MONTANA STORY:

The Toughest Cowboy I Ever Knew

photo credit: Cooper West

by

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Kyle was the toughest cowboy I ever knew. If you grew up in Colorado as I did or anywhere out West, then you know that means he was the toughest *guy* I ever knew, bar none. I've known bigger guys, guys who acted badder, guys who probably were rougher in a fight. But Kyle was just naturally tough. Nothing in his life was easy, not much was painless, but he never flinched, never complained, never gave an inch. He never seemed to know it could be different. It was his nature. I came to respect him tremendously and found myself wanting to emulate that toughness of his.

I was new to Montana. A modest success in business gave me the chance to indulge my passion for fly fishing, and in those days there was no better place in all the Continental U.S. to cast dry flies to big, wild trout than that "last, best place" up north. There were rivers throughout the state with pristine waters and thriving populations of aquatic creatures, and there were damn few people to interfere with the setting, which was an increasingly rare condition in most of the country anymore and something I longed for.

So, after I sold my art collection and made a few bucks, I packed up bits and pieces of my life in Colorado, jettisoned the rest and bought a pretty fine place in the Missouri River Canyon. The river formed from the Gallatin, Madison and Jefferson rivers that flow from Yellowstone Park and points west and join at the appropriately named town of Three Forks, where the big river began. The mighty Mo drains more watershed than any other river in the Lower 48 and it is said that, had it been discovered first, the Mississippi River would have been properly known as a tributary of the Missouri, rather than the other way around.

From its headwaters, the river flows almost immediately through three big dams, with hydroelectric projects that provide power to the region and various recreational opportunities to those many folks who are inclined to reservoir-type water sports, all of it at the cost of having flooded some of the most pristine land on God's green earth. Nevertheless, there is a stretch of

the river that begins at the base of the third dam and travels its winding course some 18 miles before it leaves the mountains and breaks out onto the plains to begin its long trek east and south to the Gulf of Mexico.

photo credit: visitgreatfalls.com

It was in those days a fishery of unimaginable bounty. The slight warming of the waters having passed through the dam created in that run of the next eighteen miles a tailwater fishery of abundant weeds, mosses and grasses in which billions of insects flourished and various types of crustaceans and waterside terrestrials thrived. All of this nourished a staggering number of very large trout, as well as all sorts of other fish, birds and various flora and fauna.

The fact that there were many tons of wild trout per mile, many of which ran larger than 10 or 15 pounds, is best appreciated if you understand the mathematics of the ecosystem: it takes a ton of plankton to grow a pound of insects and it takes a ton of insects to grow a pound of trout. These were very well fed creatures.

So, on a summer evening in June when a thick layer of expired mayflies blanket the surface of the river and vast clouds of caddis flies bounce along the water laying eggs, you know you are in a proto-classic fishery; except that unlike spring or freestone creeks, this is a river a quarter mile wide with channels 60 feet deep and holes into which boxcars have fallen from the railroad tracks that run alongside it, and even on the clearest days can no longer be seen. One thinks about that and then about the size of the fish that live there.

I thought about it so often and so intently that I moved there. My new home was 9 miles downstream from the little town of Craig and its 29 yard lights, the exact number of homes there then. I lived a ways from there, which is to say my place was rural.

Like the rest of the animal world, a fair number of people were attracted to the river, not many by urban standards of course, not many even by the humble standards of those little burgs that pass for cities in Montana. There were barely 800,000 people in the entire state spread over a land area only slightly smaller than California. But the river had always been a source of nourishment and so a greater number of people clustered along its banks than, say, the next county over east of there, where barely one soul per square mile was in residence. By the distinctly rural standards of Montana, it was something of a happening place.

For all its natural beauty, it was a harsh place, too; scarce in ways to support yourself — much closer to wild still than settled. People there were

resilient, self-reliant and almost as a matter of course, they were handy. They prided themselves on their ability to get by, to do what was needed and spend as little as possible on things you had to hire out. That's what was required.

