he'd never gone exploring to verify that story.

Barranca wasn't the only obvious indication they'd found Johnny. While Scott set up camp and got food ready, periodic gunshots echoed from a bowl hidden by trees and boulders at the top of the valley. The shots came not fast and furious but well spread out. They tailed off as night approached. Johnny had only the ammunition in his gunbelt and what might be in his saddlebags. Red whined periodically but Scott told the dog to stay.

Twilight gloomed and Scott poked at the biscuits. They did not feel soft and edible. He pried the cooked dough from the pan and used a sharp knife to separate the hunk into individual pieces. He'd failed as a biscuit baker. It looked easy when he watched others do it during trail drives. His version looked and felt like thick hardtack. Murdoch would reject them even for use as Dorset knobs. Johnny would only try to eat them if starving. Scott tied the cooled, hard lumps into a kerchief.

Red lifted his head, whined again and thumped his tail against the ground. Johnny appeared from the trees. "Go on, go see Johnny." The dog took off to leap and run in circles around Johnny. Johnny laughed and crossed arms over the saddlebags draped over a shoulder to keep his hands from becoming tempting targets for dog teeth and lolling tongue. The dog trotted back to camp, turning every few steps to make sure Johnny followed.

A dried-mud-wreathed Johnny stopped at the edge of camp with hands on hips and stared at Scott. Red turned three circles and dropped with a groan onto Johnny's bedroll. "You aiming to live here for a week?" Johnny gestured to the panniers. He dropped his saddlebags by Barranca's saddle. Red thumped his tail, held out a paw and looked up at Johnny.

"Teresa thought you might be hungry by suppertime." Scott poured coffee into a tin cup, adding a splash of whiskey. Johnny nodded once as he reached over the fire to take the cup, setting it beside his bedroll.

Scott tossed him the bag of rejected biscuits before making himself a cup of doctored coffee.

Johnny hefted the bag. "What're these?"

“They were going to be part of supper but I've decided I value my teeth more than the desire to stop hunger.” Scott pointed his cup at the bag. “If you break them into pieces the birds could get some use from them.” A sip of coffee fueled the effort to dish up stew accompanied by chunks of Maria-baked bread.

Johnny loosened the kerchief knot and fished out a biscuit. He tapped it on a rock and tried to stomp it under a boot heel. “How am supposed to break 'em?” He offered the biscuit to Red Dog who turned up his nose and gave Johnny a dirty look.

Scott rummaged in his saddlebags and tossed Johnny two boxes of ammunition.

Johnny managed to catch them both but doing so involved contortions and the lifting of one leg. He tossed one box up to catch again and lifted eyes to meet Scott's.

“I rope hay bales.” Scott neatened the contents of the saddlebags. “You shoot up the landscape.”

Johnny lowered his head, shook it and toed the dog until it shifted and made room on the bedroll. Scott handed him a plate. “What the hell's that?”

Scott shrugged. “Stew.”

“Sure ain't much.”

“There's more if you finish this.”

Johnny glared at him and waved the plate side to side. “Fill it up.”

Scott did, glad his brother hadn't lost his appetite, and added more bread. Johnny shared supper with Red but ate more than half. Scott gathered plates when all were done. “I'll clean up.”

“OK.” Johnny rolled onto his side. Red Dog nosed under Johnny's arm and curled up against his chest with a sigh.

While Scott neatened the camp, tension left Johnny's body as though leaking sand from hundreds of small holes. Johnny sagged, left with a firmer connection to the ground. Scott covered dog and brother with a blanket.

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Cold woke him. The sun hadn't crested the crag yet and air chilled his nose and the part of his head that had escaped from the blanket. The sky brightened and ridge top burned red in dawn's light. Scott pulled the blanket over his head.

The smell of coffee drew him from his cocoon. The camp sat empty and Johnny's blanket lay rumpled along the ground pointing in the direction he's gone: up to the bowl. He'd taken both boxes of bullets.

Scott toasted what remained of last night's loaf of bread while water heated for shaving. His completed his tasks to the accompaniment of desultory gunshots. As the day warmed, Johnny's shots came closer together, grouped in twos or threes. Scott turned the horses and mule loose, pulled a book from his saddlebags and climbed through trees to the edge of the bowl.

