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When the Legends Die

When the Legends Die is the tragic story of an Ute Indian family, who was forced to return to the wild and remember what their parents had taught them— in order to survive.

They were forced to leave the civilization they had known, because the head of the family killed a man who stole his money three times in a row.

Two years ago, they were living happily on Horse Mountain, near Arboles on the Southern Ute reservation in Southwestern Colorado, where they had a cornfield.

One day, when their crops burnt down, they decided to go hunting, so they would have meat during the winter—just like in the old days. Because they didn't have a permit, they got in trouble with the authorities. Once, they were the ones that had owned the land; now, they needed a hunting permit. They had to pay a fine. Because they didn't have the money, they had to take a job at Pagosa.

After two years, they were still trying to pay back the debt, so they could go back home to Horse Mountain. As mentioned before, a bad man had stolen their money three times. Also, while in Pagosa, the “white men” didn't help their situation by trying to change their ways. So they had to get married, and then they had to spend more money on the wedding and baptizing their son—

despite their own cultural rules. Normally, their son would choose his own name, when he grows up—and not the priest who named him Thomas.

So, when the bad man stole his money for the third time, he killed him. His wife Bessie, helped him to run away, then she followed the next day with their son, all the way to Horse Mountain.

The only things she took with her were the moccasins she made herself (Indian soft leather shoes), their blankets, their knife and their ax.

In the wild, they started to hunt again, using arrows like in the old times. They sang the song for hunting deer, so it would bring them good luck. Bessie made meat, leather, bags to store meat, leggings and shirts for her family. She knew how to do all of this from her mother, and it was just like in the old days. They built a lodge of pine poles, and they chanted the old song of the lodge, “which is round like the day and the year and the seasons”(18).

Although winter came, the Indian family survived because “the Ute people have lived many generations, many grandmothers, in that land. They speak its language” (19). They gathered willow shoots and black-stem ferns, inner bark and ripe grasses for Bessie’s winter basketry.

“She made rawhide, and her man cut ironwood and shaped frames on which she wove the thongs, the webs for snowshoes. He made a new bow and he shaped and feathered arrows...He taught the boy to set snares for rabbits... She made winter moccasins and winter leggings and shirts, and when she had done these things she wove baskets. And she told the old tales and sang the old songs.” (19)

After the winter passed, they started fishing again and picked serviceberries and chokecherries. They prepared meat by drying it. They were happy until one day when Bessie's husband was killed by an avalanche, while hunting for a deer. She knew at once that he was dead. She mourned with her son and then they went to find him.

When they found him, the boy "sang the wailing song for the dead. She had not taught him that song. He had that song in his heart, and he sang it" (21). They carried the body back to the lodge where they mourned all night long. The next day, they put his body in a cave, and set baskets of food beside him, so he could eat during his long journey. They then gave him a burial like in the old times, and sang the death songs.

The boy grew up, and he found a name for himself, the Bear's Brother, from the bear he met while hunting a deer.

When their ax broke, they went back to the village, for the first time in years. They traded two beautiful baskets for a knife, an ax, some ammunition, and some candies. The storeowner recognized her and told her that her husband was not wanted for the crime anymore. She didn't know if she should believe it or not. Another year went by, and her boy learned from his mother that in the old times, the Ute people were friends of everything in the mountains: the bears, the deer, the mountain lions, the jays, and the ravens.

In the summer, she went back to Jim Thacher's store to find all the details about her husband's situation. He was indeed cleared by the law. She met Blue Elk, the greedy person who lied that

he was the one who settled the case, and he asked her the price of two horses. He took by force one of the things she exchanged at Jim's store. Thanks to Jim, she would find out that Blue Elk had nothing to do with the fact that the law had cleared her husband.

One day, Bessie got very sick. Before dying, she told her son the real story of his father, and then she died. Her son decided to live alone in the forest, after burying his mother in the old way.

When the bear—that he had named himself after—died, its cub became his friend.

The people in the village realized that the boy was all by himself in the wild, so they sent Blue Elk to bring him out. At the lodge, Blue Elk remembered the old times, and for a while he was genuinely touched by the boy's pure soul. He convinced the boy to go back to civilization and school, so he could sing his songs to the world.