I on the other hand was a lot closer to a city slicker and a distinctly unhandy one at that. I was known to break into a cold sweat at the sight of a tool chest and begin to back away involuntarily, shaking my wide-eyed head from side to side. Perhaps I exaggerate a bit, but by the prevailing standards of the hardscrabble folks in Montana, I was a slacker at best and pretty near worthless at worst when it came to taking care of myself. When it came to running a ranch up here, even a modestly sized gentleman’s ranch like mine, I was clearly in over my head.

What I had going for me in their view was only one thing: money, and cash in Montana as most everywhere else can cover for a lot of other shortcomings. Folks thought I was rich. It was nowhere near the truth but perception is reality and so I was a newly arrived curiosity worthy of some attention because opportunity was rare. One never knows in what guise it may appear.

It was Montana in 1979, you understand, and not the place of movie stars and Ted Turner buffalo ranches but just a place of vast beauty and sere circumstance in which a few hundred thousand people tried to get by.

So, in the afternoon of a warm, sunny day that spring, I was laboring over a large rock that was exactly in the way of the perfect place to string a hammock between two trees. They were big old maples perhaps 60 feet tall with trunks thick as columns of Greek marble and broad, graceful branches that had reached a successful phototropic arrangement with the sun to produce a maximum density of leaves and shade for the summer days to come.

A couple dozen of them lined the front perimeter of the ranch and these two in particular grew on the slope of the lawn where it ran down toward the water in this pristine stretch of canyon hard by the spring that filled the trout pond under the shade of the aspen grove and then overflowed into the big river. It was a particularly beautiful corner of my newly bought ranch and it was a very big rock.

Truth was I couldn't begin to budge it and I was just about to go get a big crowbar or maybe a low yield nuclear device when an ominous shadow fell over my chop suey, as Raymond Chandler used to say. I looked up from where I was bent over wrestling with the rock and there in silhouette was Kyle.

photo credit: Linda Wearley

The sun was far to the south behind him and so it cast a halo around him and blurred my view. What I could see was that he was short and stout with a good-sized dark hat on a big head and a large steep face with mutton chop sideburns, broad shoulders, a barrel chest, slim hips and very short legs that

bowed a little from there to his boots. Everything about him was dark because of the outline of the sun and I couldn't get a bead on him.

"Whatcha doin'?" he asked me and when he said it I could see the chaw he was working in one cheek.

"Trying to move this rock out of the way," I said.

"Where d'ya want it?"

"Well, anywhere that's out of the way, I guess. You got a tractor or a backhoe?"

"Yeah," he said, "both." He nodded and looked at me a moment longer, spit some juice from his chew sideways and walked toward me. I backed away and he straddled the rock, bent from the waist and wrapped his arms around it, took a deep breath, dipped his knees and lifted it off the ground. He walked it a little ways away, looked at me sideways and asked, "This alright?"

"Sure," I said. Beyond that I was speechless, more than a bit stunned by the show of strength I had just witnessed.

He dropped it there, turned toward me, smiled a crooked smile and said, "I'm Kyle, glad to meet ya. Good luck. Let me know if I can be of any help." And he walked away into the sunset from whence he'd come.

photo credit: land.com

Kyle owned the 789, the original Baker Ranch that state supreme court Justice Dale Baker acquired sometime after the turn of the century and ran for the next 50 years or so, raising prime beef there and a son who became a famous movie star. When Gary Baker was making $50 thousand a week in 1927 as the biggest star in Hollywood, he returned to the ranch and carved out the finest acreage along the river for himself. He built a nearly 8000 square foot one-story lodge and with his foreman and good pal A.N. Hampton in tow and began to take regular breaks from the rigors of movie making and the fame it brought him.

“They used to hole up in there for weeks at a time,” Old Jack the caretaker told me shortly after I had purchased the lodge from the Baker Estate. “They’d have a bunch of them starlets with ‘em and just disappear.”

A year later, when the crew I eventually assembled to help me run the ranch dredged out a second trout pond near the original, we unearthed a pit of whiskey and champagne bottles some 50 x 100 feet in area and maybe 10 feet deep, which gave us some insight into the degree of disappearing that took place there over the years.