This close, multiple echoes of gunshots made it seem there were many firing. A few echos bounced loud enough to shake Scott's heart though in reality they sounded nothing like an artillery barrage or massed infantry. Trees and bushes remained full and lush – it would take more than one man with a pistol to reduce the growth to a

stunted and blasted landscape.

Scott blinked harsh memories away and focused on the here and now. The rocky ridge above them glistened with water forced up from springs. The bowl caught runoff which had turned most of the ground there into a marsh. Birds wheeled overhead, scared off by the noise and waiting to return.

One hand gripping the branch of a tree, Scott looked down to watch Johnny kill what remained of the biscuits. Johnny had claimed a flat rock for his firing line, sloshing back and forth between there and where he set up targets. He paused often to talk to Red Dog, who lay attentive with ears up. Johnny alternated between waving arms and throwing his head back, and crouching to scratch the dog's head or belly while speaking with apparent seriousness before returning to shoot.

Quiet and peace crept in between and under the gunshots. Scott pondered the nature of love and loss. Lucy and Johnny had seemed a good pair. Her meeting Gabe and the actions of Johnny's former cohorts had taken away any plans his brother had for more than friendship with her.

Scott sighed and moved to the shade of the trees. He dipped his toes into the beauty of the scene around him and sat to soak it in. Stretching his legs, he leaned against a tree trunk and opened his book.

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A jostle brought Scott to. His hat had fallen off and the book rested pages down on his chest. Bright sun made him squint. A hand shading his eyes brought his brother into view. Wet and muddy around the edges, Johnny smirked down at him.

Scott rubbed his face. His mind had wandered far before he'd set the book down and dozed, traveling into a dream that dissipated once he opened his eyes.

Johnny swung a leg and tapped Scott's feet again. "You want a sunburn?"

Scott sat up, ran a hand through his hair and placed hat firmly on his head. "Not particularly." He unbuttoned the top buttons of his shirt. The trees' shade had moved while he slept and the sun, nearly overhead, made its presence felt.

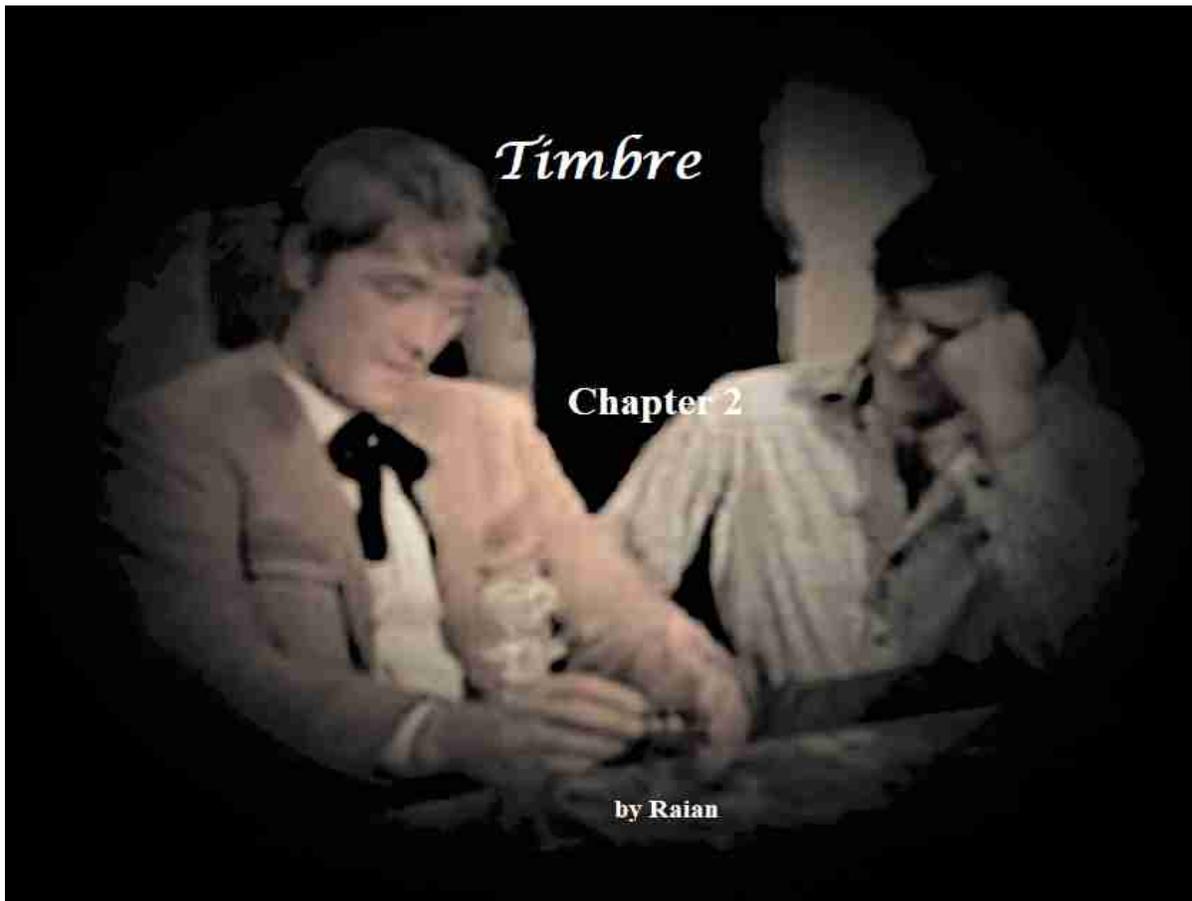
"You know what Murdoch says." Johnny tossed a box of bullets toward Scott's chest.