The boy would realize soon that Blue Elk had deceived him (in the same way his parents were deceived so long ago): Nobody wanted to listen to his songs. He was forced to give up his brother, the bear cub. He ran away once, but he found out that his mountain lodge had been burnt down to the ground. So he had to return and try to adapt to his new life.

When spring would come, and the bears would soon come out of hibernation, it was the time for the "Bear Dance, the traditional ceremony at which Utes used to gather and dance and visit after winter's isolation" (72).

He also felt that the bear cub would return to the barn where he had been locked for a while, when Thomas was brought to the school for the first time. And so it was: the bear returned. It was two years old now. Thomas went to the bear, and his “brother” recognized him immediately. Thomas then sent the bear away. “Go or they will kill you. They do not need guns to kill. They kill without guns. Listen! I speak the truth. They will kill you. Go away!” (73). He set free his “brother,” something that he couldn’t do for himself. He returned alone to the camp.

For Tom, the next period would be a struggle to cope with the new way of living. Nobody wanted him, so he had to move from job to job. Finally, Red Dillon would hire him to ride horses in the Rodeo. He was great at riding horses, but he still didn’t like his life. “That is the way it is. I ride, I eat. What else is there?” (105).

A beginning of a friendship starts to unfold with Meo, a wise old Indian man, who worked for Red. Meo shared some of his wisdom with Tom: “Life is the boss. We do what we can. Then we are old. We creep off in a corner and sit, and the tongue makes the rumble. But it is only noise, talk, talk, talk” (107).

Red was a bad man. Tom had to win or lose as Red told him to. Tom continued with this life for a while. One day, he started to wonder, “Who am I? Where am I? Where do I belong?” (118). He started to remember the little boy he had once called “Bear’s Brother,” and he remembered Thomas Black Bull from the reservation. Then he remembered how he had learned to be a bronc rider and how he had learned to do what he was told. “That boy was partly himself, but still a stranger” (118).

After Red died, Tom decided to go to Odessa, a small southwestern Texas town, for the rodeo season. He placed second in the final round; and although, with the money he had won, he was only able to pay the hotel bill, it didn't matter to him. "He had begun to find himself. That did matter" (135). He continued to ride from one show to the next, becoming well known. When Tom returned to Meo's farm to recover from a broken arm and a few broken ribs, he found out that Meo, his old friend, had died too. He abandoned the farm, returning to rodeo. He wasn't interested in riding anymore. He rode for the revenge, "for the punishment he could give to a horse" (147). He was acting like a Kamikaze, full of anger and resentment. His body was wounded many times, but Tom continued riding like a hero. He became a legend.

The crowds were fascinated. "They sat silent when he rode, because they were awed and morbidly fascinated. Tom Black was more than a rider. He was a kind of elemental force, a primitive scourge and a raw challenge that summoned diabolic violence from every horse he rode" (148).

One day he got hurt so badly that he was unconscious for days. When he woke up and tried to move, he realized that "he was no longer a boy or a breechclout Indian. He was a grown man in another world, a bronc rider trapped by his own injuries in a world of pain and helplessness" (157-158).

Tom's character was best understood by his nurse, Mary Redmond: "He's mad at life,...not at me" (164).

When Mary offered to help him find a room, he refused her, afraid that she might try to trap him like everyone else: Blue Elk, Benny Grayback, Rowena Ellis and Red Dillon.

After leaving the hospital, Tom decided to return to his roots—Pagosa, Colorado—to heal his wounds.

Although initially he was planning to return to the rodeo, Tom started to remember the old ways, and the hatred he carried in his heart for so long seemed to vanish away. He realized that he would never return to the arena because now he was proud, again, of who he was. He wasn't trying anymore to live in the new ways. The return to his roots brought him the peace he needed. "He was no longer Tom Black. He was Tom Black Bull, a man who knew and was proud of his own inheritance and who had come to the end of his long hunt" (216).

Works Cited

Borland, Hal. *When the Legends Die*. New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., 1963.