Kyle lived in the old ranch house far on the other side of Handy Creek and I lived in the Baker Lodge, which Gary had built those many years past. The front porch was about 120 feet across and maybe 12 feet deep. The end of the lodge toward the river was anchored by a massive river rock fireplace. Wings spun off from the living room, dining room and kitchen toward the back of the house where it bumped up against the hillside. There were many bedrooms, bathrooms, offices and mud room, a wine cellar and root cellar and pool room and all sorts of space that the ghost of a major movie star graciously haunted. There were some very nicely appointed cabins, too, of 1000 feet each for guests and such nearer the river.

Kyle and his kids and Jack and Maggie down the road a piece in the caretakers’ home were my only neighbors. They were all you’d ever need.

Kyle’s boys were Kasey, Kit and Kyle Junior. They were young kids when I met them and particularly fine kids for being without their mother.

Jack told me one night over a six pack we shared on the porch of his home while the sky filled with patches of salmon colored and silver-grey clouds, bats darted through the air, and fish splashed in the river rolling past us that Kristie and Kyle had met while on the rodeo circuit. He was a bull rider, she

a barrel racer, and over the course of a season traipsing from one rodeo to the next they fell in love.

There was good reason to suppose it never would happen. Kyle was solid and tough and completely in his element with the other men and the animals, but around women his age, he was shy and soft-spoken, and that peculiar sensation in his chest when he saw her made him feel like running away half the time and the other half just held him in her sway. He'd watch from near the stock chutes when her event was up, standing on the bottom rung of the fence with his hat pushed back and something exactly like awe on his face as he watched her ride.

She was good! She and the paint mare were like a blur galloping from one barrel to the next, leaning hard into the turns and whipping smartly around them, dust flying and the crowd oohing. She was damn good! And, beautiful too!

It might have gone no further than appreciating her from a distance because he just wasn't likely to approach her, wouldn't know what to say if he did, how he'd feel if she told him to get lost. But she was aware of his attention, had been for a while now, and also had figured he was one of those guys who'd just never get around to saying hello, so she introduced herself.

"I'm Kristie. Seen you ride. You're really good."

"You too," he said, lowering his head bashfully before lifting it again to look her right in the eye and smile, squinting just a bit from the effort. "You and that paint mare look mighty good together."

"Thank you," she said, returning the smile. "Want to get some lunch?"

Before the winter settled in, they were married and set about making a life together. They didn't have much and didn't much care. Kyle got on at the

refinery in Great Falls and Kristie was full-time working on fixing up their home, a small, ramshackle place on some acreage near town they rented with an option to buy. It wasn't much to look at but there was room for their horses and you got a good view of the Big Belts to the south where the sun set this time of year.

On Sundays when the weather was good, they'd take the old pickup down I-15 to the Missouri River Canyon, where they'd picnic some and often as not spend a long time looking at the 789 Ranch and dreaming their dreams. From the opposite side of the river where they hiked in to a favorite spot, the ranch spread out in front of them. It was tucked into the big S-curves of the river and rose from the rich bottom land to large hay fields spread across low, rolling acreage that followed the shape of the waterway. Farther up were meadows of deep grass and wildflowers, outcroppings of large purple boulders and forests of pine and fir, and higher still the land rose quickly through rock faces, scree and forested chutes to the canyon ridge.

It was only a few thousand acres, most of which was leasehold, but along with the Lodge property that adjoined it on the other side of the creek, it comprised one of the choicest pieces of property in the entire canyon. "It's not like we could ever afford it," Kristie would say, and Kyle would say, "If we ever could that's the place I'd want to have."

The boys arrived in quick succession two years apart and the rhythm of their life took on more complexity. The rodeos were fewer now for Kyle. The bulls seemed tougher to ride, the soreness in his muscles slower to work itself out, and Kristie hardly had a chance to ride at all, let alone to compete. Her paint mare grew fat every summer from all the tall grass in the pasture and so little work in the saddle.

When Kyle Junior was born Kristie took a long while to regain her strength. Even after weaning him at one-year she still was tired. Three kids

in five years will wear you out, they told each other and agreed to have no more.

photo credit: land.com

There were diapers and dirty kids, chicken pox and croup, tantrums and fits, all of the kids and the animals and the chores that came with them, a house that never seemed to get clean for more than a minute before her troop made a mess of it again, and yet messy house be damned, she'd never had been happier than right now, she told him. What she didn't tell him was that she'd never felt so tired either.