Scott managed to catch it without dropping his book or tipping over in the process. "Yes – lying down on the job causes apoplexy. Or some such words of wisdom." He shook the box. It felt half full. "All done?" Drawing his legs under him and with the help of the tree, Scott stood.

"Don't need 'em anymore. No point wasting bullets."

In camp, Johnny started a new pot of coffee and stirred up the fire, using the empty ammunition box to stoke the flames.

They ate a simple midday meal and spent the rest of the day clearing brush, chopping wood and trying to improve drainage. Though water would soon undo what they'd done, the hard work wore down more of his brother's weeks-old jagged edges.



Burning through ammunition, talking to Red Dog and hard sweat released pent-up emotions and primed Johnny's pump. The familiar task of gun cleaning kept hands busy that evening and fully freed Johnny's tongue. "We could bring sheep up the cliff trail."

"Easier than cattle."

"Easy... would mean putting this grass to use." Johnny bent over the gun in his lap as he reassembled cleaned parts. "I thought she loved me."

Scott dipped his head and rubbed the side of his nose at the switch from sheep to Lucy. Had she loved Johnny? You could be so sure, yet...

People made do. People jilted each other. Relationships were made and kept for convenience and appearances. Few were lucky enough to find deep and enduring love.

What called soul to soul? It could happen in such a short time but often needed years to mature with trials and tribulations to prove love true.

Perhaps something within each person played a melody. Many instruments sounded good together but once you heard a Stradivarius or Steinway and felt the tremors go deep... the way music called to you and pulled you in... it could not be denied and others would never measure up.

By the time Lucy died, Johnny had already lost her. Gabe would also be dealing with loss but that would be no consolation for Johnny. "You'll find a true love someday."

“How're you supposed to know when it's right?” He'd asked similar questions over the months since learning to trust.

“They say you know. I'll be able to describe the event and feelings more fully if I ever encounter them myself.”

Johnny raised his head and they shared a look which turned to grins and chuckles. “Lancer affinity for beautiful women gone wrong again, right brother?”

“Right.” Smiling at that proved difficult.

Johnny forced a grin. “Emerson must have something to say about it.”

Events had hit Johnny hard. Lucy had been his first real test for a long-term relationship. Scott closed his eyes, visualizing passages he'd memorized many years ago. *“The purpose of life is not to be happy. It is to be useful, to be honorable, to be compassionate, to have it make some difference that you have lived and lived well.”*

“That's not making me feel better, brother.”

Scott cleared his throat. *“There's more. It is not the length of life, but the depth. We are always getting ready to live, but never living. What lies behind you and what lies in front of you pales in comparison to what lies inside of you. Dare to live the life you have dreamed for yourself. Go forward and make your dreams come true.*

*“Be not the slave of your own past. Plunge into the sublime seas, dive deep and swim far, so you shall come back with self-respect, with new power, with an advanced experience that shall explain and overlook the old.”*

Using the bullets he'd placed in his gunbelt, Johnny reloaded the pistol and holstered it. “What's that all mean?”

*“Tis better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all. We learn from regrets. Those lessons help us do better in future relationships.”* Johnny sighed and his expression showed doubts. “While memory's fresh it's impossible to believe that, I know. It takes courage to risk your heart more than once.”

“Emerson could've saved time and said that last part first.”

“Indeed. But the last part's courtesy of Tennyson.”

“Emerson has lots of wordy friends.” Red Dog, who'd been warming his belly near the fire, rolled to his feet and moved close enough to put his head on Johnny's leg. Johnny scratched behind the dog's ears. “Maybe Red could give me tips.”

“It's called dispensing platitudes.”

“Horse apples, you mean.”

“Of the most copious and odoriferous kind.” They shared a chuckle. Scott's smile became more of a grimace. “All I can really say is I understand what you're feeling. It's a challenge to give advice when I'm still trying to figure out this” – he waved a hand through the air – “love thing myself.”

Then there was dealing with loss of the most final kind... a whole different subject.

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Early the next morning, Johnny tied bedrolls and saddled horses while Scott loaded the mule. Johnny gestured over his shoulder with a thumb. “Creek down there's blocked. Or will be when it rains again. Trees fell over.”

“Lead the way.” They negotiated through water and mud, and slid down the narrow trail to follow Johnny's old tracks once on the lower valley floor. At a place where several rivulets joined, deadfall did threaten the free flow of water.

They took turns with hatchet and handsaw, making wood chips fly. It took both of them to drag larger branches away from the water. Johnny threw smaller branches onto the bank. Red kept bringing those back.

Hands on hips and head tilted Johnny looked down at the latest retrieved. “Go catch rabbits.” Red's ears perked up and his head cocked. “Go on, Red. Get rabbits.” Johnny waved at the surrounding countryside. Red disappeared into the brush.

Removal of limbs reduced the tree to a manageable hunk of trunk. With ropes tied on and pulls from both horses, once the tree started moving they took it a distance from the creek bed. Ranch work could be hard and tedious but Scott couldn't deny the satisfaction in a job well done. Johnny and he shared a grin before dismounting to remove the ropes. Scott glanced to where they'd dropped the mule's packs. “Dog's ready for you.”

Johnny smiled at the sight of Red on the other side of the creek, sitting pretty next to three rabbit bodies.

Scott made camp while Johnny cleaned carcasses and cooked supper. The last loaves of bread were going stale but could be dipped in stew or toasted.

With three hungry mouths to fill, food soon disappeared. Scott patted his belly. “Do you want anything else?”

“Not unless there's cake in those packs.”

“I expect a real cook could whip one up from what Teresa sent with me.” He raised eyebrows but Johnny smirked and shook his head. “I could try to make one but she didn't pack a mixing bowl.” Scott liked the white and blue one hanging in the Lancer kitchen. It had a handle and gave him confidence in his mixing and pouring. Perhaps biscuits would bake properly if he used that bowl. “I think I saw a tin of cookies.”

“I'll make more coffee.”

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“Can a man change?” Johnny's voice blended with the fire's snap and crackle.

Scott squinted against the bright flames but couldn't see Johnny sitting in shadows. “He can, if he wants to and tries hard enough.”

“But what about damage he's done? Lives he's hurt?”

“If those he's wronged are still alive, an attempt at restitution can be made. Depending on what happened, though, victims could think it's too little too late.”

“I could've said no to my old friends. They wanted to play the same old stupid games. I should've stayed with Lucy.”

Where on a trail leading through events was the fork that went straight to an outcome with no choices left? Johnny might have met Gabe under different circumstances. Johnny liked to share Lancer. He might have offered to let Gabe bring the sheep even if Gabe hadn't stopped the bull from charging. Events would have proceeded as they had. “If Gabe had stayed near town and Porter saw or heard of sheep nearby, Lucy could have

been caught in crossfire there.”

“You're saying no matter what I did, Lucy'd still be dead.”

“I'm saying there's no way to know.”

“Gabe should've gone 'round the hacienda. Didn't think he'd follow me and bring the sheep right in front of everybody. I knew the Association was meeting that day. Didn't want to be there for another boring meeting but if I'd been where I was supposed to be...” Johnny poked at the fire and added another log, hiding his face behind tipped hat. “She's dead. Knowing she wasn't mine anymore doesn't make it easier to forget.”

“You don't. Not at first. Death...” Scott looked for answers in his coffee cup but unfathomable darkness stared back. “You don't think you can stand it but somehow you keep going.”