When she got sick, the diagnosis was lymphoma. She was 29 years old and only a few years after the radiation treatments she was dead.

After the funeral, Kyle took the money from her life insurance and put a down payment on the 789, where he moved with the kids and the horses and the rest of the animals and tried to get on with their lives. The ranch was something like a monument to her, a dream realized in a way they'd never imagined.

He'd hoped that with what remained of the money and custom cutting hay from the place and custom breaking and training horses there, he could make it. He scraped and scratched, too, did all sorts of work for people in the area, anything he could do to earn a dollar.

When I became his neighbor, it probably seemed god sent to him. He built me a fence, cleaned up the grounds, agreed to hay my land in exchange for half the bales and grew the best Potomac red potatoes I ever tasted in the easement along the railroad tracks between my place and the river, which like the hay once dug were share and share alike.

He'd grade your driveway or clear it of snow with his big tractor, dig you a pond with his backhoe or haul your horses wherever you wanted in his old trailer. If you had friends from out of state who wanted to hunt elk, he'd take a group for ten days up into the Bob Marshall or the Great Bear wilderness and make sure they had the time of their life. He did it for me and to a lesser degree, because they had less money and more self-sufficiency, he did it for most of our neighbors within miles in all directions.

And, of course, anything you needed done with horses, breaking them, training them, teaching them to pack, to lead or follow or come when you whistle, Kyle was the man. It was a lot of work for not much money but he never complained. We had a great time together that first year I lived there.

I had my little ranch, my small stash of cash and a new business I was developing. Kyle had his hopes and a big heart. For a year or so we were

equals, neighbors, learning to be if not friends yet then at least more than acquaintances. We came to find that we needed each other.

Kyle taught me a lot about horses. He loved animals and horses especially, but to him they were tools of his trade. They had to help him get the job done or they weren't worth the feed. I had a mare that gave me a hard time every time I tried to saddle her. She'd take off to the far side of the corral and as you moved toward her, she'd gallop past to the opposite side jumping and kicking over and over again for as long as you were willing to play. I could always lure her into a pen with a bucket of oats, slip a rope around her neck and then proceed to get her rigged up but that was just reinforcing a bad habit.

"You got to break her of that," Kyle told me one day after watching me walking from one end of the pasture to the other with her halter in hand while she was galloping past me, stopping a distance away to toss her head, rear up and charge past me again, having herself a great time. "You got to show her who's boss."

He removed his thick leather belt as he approached me, stood by while she revved herself up and came charging toward us again and when she got near, he whistled very loud at her. That didn't slow her a bit but what he did next happened so fast that neither she nor I could believe it. He leaped at her, got his belt around her neck as she ran, slid down her withers and dug his heels into the ground, taking her down chest first and flipping her onto her back. She hit the ground so hard so fast that I thought he might have killed her.

He got to his feet with the belt still in hand and she got up, too, trembling violently while he stroked her neck and spoke to her softly, and when she eventually calmed down he led her over to me. He had me raise the halter and whistle very loud at her and she began to tremble again and after that

she never ran away when I whistled but just stood quietly and waited while I saddled her up. “Save ya both a lot of time,” Kyle said to me with a wink and a smile.

That summer I had a call from my friend Bobby down in Denver who said his teenage son was having some problems and needed some time away from the city. Could he spend a month with me in Montana?

Ian was my godson and of course I said yes. My daughters were here for the summer so he’d have people his age that he knew and Kyle’s boys to play with. We made plans to fly him up in a couple of weeks and that was that. After I hung up though I gave some thought to what sort of reaction the young man might get from the folks hereabouts. His dad was from a Denver society family and long since divorced from the boy’s mother who was a very beautiful Black woman and, in his looks, Ian took after her side of the family.

photo credit: the author

In Montana you didn’t see a whole lot of Black people. In fact, if it wasn’t for television and a few of the servicemen at the missile base in Great Falls, a lot of the local people might never have seen any Black folks at all. How they would react to Ian I hadn’t a clue.

Hereabouts, minorities are Indians, mostly Blackfeet, some Flatheads, Crees and Assiniboin, and Crow and Cheyenne further south around Billings. There are Mexicans seasonally in the Flathead Valley when the berries are ripe for picking and Canadians at all times of the year, Norks as they’re called, foreigners to look down on just for laughs, eh?

But Black people are scarce and Ian when he arrived at the airport stood out like a smudge on the blank tableau of greater Great Falls. He was tall for

his age, thin and wiry with hair somewhere between curly and kinky framing his handsome face and dark eyes that alternately smiled at you warmly and searched you warily for motives. He was merely another teenager and yet he was a striking physical specimen in a place where people are homely, Black where people are resoundingly White.

Maybe I was too sensitive, but I felt the entire time we waited for his bags that everybody's eyes were on us. If he noticed it, Ian didn't show it, answered me easily enough when I asked him, "How's your dad?" or "You decided where you're going to high school?" or any of the rest of the nervous conversation I made with him. Otherwise, he looked at the ground or the posters for various motels in the area or just looked off in the distance.

It was a relief when we left the terminal and made our way to the parking lot. Some young girls were walking nearby, one of whom was pretty scantily dressed and perhaps it was for them the event was intended but just then a pickup came speeding by us with the guy riding shotgun yelling,

"Whoo, look at that! You just never know what you might see when you come to town anymore. Shee-it and shinola…" and so forth he screamed as the truck roared away.

"Those guys act like they've never seen a good-looking girl before," I said. Ian grimaced at me and said nothing.

The ranch was 45 miles south through a stretch of highway that rides up the last leg of the Great Plains and enters the first wave of mountains that begin to form the Continental Divide. There are pieces of landscape that Karl Bodmer painted in the 1830s as he rode west with Prince Maximillian and further on is the Gates of the Mountains, which Lewis and Clark in 1805 claimed was the most beautiful place on their entire journey across the uncharted west of Thomas Jefferson's imagination.

Ian took it in with a forced studiousness and neither of us said much the entire way. This short time in his presence, in this place where he was so conspicuous, reinforced our mutual discomfort. I was really concerned about how he might be treated by my neighbors and the people who worked for us. No doubt the question was in the boy's mind, as well.

photo credit: mtot.com

We found out soon enough. Kyle and the boys and Jack and Maggie and all their family from up in Great Falls had the chance at one time or another to spend some time with Ian and every one of them treated him like gold. They were as kind and patient and loving with him as they were with my daughters and anyone else they had reason to like. I don't think he could have had a better time.

A few days after he arrived, though, I had a chance to tell Kyle what had happened at the airport. "They don't know no better," he said.

"The thing is, Kyle, I'm pretty sure the guy riding shotgun was Dale."

A few months back, I had hired a guy named Hank Hirshle to ramrod my ranch, get done the things that needed doing and Hank was an ace. He was 6 foot 8 inches tall and wide at the shoulders as an ax handle. I've seen him run up the side of a steep hill with a roll of barbed wire over each shoulder and barely break a sweat. He did the work of 2 or 3 men and whenever another hand was needed, Hank produced just the right guy from a vast field of contacts.

He was something of a local legend and completely honorable within the confines of his own sense of right and wrong, but he was nobody to mess with if you valued your well-being. Among other things that fed his notoriety, he headed up a large tribe of survivalists who lived in the caves up the Dearborn River lands. Dale was one of his guys.

Kyle looked at me hard and said, "Pretty sure?"

"I'm sure," I said.

Nothing more was said, but the next Saturday I saw Dale leaving the Dearborn Inn at the end of the ranch road. The left side of his face was swollen to twice its size and in the afternoon sun his eye was the color of eggplant with an angry froth of yellow highlights that looked near to splitting open. He never looked at me and moved by without a word.

The month passed quickly and when Ian's visit was nearly up, I said to Kyle that I'd like for all of us to take him on a long horseback ride around the ranch and have a big picnic as a way of saying goodbye before we sent him home on Sunday. My only concern is he doesn't ride much and Kyle said not to worry, he had one Ian could ride.