Silence greeted those words. Scott blinked, thinking of what he could say. His brother had experience with death and heartache but the shock of recent loss made it easy to forget that grief would lessen. “One day, you'll realize you haven't thought of Lucy for part of the day. Then a whole day. Then you can think of her but instead of your own feelings, what was right and good about her will come first.”

Johnny sat with head bowed and one arm across his chest. The other hand rumbled the hair on Red's back.

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They spent two days doing maintenance work on fences and waterways. Murdoch would be glad to cross this area off the ranch's to-do list for another year.

The next morning, Scott made breakfast while Johnny, dead to the world, slept in.

By the end of the day, they'd completed what could be done with the tools at hand and were famished. Johnny sent Red to hunt again and warmed up a can of beans, adding meat once Red returned with his catches. Canned peaches would be dessert.

Without something to occupy his hands other than a coffee cup, events of the past weeks paraded through Scott's mind. The world was full of insanity. Could people ever stop wanting to fight and kill for such trivial reasons? Though his first choice would be to talk things through, trying to compromise, trying to help... when others took the law into their own hands there might be no other choice but to shoot back.

*Turn the other cheek:* a lesson Johnny brought back from a cattle drive. Laura the missionary had the right idea. But everyone had to respect it, didn't they? There were always those waiting to take advantage of cheek-turners; always those who found pleasure in marginalizing, hurting and using others – especially those who wouldn't or couldn't fight back.

Johnny made the ride home to Lancer without his gun after he'd met Laura. He could have stopped wearing it for good. Not everyone went armed. Gabe being a man of peace was part of what drew Lucy to him.

How could he advise Johnny to change his ways when he himself continued to carry a gun? Scott rubbed the knuckles of his right hand – not to mention when he himself would be the first to strike when family and friends were threatened. They had to stand pat in a land which attracted men bent on evil. That situation would never change though the weapons of choice might.

“You look like your brain's hurting.” Johnny held up the coffee pot.

Scott pulled the whiskey bottle from his saddlebags. One side of Johnny's mouth turned up. Scott added liquor to both cups and Johnny topped them up. "I'm thinking of how the innocent are hurt too often."

Johnny rubbed his forehead and tapped a fist against his thigh. "Lucy laughed when I wanted to spend time with my old friends instead of her. I wanted to talk over good old days. Every time I've done that it's gone wrong. There weren't many good old days – not with those boys. Not with any of 'em."

Scott took over stirring the meat and beans. Their children or their children's children might live in a world free of that knee-jerk reaction to shoot first and ask questions later – a world free of those wanting to harm others because they were different. Scott refused to stop hoping people could change.

The world rolled on, bringing another sunset. Darkness always came before dawn. How many others would spend this night in grief or with mind twisted up over might-have-beens? Too many, but avoiding loss and mistakes at all costs meant not living.

Johnny sighed and settled shoulders more firmly against his saddle. "I can't stop thinking what I could have done different."

Scott handed Johnny a plate of food before making himself comfortable on his own bedroll. "Today's a sum of all choices made up 'til now. What if you'd decided not to come to Lancer?"

Johnny stared across the fire before filling his mouth with food.

"Gabe helped you and you helped him – I would've done the same. Your friends had the choice to refuse to listen to Porter. Porter could have looked around and realized this is California, not Wyoming. Sheep and cattle can and do coexist here. When men foment violence against others no one wins."

"And they were trespassing on Lancer land." Johnny tapped his knife on the plate's edge. "What's that thing you said I can call you when you turn wordy?"

"A pedant."

"Yeah." Johnny bared his teeth. "Not on this trip."

Perhaps what he'd said over the last few days would help his brother.

They finished eating in silence. Johnny fell asleep sitting up with plate in his lap. Scott eased his brother down and covered him with a blanket. After making short work of morsels left on both their plates, Red turned in circles before nestling back to back with Johnny.

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Scott woke the next morning to find Johnny hunkered over the fire, scrambling eggs and flipping flapjacks. The army could learn from the fact that eggs could go for a ride on a mule for several days and remain intact and edible. Whoever made the egg carrier they used on Lancer deserved praise.

Scott poured coffee and the first sip washed morning cobwebs from his head.

Johnny still had bones to chew. He tossed Red a flapjack and made a stab at leaving recent events behind. "Lucy's in the past. The past is dead and gone."

That was Murdoch talking – a callous disregard Scott would not let pass. His brother wasn't the type to be

closed-hearted. “There are good things in the past. Things worth remembering.”