Come Saturday I was saddling up a half dozen of my horses when the boys from next door rode up, Kyle easing along in the dust behind them, leading a paint mare. It was Choteau, his wife's barrel racer that nobody but she and

Kyle had ridden all these many years. The mare was old now, pushing 30 years and showed her age, but she was still a fine looking animal, smart and gentle, a perfect mount for Ian. The boy would look good on her, feel comfortable and he'd be perfectly safe.

Kyle led Kristie's mare to Ian and had a conversation with him I didn't catch, but I saw the gentleness in his expression and the rapt attention the boy paid him. Jack and Maggie saw it too. The look we exchanged in acknowledging it when Kyle helped Ian into the saddle was poignant and Old Jack just shook his head and smiled as if to say: you live long enough and you get to see something as fine as this come into your life one day.

The ride was beautiful, the weather soft and warm, the trail up through the hills to the waterfall at the back of the ranch was lined with towering Douglas fir and ponderosa pine in which bald eagles perched and calmly watched us pass. The horses moved in a procession through the tall, slender grass and splatters of asters, columbine, lupine and poppies. The sky was that spectacular shade of blue that comes to the far North in summer and the air was deeply scented with pitch.

We picnicked at the pool the waterfall formed where it fell 50 feet from the cliff above and the kids waded in and splashed and swam while we adults drank cold bottles of Pabst and long neck Bud and laughed at Jack's tales of the old days. Maggie hushed him every time his tales got a bit off color and all of us laughed even harder. It was a moment in time as near to perfect as anyone had a right to ask and I was happy to have wrapped up Ian's visit in such a poignant way.

Summer faded into autumn, and it wasn't long before Kyle was commuting to Great Falls nearly every day to work at the refinery again just to keep his finances together and soon thereafter he told me he'd rented a small house and registered the boys for school there to cut down on the driving. He

expected to be down at least every weekend and holidays and wondered if I could help out with the horses during the week, which I agreed to do.

Unless you've lived in Montana you can't appreciate the depth of the commitment that entailed. It was a short walk from the Lodge to the ranch house, maybe a quarter mile or so across the creek, through his fences and pasture to the corrals, which is not worth mentioning when the weather is nice. I'd check on the horses every couple of days and every so often move them from one pasture to another where they'd graze knee deep in alfalfa and timothy grass.

But the winter comes soon enough and stays long and until you've been through winter in Montana, it's tempting to suggest you don't really know what cold is. When the last long stretch of Indian summer gave way to the cold, it did so abruptly, dropping below zero the end of October and staying there by varying degrees of severity until the January thaw, which came the last week of the month.

What there was of the sun carved a brief arc low in the southern sky just above the rim of the canyon. The river that cut through it gave off great clouds of steam which cast the world in a vague halo of filtered light. The freezing moisture grew denser as it lifted, forming twisting pillars of ice crystals that emerged from the wind-whipped snow and darkened progressively into the slate grey sky. A thick icy crust covered every surface and you felt as though you were in a canyon on the moon, so still and solitary it seemed.

Animals need plenty of food and fresh water to survive that sort of cold. If they get it, they're fine. My place had the spring and the ponds, so water wasn't a problem. I fed the horses good hay twice a day and, when it was really cold, some oats and molasses in hot water as a treat. They walked the pastures in and out of the stables with a thick sheet of ice on their back and

when they drank deeply from the spring after eating and raised their head into the frozen air a large clump of ice formed on their snout.

There were times when the snows came and the winds howled so that it was Herculean to get from the mud room down to the corrals and the stables. You'd dress in long johns, felt-lined blue jeans and a woolen shirt, a quilted jump suit, hat with ear flaps, scarf and fur lined gloves, and heavy Timberland boots or better yet Sorel Caribous with a couple of thick pairs of socks. Like some mythical creature of barely habitable climes you'd set off into the fading light of day and it snowed so hard sometimes the biggest challenge was finding your way home on your own property a mere hundred yards or so from the house. That's what it took to feed *my* horses in the winter.

Feeding Kyle's was another matter altogether; there were more of them, and they were a lot farther away. Because Handy Creek was frozen over all winter, the horses had to be watered from a stock tank which was perpetually frozen over, and which would freeze up again within an hour or so each time I broke it with a sledge hammer.

I'd feed my horses and then his, twice a day, at dawn and again at last light. The faint hint of sunlight filtered through the dense fog and ice crystals hung in the air. The hairs in my nose froze with each breath and breathing itself was just short of painful the air was so cold. Nearly every bit of skin was covered to protect it from frost bite and where it was exposed, my eyebrows and lashes were beaded with ice. My boots made sharp squeaking sounds in the snow as I walked the long stretch to Kyle's corrals.

photo credit: Linda Wearley

I'd break open a few bales of hay and then retrieve the sledge from the tool shed to wail away at the layer of ice in the tank and when I was done, the feed lying thick on top of the snow and the fragrance of unfrozen moisture scenting the air, I'd hear faintly at first the clomp of many hooves as the horses trotted toward me and one by one breathing big clouds of steam from their nostrils they emerged like ghosts from out of the gloom.

Choteau was always the last to appear. Everyone and everything moves slowly in that kind of cold, but the old mare was so slow she caused me concern. I gave her plenty of extra attention, fed her a little ways apart from the others so she got as much hay as she wanted and I brought her a bucket of oats mixed in hot water with molasses whenever the weather was especially cold, which seemed to be all winter. She was responsive, didn't seem to be sick but moved very slowly all the same.

I mentioned it to Kyle the next time he was down. He said, "Yeah, she's gettin' old, she'll be all right, she's doin' fine," and looked away.

Tough winters foster a deep appreciation of the spring and so it was with me that year. The days were growing longer, clearer, warmer and although I still had to feed the horses, the water tank stayed clear of ice, the creek began to run again and even when it snowed the weather had a gentleness about it that I hadn't felt in four or five months.

A thick undergrowth of grass began to come up in the pastures and the horses sometimes would roll around in it or just lie about in the sun, warming and resting their bones. The wild animals returned from their burrows, their caves, their recesses, wherever they had holed up in the cold. The birds greatly increased in numbers as those tens of thousands that had migrated south last fall came north again.

There was a physical relief that accompanied the return of sunlight to our lives, the wild and domestic creatures equally and for my neighbors and me, as well. All of us living, breathing mammals who had passed through another hostile winter and emerged into the soft belly of spring were feeling good.

photo credit: missouririveranglers.com

Soon enough the boys and I would be catching trout with flies on the surface of the river all morning long, hiking the hills and picnicking again at the waterfall on lazy afternoons. The horses would be knee high in clover. Wouldn’t we all?

The summer came with all of its glorious 18 hours days and starry nights. We worked and played and every so often I’d notice the horses off in a pasture, but I never seemed to catch sight of Choteau among them. Several

times I went to look for her and found her lying down in the tall grass. She always got up to greet me and seemed to be alert, but the skin sagged from her body and her belly was badly swollen.

All too soon it was hunting season again and after a few weeks, when the locals were up in the wilderness after elk, I unexpectedly came upon Choteau. I was riding through one of the pastures on the side of a hill we never hayed, and she was lying on her side in the sun. Before she roused herself and rolled up onto her belly, I had a clear look at her in repose.

She was still a beautiful animal in the fine cut of her face, but her backbone protruded, and her hide hung loose on her ribs. Her swollen belly, worse than ever, suggested it had begun to quit functioning. There was a look in her eye that suggested resignation, as though she was prepared not to move again, which for a herd animal is truly surrender, a yielding to an inevitable death that being motionless soon will bring.

It seemed she wasn't going to get up, but I encouraged her and she finally stood. I walked her and my horse back to Kyle's place and put her in the small corral that abutted the barn. She drank some water and nosed around a little in a bucket of oats I offered but shortly was lying down again and I let her be.

Kyle was down that weekend. Sunday night he took the boys back to Great Falls but returned by himself to spend the night at the ranch. He must have called in sick at work because he stayed all day Monday and was still around the next morning when he showed up at my door.