“Like what?”

“Like your mother.”

Johnny focused on the frying pan. A bittersweet smile spread across his face.

“Like Eduardo, the friend you told me about. Like the lessons learned which brought you here and helped you stay – like those Val tried to teach you when you first met him.”

“Those might be starting to sink in.” Johnny rubbed the back of his head and his smile became rueful.

Scott sipped his coffee and smacked his lips. “Then there was the day you met me.”

Johnny chuckled but his smile melted away. He pulled hat brim down to hide his eyes, put a hand over his heart before tapping knuckles on his chest.

Pushing memories aside didn't always help, no matter what Murdoch preached. “Did you ever look for your step-father?”

Johnny shook his head. He filled their plates and put what remained down for Red to eat.

“May I ask why not?” Scott adjusted his position and coffee cup to allow hands to take plate and fork.

Johnny shrugged and sat cross-legged on his bedroll.

“He's a link to your mother. To the love you both had for her.”

Johnny rubbed a hand along a thigh before organizing his own plate and cup. “Don't even know if it was a real marriage. If Murdoch ever divorced her.”

“Does it matter? They loved each other.”

“Yeah. They say that's enough. But back then... for me, it wasn't.”

To heal from any kind of injury took time. They finished breakfast in silence. Red eyed Scott's plate. He set it down for the dog to clean.

“I'll do dishes.” Johnny reached for the plate once Red had finished and paused with arm outstretched, sniffing at his armpit. “Why didn't you tell me I stink?”

“I thought you saw see me wrinkling my nose and waving a hand in front of my face.”

“Not funny, brother.” Johnny flapped the front of his shirt and made a face. “I need a bath.”

Scott fetched a bag from the mule's pack, pushed items into it and tossed it to his brother.

Johnny peeked inside. “Towels, clean shirt. Two bars of soap.” The cheeky grin appeared for the first time in weeks. “I smell that bad?”

“The horses are starting to complain. The mule tries to stay upwind. Red's used to it.” Scott gathered a change

of clothing for himself.

Johnny rubbed his stubbled chin.

“In my saddlebags. Left side.”

“You're handy to have around, brother.” Johnny found his shaving kit.

Scott pulled his own kit from the other side of the saddlebags. “Between Teresa and me, I think we have all we need but the kitchen sink.”

Johnny, heading for the creek, threw a comment over his shoulder. “Except cake.”

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Neither said much on the ride home. Most of the way, they followed Red's upright tail waving them on through sounds of animals, birds, and wind in grass and trees.

By unspoken agreement they detoured through the redwood forest. There, quiet reigned. Dappled sun reached for the ground amid cathedral trunks. The grove smelled of earth and wood; felt of old age, storms and droughts weathered, and of time passing – the patience to overcome hardships.

Red Dog, unimpressed by the stately giants, scratched his neck, shook and with an air of human boredom sat facing home in the middle of the path. The mule, knowing home was almost in sight, pawed the ground and moaned.

Johnny took off his hat and tipped his head back. The sight of trees towering above could be dizzying. “There's places where storms come up with no warning.” He reached forward to push Barranca's mane to one side of his neck. “They blindside you and kick up dust. It's hard to say which way's up.”

Scott adjusted the pack mule's lead and leaned on crossed arms against the saddle horn.

Johnny breathed a long sigh and rubbed over his heart. "How long will it take?"

"As long as you need."

Johnny set his hat square on his head and they rode on.

THE END Feb 2020

*You attend the funeral, you bid the dead farewell. You grieve. Then you continue with your life.  
And at times the fact of her absence will hit you like a blow to the chest, and you will weep.  
But this will happen less and less as time goes on.  
She is dead. You are alive. So live.  
– Neil Gaiman, Fables & Reflections*

A/N: Notes about the reality of sheep in California can be found at the end of “The Independence of Solitude.”

The Johnson County War is mentioned in this episode by Murdoch (who calls it “Johnson County Massacre”) and alluded to by Porter. Also known as the War on Powder River, the Johnson County War was a range conflict that took place in Wyoming from 1889 to 1893. It had nothing to do with sheep.

In one article on range wars by the Wyoming State Historical Society, the only mention of sheep is for an event that took place in 1909.

Chris LeDoux wrote a song about the Johnson County War: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IS5CTMQ2Vro>