"I've got to put her down," he said, looking at me with those deep dark eyes of his before looking at his barn across the way. We were quiet for a long time, Kyle staring off in the distance and me trying not to stare at him. He finally turned to look at me again. "I've got to put her down, but I don't think I can do it." Tears were welling in his eyes.

We walked over to his place and he went into the house. I took the mare from her stall and led her very slowly to a pretty little meadow a ways up Handy Creek. It was late in the season, but a few flowers were yet in bloom and the day was warm and still. Choteau stood there quietly looking at me and once or twice tossing her head from side to side. She huffed and blew, raised her head and whinnied weakly, and from somewhere below us a horse whinnied back. I put the .44 revolver just below her ear and shot her through the brain.

Kyle passed by a little while later driving his backhoe up along the creek. He was hunched over the wheel with his hat pulled down staring straight ahead. The day was beginning to cool as the sun neared the rim of the canyon to the west. He buried old Choteau where she lay. Neither of us ever mentioned that day again.

photo credit: montanaanglingco.com

It wasn’t long before winter settled in and by the next spring Kyle had lost the ranch to the mortgage bank. He sold off most of his horses and moved the rest of them up to the place where he stayed in Great Falls. A For Sale sign went up and the ranch house stayed empty for a long time. I rarely saw him again after that. Then a time came when I never saw him again.

There was an evening that Jack and Maggie and several of their kids took me to a barbeque at the home of Kyles’s brother, Laren, whom I’d never met nor even knew of before I was invited. He lived in a beautiful home on several acres at the edge of Great Falls.

The dinner was sumptuous and later that night after too many beers I remarked to Jack and a couple of his boys that it was amazing wasn’t it one brother could do so well and the other went bust. Jack pulled up short and muttered something before he and the boys turned away and left me alone with my insensitivity.

It was one of those things you say that lives inside you twisting uncomfortably until you apologize and I never had the chance. I tried at various times to get in touch with Kyle and it never happened. Somehow I guess he had heard of what I’d said and was having none of me. So, I had a long time to think about why I said it.

Maybe it was all those frozen walks through the gloom to feed his horses that came to naught when he sold them off and moved away. Maybe he had asked more of me than I could give without a measure of resentment. Maybe I never felt tough enough to measure up, so I kicked him when he was down. Whatever the reason, in the end he was better to me than I was to him. I’m sure he laughed at me plenty of times, but he was never cruel. I wish I could undo it or find a way to make it right

A few years later, my circumstances changed and I returned to Denver, saying goodbye to Jack and Maggie and all their many kids and grandkids, and to the other locals I'd gotten to know. I never got to say goodbye to Kyle. I did get to spend a few minutes standing by the pile of rocks and boulders that covered the grave where Choteau lies in the middle of the meadow up Handy Creek.

A lot of the memories I have of Montana include my time with Kyle and his family, and whenever I think of them, I hope that they are doing well and prospering. Of course, the kids aren't kids anymore, his and mine and Ian are grown well into adulthood, and many of the people from that time in my life have passed away, bless Jack and Maggie most of all. Those things have changed but some others never seem to.

Kyle is older now too but probably still scraping by, living hand to mouth. He's likely still the same hard scrabble character in his black felt hat and mutton chop sideburns with a barrel chest and bowlegs and a cheek full of chew swelling his face. No doubt he's still working with animals, still working a job somewhere in town to put food on the table and pay the bills.

When he kicks back in a chair on the porch on a summer evening and looks at the hills and the canyon far to the south, I would bet that eventually his thoughts always turn to Kristie and those few brief years they had together. It was the time of his life and obviously he would never forget her.

I can never forget her and I never even *knew* her. But she made a big impression on me and my time in Montana because of the events she set in motion by being the woman Kyle loved, the barrel racer with the fast paint mare.

Life’s been very tough on Kyle to take away someone so special so soon after their life together began. But he handles what life gives him and keeps on.

The sun for much of the year in Montana is low on the horizon and its warmth is brief. But it is enough to raise great beauty in the fields and to crown the hills with light. I met some of its sons and daughters there and they like the place itself were unforgettable, especially Kyle. He was the toughest cowboy I ever knew.

-- end --

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